

3PONTELAND TOWN COUNCIL

MINUTES OF A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD AT THE TOWN COUNCIL OFFICES ON 24 JANUARY 2023

Present: Councillor C Greenwell (in the Chair)

Councillors S Ahmed, Mrs C Caisley, R Dodd, A Hall, Mrs K Overbury, A Varley and Mrs K Woodrow.

106. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S Johnson.

107. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

108. PONTELAND TOWN COUNCIL RESERVES

A report by the Clerk had been circulated for consideration.

The report set out the current level of reserves held by the Town Council for general purposes, and those set aside for asset replacement, Cemetery reserves and tree replacement.

As part of the budget process and determination of the precept figure for the coming year the Council should determine whether their level of reserves is sufficient and also if there was any surplus that could be used to offset the amount of precept levied.

Councillors were reminded that in January 2022, they had agreed to revise the figure they should hold in general reserves (minimum of 6 months operating expenses) to £210,000.

At the end of this financial year, a report would be presented to the Council listing any necessary transfers and unexpended amounts and it would be recommended that any available funds that weren't already earmarked for other purposes should be transferred to the General Reserves. Councillors suggested that with some of the issues that may need to be dealt with in the next financial year that any residual sum should be transferred to a maintenance heading to enable them to handle any urgent issues. This was agreed.

There were some upcoming projects that would likely need to be considered by the Council in 2023-24. There was a reasonable sum available in the current projects fund however there were some issues such as dealing with Ash Dieback trees that may require additional funds.

RESOLVED –

- (i) Note the information relating to reserves.

108. PONTELAND TOWN COUNCIL RESERVES (Continued)

(ii) It was agreed to examine the situation at year-end when there may be non-earmarked funds that could be transferred to a maintenance budget heading as outlined above.

(iii) Agree to consider using general reserves to fund any projects if the amount currently held in that budget heading was fully utilised.

(iv) Agree to transfer appropriate funds to the Cemetery and tree reserve funds in May/June 2023.

109. BUDGET AND PRECEPT 2023-24

The Town Council had carried out an initial review of the budget for 2023-24 on 11 January and a draft copy of the budget from that meeting was submitted for approval.

As reported at that meeting, NCC had given prior notification of the indicative tax base figure for Ponteland for 2023-24 which was 6074.39. This represented an increase of 47.85 from the current year.

Councillors were reminded that for the last three years they had previously agreed to a zero-increase on a band D property and the draft budget presented to the 11 January meeting was produced on that basis. The draft budget produced a precept of £448,715, an increase of £3535 on the current year. The band D amount would remain the same at £73.97.

Some amendments were made to the draft budget as part of the discussions at the 11 January meeting and these changes had been made. Details of changes were included in the report.

One amendment related to the project development fund under expenditure heading 11.6 which had been reduced from £4100 to £2100. It was noted that the Ponteland Neighbourhood Plan required updating now that the Northumberland Local Plan had been adopted. Although some assistance was available from NCC, it was also felt that some external assistance may be required. It was agreed that payment for this would be met from the £2100 in the project development fund.

The Council also needed to consider the situation regarding fees and charges. In relation to the allotments, previous practice has been to increase the rents by £1 across the board. It was reported that 21 out of 24 plots were currently let with another 12 becoming available once the boundary fencing had been installed. There were ongoing discussions with the Northern Counties Allotment Association to review various issues relating to the allotments. One of the items discussed related to changing the allotment year from 1 April to 31 March to 1 October to 30 September. If this was agreed, then it was suggested that tenants be asked to pay half of the current rental to allow some time to have other issues examined and agreed.

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109. BUDGET AND PRECEPT 2023-24(Continued)

In relation to the Cemetery fees, it was reported that the Cemetery Committee had met on 25 October 2022 when members had indicated that they wanted to increase the fees for 2023-24 as the fees had not changed since 2019. At the request of members, the Clerk had produced some comparison figures with other parish and town councils and suggested fees for 2023-24. This information plus other updates had been circulated to the Cemetery Committee members in December 2022. A further meeting of that Committee would be necessary to discuss and approve the fees and it was hoped this could be achieved before the end of the financial year.

It was noted that the fees had no impact on the budget however, the recommendations of the Cemetery Committee would need to be presented to the Council for formal approval.

The Clerk raised an important issue in relation to the budget for this year. She had asked for quotes for tree surveys for both inside and outside of the park to be carried out. A quote in the sum of £3400 for both surveys had been received from the company who had carried out the last two surveys. The Clerk was keen to get this agreed as there was funding in the budget this year for the work. Members agreed it was important to get this work underway.

RESOLVED –

- (i) The draft budget for 2023-24 as presented be approved and the Council agreed to levy a precept request of £448,715 on Northumberland County Council.
- (ii) The Council agreed in principle to maintain the allotment rents at the same level for the next six months up to 1 October to allow time for various issues to be discussed and agreed. This was subject to a recommendation being made by the Environment Working Party to the next Council meeting.
- (iii) It was agreed to await the recommendations of the Cemetery Committee in relation to any increase in fees for 2023-24.
- (iv) Agree to the expenditure outlined above in respect of tree surveys for inside and outside of the park in the total sum of £3400.

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