



High Wycombe Town Committee Budget Sub-Group minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the High Wycombe Town Committee Budget Sub-Group held on Thursday 5 January 2023 in , commencing at 7.00 pm and concluding at 8.00 pm.

Members present

A Baughan, L Clarke OBE, T Green, M Hussain, S Raja and P Turner

Others in attendance

M Dickman, C Gray, L Francis, D Harvey and F Mugari

Apologies

N Thomas

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Nathan Thomas.

2 NOTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING - 15 NOVEMBER 2022

The Notes of the Meeting were agreed subject to the addition of Cllr Lesley Clarke OBE.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs Lesley Clarke and Tony Green declared a personal interest as Directors of HW Bid Co.

4 ACTIONS FROM MEETING HELD ON 15 NOVEMBER 2022

Ms Mugari, Head of Finance went through the actions taken at the last meeting and Members made some comments on those responses as shown below.

1. REQUESTED: Breakdown of Grounds Maintenance Costs to show that only the relevant areas are being recharged to HWTC (MD)
 - ACTION TAKEN: Following an analysis of last year's total costs, the HWTC Grounds Maintenance costs made up 28.3% of the overall Idverde Grounds Maintenance contract costs

2. REQUESTED: Indexation to be applied against Grounds Maintenance costs as per contract
 - ACTION TAKEN: Contract's Schedule 5 received – figure of 11.1% used for indexation per Schedule 5; CPI linked
3. REQUESTED: Get details of allotment income for LC from Idverde contract (MD) to see whether they are still delivering Value For Money
 - ACTION TAKEN: Value for Money was assessed at the time of contract negotiations:

Martin Dickman reported that Sarah Townsend, Contracts Manager could provide further detail if required. A Member asked if the 28.3% covered play areas and was referred to paragraph 5.4 of the Special Expenses Draft Report which detailed regular activities carried out by various departments within the Council. Within that a further question was asked about allotments (ii) and what income was received. This information was not currently available as most allotments were managed by Town and Parish Councils, but Martin Dickman clarified that with the Idverde contract income did not offset costs; it was also based on an 'output' specification. Members suggested that fees should be reduced if this did not have an impact on the contract. Martin Dickman reported that this decision lay with the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure and the Service Director for Culture, Sport and Leisure. He would discuss this with them and come back to Members on the implications of reducing fees in the future, including the need to be consistent across the County. In addition, information on income if available. Reference was also made to the Levelling Up Project Opportunity Bucks and the importance of helping priority areas of which Wycombe was one. Members noted that any changes to fees and charges relating to allotments required a one year consultation.

Action: Martin Dickman

4. REQUESTED: HW Cemetery - Factor in 6% increase for salaries

Following a question it was confirmed that 6% was the modelling assumption with the cost of living crisis.

5. REQUESTED: HW Cemetery - Cost of concrete burial chambers – need to remove income from HW Cemetery as only 1 plot left

Members noted that there was one plot left but that this plot could not be used due to health and safety issues.

6. REQUESTED: Penn Rd Cemetery - Income negates expenditure for concrete chambers. LC would like to see how much was spent on concrete chambers.
 - ACTION TAKEN: this detail was provided in the agenda pack for 5 January Budget Sub Group
7. REQUESTED: Penn Rd Cemetery - Look at decreasing spend on concrete chambers if not spending on them next year?

- ACTION TAKEN - The cemetery team have confirmed that a further 100 burial chambers will be purchased next year at £814 each. This has been included in the budget.

Members noted that more concrete chambers had been sold at the Penn Road Cemetery. Following consultation, it was agreed that concrete chambers should continue to be used. However, there were other options available for residents.

9. REQUESTED: MD to ask Peter Cartwright or Sue Drummond about footway lights to find out exactly which ones are covered in budget
 - a. ACTION TAKEN: Corporate memory on the history of the location of footway lights is a challenge and Members are asked to provide their historical knowledge.

Clare Gray to circulate a spreadsheet on Special Expenses Footway and Lighting Areas and roads and footpaths which have been provided by Cllr Clarke. These lights were the responsibility of different areas e.g. Parish Councils, and the Contract Manager was obtaining this information including which lights came under the Special Expenses budget. A Member suggested that legacy WDC minutes/reports could provide further information. Reference was made to new developments which had not been adopted by Highways.

Action: Clare Gray

10. REQUESTED: Check where £3k budget for closed churchyard is. Is it included in budget for rec grounds?
 - a. ACTION TAKEN: Per Martin Dickman this was still a work in progress. From a finance perspective this budget had never been stipulated separately since unitary.

A Member expressed concern that this was being paid for twice but it was clarified that the other expenditure related to the war memorial.

11. REQUESTED: Fees & Charges

There had been a discussion about reducing Grounds Maintenance-related fees and charges at the start of the meeting. Investigations were being carried out regarding the option for a Community Interest Fund. Following a question Martin Dickman clarified that fees and charges were different to the use of CIL funding. Fees and charges were listed on the last page of the draft budget report. A Member expressed concern that the CIL funding was also paying for green spaces. CIL funding would be used more for capital projects and maintenance would come under the contract and revenue funding. However, the Member commented that if the play area was replaced then funding would not be required for the maintenance of the play area. However, there were still other costs such as health and safety inspections. There was also some capital funding for the Rye and Shelley Road outside of the special expenses budget.

In terms of the Child Fund, Members noted that residents could get help for the expense of a funeral if the child had not reached 18 or was stillborn after 24th week of pregnancy. There had been two burials; one in adult concrete chamber in Penn Road and another in High Wycombe where claims had been made. For stillborn children the Snowdrop Garden could be used for smaller spaces.

11. REQUESTED: AOB - Use portion of £13k that used to go to Hilltop to go towards events in the town centre to help HW BidCo (Frog Fest, more markets, bring more people into the town) – Include option to include £12k in next report to see effect on precept
 - ACTION TAKEN – This has now been incorporated into the proposed budget.

No further comments were made with respect to actions taken.

5 SPECIAL EXPENSES DRAFT BUDGET 2023/24 FOR CONSIDERATION

Ms Mugari Head of Finance presented the draft budget 2023/24, including contract costs, the management and support recharges and town centre events. In particular, she went through the options and risks for the Council tax and precept. The options were as follows:

- **Option 1:** An increase of £3.30 to Band D tax for HWTC to £20.12 would raise £483,520 in precept which would cover 96% of the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24 and combined with forecast interest receipts would result in a minimal drawdown from reserve of £18.00 and the reserve balance would remain above the minimum recommended level of £150,000. In terms of precept cost cover for HWTC and therefore helping HWTC continue to be financially sustainable in the future, **this option is a recommended option.**
- **Option 2:** An increase of £4.19 to Band D tax for HWTC to £21.01 would raise £504,988 in precept which would cover 100% of the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24. This option would put the most pressure on the rest of the Council to find additional savings to cover the increase. In terms of precept cost cover for HWTC, **this option is recommended for consideration (as an alternative choice after the preferred recommendation in 3.1)** as all costs are covered for HWTC Special Expenses and no reserve drawdown would be required.
- **Option 3:** A nil increase to Band D tax for HWTC will have further adverse impact on the HWTC reserve in the future and it would not result in a precept that funds the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24. As properties have increased by 507.26 to 24,033.51, the precept will increase by £8,531.64 despite remaining at £16.82 for Band D tax, which has an inadequate impact on covering the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24. A reserve drawdown of £79,258 would be required to cover the net expenditure of £504,988. This option would result in a reserve balance lower than the recommended £150,000 for future years from 2027/28, assuming precept remains the same in that year and there are no further pressures on

the budget from next year. This option is therefore not financially sustainable as the HWTC reserve would be reduced to unacceptable levels. This option is **NOT** recommended.

- **Option 4:** A decrease of £1.06 to Band D tax for HWTC to £15.76 would raise £347,284 in precept which would only cover 69% of the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24. A drawdown from reserve of £136,217 would be required in 2023/24 and beyond to cover costs fully. By 2025/26, assuming the same rate of expenditure, the reserve levels will diminish to below the recommended minimum of £150,000. This option is **NOT** recommended.

Following the presentation a Member asked how much funding was in reserves (forecast 23/24 opening balance £537,152 and forecast closing balance 23/24 £478,106) and noted that there should not be a reserve balance lower than £150,000 just in case any unexpected expenditure was required.

In terms of number of properties Members noted that these had increased by 507.26 to 24,033.51 but that it was essential still to raise the precept due to the increase in number of properties – this would assist in covering the net budgeted expenditure for 2023/24.

A Member referred to the cost of webcasting and whether this provided value for money and whether it was required. Clare Gray would discuss this with the Service Director and respond before the next meeting.

Action: Clare Gray

Lesley Clarke proposed an Option 5 with a 5% increase in Band D charge. The Head of Finance reported that she would model this increase but it should be a viable option as there would still be sufficient reserves cover for financial sustainability to be maintained. The Member calculated that this would bring the Band D charge to £17.66 and should leave reserves which were still healthy and a smaller increase would help residents with the cost of living crisis. This was seconded by Paul Turner and agreed by Members of the Sub-Group. The five options would be presented to the High Wycombe Town Committee on 17 January 2023 with Option 5 as the recommended option of the Budget Sub-Group.