

FINANCE & ESTABLISHMENT COMMITTEE

SAFFRON WALDEN TOWN COUNCIL

MINUTES of the FINANCE & ESTABLISHMENT COMMITTEE MEETING held in the Town Hall Saffron Walden on Friday 20th December 2024 at 7.30pm

Present Councillors: Coote, de Vries (chair), Eke, Freeman, Gadd, McBirnie, McLellan, Meloy, Porch, Parker and Reeve.

Officers: Town Clerk, Responsible Finance Officer (RFO), Operations Manager and Deputy Town Clerk.

Public: None

<p>F & E 195-24</p>	<p>Apologies for absence Apologies were received and accepted from Cllrs Ahmed and Shotropa; Cllrs McLellan and Porch substituted for each respectively, as the Budget Working Group (BWG) Chair and Deputy Chair.</p> <p>It was confirmed the requests were valid and called in line with Standing Orders.</p>
<p>F & E 196-24</p>	<p>To receive any Declarations of Interest Cllrs Coote, Freeman, McBirnie and Reeve declared a generic non-pecuniary interest as District Councillors for Uttlesford District Council.</p> <p>Cllr Gadd declared a generic non-pecuniary interest as a County Councillor for Essex County Council.</p> <p>Cllr Parker declared a generic non-pecuniary interest as a member of Uttlesford Community Action Network.</p>
<p>F&E 197-24</p>	<p>Public Speaking Time There were no questions arising.</p>
<p>F&E 198-24</p>	<p>First Draft Budget 2025/26</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. It was confirmed committee is asked to consider whether it rejects or approves the budget for recommendation to Full Council. Should committee reject the budget the clerk recommended the BWG reconvenes to consider the F&E Committee resolutions. b. Some F & E Members disagreed (to 'a' above), requesting that if the budget is rejected at this meeting, the details should then be further re-considered by the F&E Committee not the BWG. This was debated, noting the BWG was appointed by Full Council to review, consider and recommend the budget to the F&E Committee (and Full Council as the determining body), the BWG should continue and finalise the work. The Clerk reaffirmed the recommendation for the F & E Committee to provide guidance and direction to any reconvened BWG; this matter was rediscussed later in the meeting.

- c. Cllr Porch proposed to accept the budget as presented to F & E, this was seconded by Cllr Reeve.
- d. Cllr Gadd proposed to reject the budget and to amend the budget, providing later details of his proposed amendments
- e. Councillors discussed the external grants with some Members strongly requesting all external grants are reinstated, others raised concern as to how the grants can be reinstated without raising the precept or reducing the awarding amounts.
- f. Staffing hours and resourcing capacities were also discussed
- g. Cllr Gadd raised queries on the grant received from the Shared Prosperity Fund and it was noted details had previously been provided and were referred to in response to Cllr Gadd's queries.
- h. It was noted SWTC is behind the cumulative UK inflation rate of the past 6 years; councillors raised strong concern with this because it has resulted in Ear Marked Reserves being heavily reduced and the EMR should be reinstated as a matter of priority.
- i. Cllr Coote left the meeting.
- j. BWG members emphasised and reiterated several BWG meetings have taken place with the first meeting in August and noted the budget as presented had been reached on an informed basis, following eight BWG meetings. BWG members expressed concern at issues being raised now by F & E Committee members which had not been raised previously at either this Committee or at any Full Council meeting; this matter was not reconciled.
- k. Committee felt the precept increase at 6.74% was a reasonable increase, acknowledging the rise in costs (this position later reaffirmed in the meeting).
- l. Cllr Gadd proposed to amend the budget as follows:
 - (i) To remove the additional monies set aside for increased staffing hours at the TIC (£17,011)
 - (ii) To reinstate external grants to Saffron Hall (£10k) and Saffron Screen (£2,500) as per the 2024/25 budget
 - (iii) To cease an Admin post
 - (iv) That the consequences of the above savings (circa £12k) be used for the Jubilee Hub House EMR.

Cllr Gadd's proposal was seconded by Cllr Meloy.

- i. Concerns were raised regarding these proposals, noting a number of fundamental changes were proposed and Councillors were apprehensive noting the complexity of changes which should be made on an informed basis. It was further noted that the BWG had not received any prior notification or details of these late proposals which had not therefore been considered or debated in any of the eight BWG meetings.

	<p>ii. The Chair put Cllr Gadd's proposal to a vote, which the majority voted AGAINST.</p> <p>m. The Chair put Cllr Porch's proposal, to recommend the budget to full council, to a vote, which was the majority voted AGAINST.</p> <p>n. Committee requested:</p> <p>i. a revised budget is presented to an extraordinary Finance and Establishment in advance of the January Full Council meeting, with BWG members invited to attend (noting unless substituted they will not have voting rights). Cllr Parker suggested it was more appropriate for any further discussion to be met via the BWG, as opposed to a further F & E meeting (this matter was unreconciled at this time).</p> <p>ii. Officers to present revised costings to show the implications of the following actions:</p> <p>(a) Reinstatement of grants to Saffron Hall and Saffron Screen at 80% of the 2024/25 budget.</p> <p>(b) Removal/reduction of TIC additional staffing costs (15-hour pw)</p> <p>(c) Reduction of 1 x Office Admin post (ie not increasing to 37 hours pw).</p> <p>o. Cllr Parker left the meeting.</p> <p>p. Councillors raised concern that the amendments proposed are significant and may result in a decision being reached simply to meet timing deadlines.</p> <p>q. Cllrs McBirnie and Freeman left the meeting.</p> <p>r. It was agreed that Councillors would consolidate any additional proposed changes via email communications to the Chair of F & E and/or Chair of BWG for collation and onward sending to Officers.</p> <p>s. Committee favoured the percentage increase (6.74%) but asked that the changes cited above (nii) are presented at a future meeting for consideration.</p> <p>Cllr McLellan (Chair of BWG) expressed concerns that should the BWG reconvene, it would still fail to satisfy the requirements of the F & E Committee and therefore the F & E Committee (as opposed to a further BWG) should be reconvened.</p> <p>In recognising the need to move forward with a draft budget, those remaining Cllrs (de de Vries (chair), Eke, Gadd, McLellan, Meloy, Porch and Reeve) agreed that the F & E Committee should reconvene to further discuss a 2nd draft budget (date tbc).</p>
F & E 199-24	<p>Urgent Information Items There were no matters raised.</p>
F & E 200-24	<p>Date and time of Next Meeting It was noted the next ordinary meeting to be held on 20th January 2025 at The Town Hall Saffron Walden at 7.30pm and an extraordinary F&E meeting date to reconsider the budget will be circulated outside this meeting.</p>

The Chairman closed the meeting at 14.10