

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE held on 20 September 2002 in the Parish Room, Fiddlers Lane, Saughall

In attendance: Councillor Mrs M Anderson  
Councillor A Bailey (in the Chair)  
Councillor CW Eyton  
Councillor A Warrington

Invited Members: Councillor Mrs JE Storrar  
Councillor RA Storrar

46 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors B Kerr and R Shukla.

47 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 May 2002 be confirmed as a correct record.

48 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Minute No 48 – Bus Shelter Schemes

Although the first phase of the Bus Shelters Scheme had been carried out by contractors working for Cheshire County Council, the Council had not been advised of timescales for completion of the second phase i.e. bus shelters in Little Saughall.

RESOLVED:

That the Clerk be requested to contact Ms Jenni Edge of Cheshire County Council's Transport Co-ordination Department, to ascertain when the new bus shelters will be erected.

49 TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT FOR CLERKS

The excessive hours the Clerk had put in between May and August 2002 had caused concern as she was contracted to do 16 hours per week. The period had been particularly busy due to the enthusiasm of the new Council to get things done, various new initiatives being undertaken, numerous meetings, the acquisition of land earmarked for the Golden Jubilee Park, poor responses from Principal Council Officers and the subsequent need to follow up and the year end accounts.

The Clerk had kept a record of the hours she had worked which were considerably more than the 16 hours per week required of her. She did

however report that the work had “tailed off” somewhat during September 2002.

The Clerk informed that 16 hours per week was enough for her to do as well as her full time job. If the new Council continued to work at the pace at which it had started out it would need to consider taking on a second Clerk and sharing the duties between two posts.

Members agreed that it may be necessary for the Council to prioritise its work in the light of the hours the Clerk was employed to work. The Clerk agreed to monitor the hours she worked and inform the Council if they rose above 16 hours per week again.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Clerk’s hours of work be kept under review;
- (2) the Clerk be requested to obtain a model Contract of Employment from the County Secretary, Mrs Jackie Weaver; and
- (3) the Clerk’s Terms and Conditions of Employment be further considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

50      DISPENSATIONS      ALLOWING      MEMBERS      WITH      PREJUDICIAL  
INTERESTS TO PARTICIPATE IN MEETINGS

Members noted the content of a letter from Mr Charles Kerry, Solicitor, Head of Democratic Services at Chester City Council, on the dispensations which allowed members with prejudicial interests to participate in meetings.

Under Section 81 of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Council’s Code of Conduct, a Member who had a prejudicial interest in a matter which was under consideration may not participate in the consideration of that matter by the Council unless he/she had first obtained a dispensation from Chester City Council’s Ethics and Standards Committee.

Members could apply for a dispensation in certain circumstances where:

- ‘
- ?? more than 50% of members entitled or required to participate in the business of the Parish Council are prevented from doing so because of prejudicial interest; or
- ?? the Parish Council is not able to comply with political balance principles.’

Individual Parish Councillors seeking dispensation must do so in writing, not less than 14 days before the date when the matter was to be considered and explaining reasons.

RESOLVED:

That the content of Mr Kerry's letter on dispensations be noted.

51 INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

The Parish Council's Accounts for the 2001/2002 had been completed by the Clerk and submitted to Mr Harry Dobson, the Council's Independent Internal Auditor, for his consideration and report.

Mr Dobson had reviewed the Accounts and had signed them off as being completed. He had raised a number of questions and the Clerk had prepared answers to them and circulated both with the agenda.

Mr Dobson had gone on to make three recommendations as follows for the Council's consideration:

1. Consider the Risk Management section of the Financial Regulations in regard to accessing risk, annually, and when any change in Council operations take place. This will usually mean a check on Insurance cover. If in operation this would have meant a review when the decision was taken to purchase the new recreational land for instance.
2. Consider the operation of a Petty Cash Imprest System for the Clerk's incidental expenses. This will enable the Cheque on the Receipts and Payments report to balance with the Petty Cash record book.
3. Have the items making up the Asset Register checked and agreed annually at a meeting before the Accounts publication. A record of where the items are should be available and their valuation.

The Committee noted the Independent Internal Auditor's questions and the Clerk's answers and gave consideration to the three recommendations.

The Council did carry out an annual risk assessment and at the same time reviewed its insurance cover. This had been done during the financial year 2001/2002 but it was accepted that it should have done in advance of the purchase of the recently acquired recreational land. However, the Clerk had consulted with the Insurance Company after the land had been purchased and the Council had declared itself satisfied with the insurance cover it already had. It had not been deemed necessary to increase it. Members agreed to adopt the Independent Internal Auditor's first recommendation.

The Clerk was happy with the current arrangements in respect of incidental expenses. She paid for what she required each month postage costs, stationary, etc and then claimed it back at the end of each month making payment by cheque.

It was noted that the Clerk's house contents insurance would not cover Parish Council monies and petty cash would have to be kept elsewhere which was

itself an obvious a risk. Members agreed not to adopt the Independent Internal Auditor's second recommendation.

Members noted that there was an Asset Register in existence and recommendation (3) could be complied with although a number of the assets were depreciating rapidly e.g. the printer, and some were worth next to nothing e.g. office furniture. It was also difficult to put a value on the play equipment. Members agreed to adopt the Independent Internal Auditor's third recommendation.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Independent Internal Auditor's report be noted;
- (2) the Independent Internal Auditor's recommendations (1) and (3) be adopted;
- (3) the Clerk's answers in response to the questions raised be noted; and
- (4) the Clerk be requested to write to Mr Dobson thanking him for his help with the 2001/2002 Parish Council Audit, answering his questions and informing him which recommendations the Council wished to adopt.

52 PARISH ROOM, 2 FIDDLERS LANE

(a) Non Domestic Rates

The Clerk had applied to Chester City Council for Rural Rate Relief in respect of the Parish Room. A letter acknowledging receipt of the application had been received on 14 August 2002. Mr T Moseley of the Revenue and Benefit Services Section had promised to write to the Clerk again once a decision had been made but no further letter had been forthcoming.

(b) Parish Room Review

The Council had agreed previously that it was important that the Parish Room provided value for money. To ensure Best Value the Council had agreed that a review of the Room would be carried out in September 2002, in the light of its costs and benefits (both economic and social).

Members noted the facilities available to them along with their usage.

- ?? There was a Parish Council Surgery held most Saturday mornings in the Parish Room between 10:00am and 10:45am. (48 weeks per year)
- ?? There were monthly Planning Committee meetings scheduled to be held in the Parish Room throughout the 2002/2003 Municipal year. Also additional meetings were arranged ad hoc. However, it was noted

that some meetings were cancelled and some arranged to coincide with Council meetings and so were held in the Vernon Institute.

- ?? There were monthly Finance and General Purposes Committee meetings scheduled to be held in the Parish Room throughout the 2002/2003 Municipal year although up to now three had been cancelled due to lack of business.
- ?? There were three Community Safety Committee meetings scheduled to be held in the Parish Room throughout the 2002/2003 Municipal year although none had been held up to now.
- ?? The Golden Jubilee Park Panel met in the Parish Room usually monthly.
- ?? The Saughall Parish Rural Housing Working Party met in the Parish Room approximately quarterly.
- ?? The Homewatch held its meetings in the Parish Room every other month plus additional ad hoc meetings.
- ?? In the previous year there had been three meetings with the youth of the village on an ad hoc basis and various meetings with Principal Authority Officers on specific issues.

Members also noted that:

- ?? The annual rental of the room was £1,750.
- ?? The Water Rates were approximately £45 per year.
- ?? The Rates were £1,048.80 in total for the year.

Consequently, the occupancy of the Parish Room was costing approximately £2,843.80 per annum. All Council meetings were held in the Vernon Institute.

The Committee weighed up the costs of the Parish Room against its usage, noting that there were other venues in the village available to the Council for meetings.

The Vernon Institute was one venue supported by the Council as it provided grant aid annually as a contribution to its refurbishment and the maintenance of its fabric.

The Uniform Group Headquarters had a suitable room for Committee meetings etc. and it was suggested that an approach be made by the Council to see if it could be made available to it for a nominal rent. Members were keen to maintain a presence in that part of the village.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) in the interests of Best Value the Council be **RECOMMENDED** to vacate the Parish Room by 31 March 2002, thereby ensuring that the landlord has sufficient notice (3 months notice is required);
- (2) the Chairman be requested to sound out the Chairman of the Uniform Group to see if it would be possible for the Council to hold some of its meetings in the Group's Headquarters on Fiddlers Lane; and
- (3) subject to (1) above being agreed by the Council
  - (a) meetings currently held in the Parish Room be split between the Vernon Institute and the Uniform Group Headquarters (if permission is granted);
  - (b) necessary arrangements in respect of vacating the Parish Room (An Exit Strategy) be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee; and
  - (c) the Clerk ensure the landlord is given 3 months formal notice that the Council wishes to give up the tenancy on the Parish Room on 31 March 2002.

53 GOLDEN JUBILEE PARK – GRANT AID

(a) Local Panel Project Funding

The Council had been successful in its bid for funding of £3,200 to create a Golden Jubilee Park on the newly acquired land on Fiddlers Lane.

However, the funds were only available up until 31 March 2003 and therefore the agreed expenditure must have been incurred and claimed in time for payment processing by that date. Funding would only be released when copies of full receipted invoices for the works were received by Chester City Council's Local Panel Officer, Mr Clive Roberts.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and Mr Charles Seward, Chester City Council's Forward Planning Manager, be asked to provide the information he had promised on the hedge and trees between the two pieces of land in the Parish Council's ownership and advise further on planning permission, as grant aid offered was subject to the work being done within strict timescales.

(b) Community Facility and Rural Playground Grants

In the light of (a) above, Mr Roberts had written to the Clerk asking if the Council still needed the Community Facility and Playground Grants which she had applied for.

Councillor RA Storrar had agreed to meet with Mr Roberts regarding the grant aid opportunities. He had told him that the Golden Jubilee Park was a large project and the Council needed all of the funding it could get. Mr Roberts had agreed to process the two grants but no decision on them had been communicated to the Clerk.

RESOLVED:

That the situation be noted and decisions on the two grants applied for be awaited.

(c) Grant Aid to Voluntary and Community Sector 2003-2004

The Committee received a copy of a letter from Mr Gareth Taylor, Chester City Council's Funding Compact Co-ordinator that detailed information on £800,000 of grants available to support voluntary and community groups or projects.

RESOLVED:

That the detail of the letter detailing grant aid be noted.

54 FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Members received copies of information supplied by Ms Sandra Morrison, Chester City Council's External Funding Officer, as follows;

Funding Opportunities Fact Sheet  
Village and Community Hall Funders Fact Pack  
Local and Regional Funders Fact Pack

Information had also been sent in respect of a free training course (£10 returnable deposit guaranteed a place) on Fundraising in the North West. The course was being held on Thursday, 24 October 2002 at the Town Hall, Chester.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the information on funding opportunities supplied by Ms Morrison be noted and supplied to Members of the Golden Jubilee Park Panel; and
- (2) 2 places be booked on the North West Fundraising course for Councillors B Kerr and Mrs JE Storrar (substitute – Councillor Mrs M Anderson).

55 VERNON INSTITUTE

The Committee considered the various options available to it to provide support to the Vernon Institute Management Committee in its endeavours to bring about modernisation and repairs to the Vernon Institute building.

The Vernon Institute was the Village Hall and as such was a valuable asset to the village. It was in poor condition at present and was in serious need of revamp. To this end drastic action was needed. The building had been deteriorating steadily over a long period of time. Members agreed that the time had come to take stock of the situation and to come up with an Action Plan to halt the decline and to repair and revitalise the Vernon Institute. If this could not be done the long term future of the building was bleak and uncertain.

It was imperative that external funding opportunities were identified and explored to finance the work required. Members considered how this could be achieved especially in the light of competing bids for finance. Councillor RA Storrar agreed to approach two members of the local community who had the necessary skills and experience and ask for their help to prepare bids.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) Council be **RECOMMENDED** to reassign its priorities to, and through partnership working offer as much positive support as it is able to facilitate the improvements needed to bring the Vernon Institute up to an appropriate standard befitting of a Village Hall in the twenty first century;
- (2) if the Council is agreeable to (1) above, it is **RECOMMENDED** to explore further the various proposals considered by the Committee and agree a possible rescue strategy; and
- (3) the next Parish Council Newsletter carry a plea for people with experience in attracting external funding to come forward to assist the bid preparation in respect of grant aid applications for the Council and its partners.

56 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the next meeting of the Committee be held at 7:30pm on Thursday, 14 November 2002; and
- (2) the meetings of the Committee scheduled for Thursday, 17 October and 21 November 2002 be cancelled.