

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE held on 25 September 2003 in the Parish Room, Fiddlers Lane, Saughall

In attendance: Councillor A Bailey (in the Chair)  
Councillor C Wynne-Eyton  
Councillor Mrs M Wynne-Eyton  
Councillor R Shukla.  
Councillor RA Storrar

Invited Members: Councillor B Kerr  
Councillor Mrs P Humphrey  
Councillor Mrs JE Storrar

48 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No Apologies were received from Councillor A Warrington.

49 CODE OF CONDUCT – DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No Declarations of Interest were received.

50 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 July 2003 be confirmed as a correct record.

51 MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Minute No 41 – Proposed Affordable Housing In Saughall

Councillor Kerr presented the Clerk with a copy of a publication from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM Circular 06/2003 dated 4 August 2003), which updated, after consultation earlier this year, the Local Government Act 1972: General Disposal Consent (England) 2003 “Disposal of Land for Less than the Best Consideration that can Reasonably be Obtained”.

This information guide may be used in the pursuit of an Affordable Housing Scheme on land on Lodge Lane, Saughall.

The Clerk had requested a progress report from the County Property Officer on the County Council’s further considerations in respect of the possible disposal of its operational land that was being targeted for the housing development. This report would be presented to the next meeting of the Council scheduled for Monday. 6 October 2003.

Minute No 43 – Golden Jubilee Park

The Chairman sought the views of the Committee on a proposal to ask a local contractor to plough and seed the Park as an interim measure. This would then

ensure that the land could be used for play next Spring/Summer. Any sowing would need to be done now and the work required was estimated to cost approximately £700.

RESOLVED:

That Council be **RECOMMENDED** to endorse the proposal to plough and seed the Golden Jubilee Park land and put arrangements in hand as a matter of urgency.

## 52 QUALITY PARISH COUNCIL SCHEME

This Committee meeting had been convened primarily to discuss the possibility of the Council becoming a Quality Parish Council and the implications it would have for the Council, the local community, individual Members and the Clerk herself. To assist the debate copies of the following had been enclosed with the agenda:

- ?? The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme – Explained
- ?? The National Training Strategy for Town & Parish Council's
  - The Portfolio Guide
  - Assessment Criteria and the pitfalls to avoid whilst compiling your Portfolio of Evidence

The Quality Parish Council Scheme had been developed jointly by DEFRA and ODPM, following consultation and with the collaboration of key stakeholders such as the Local Government Association, the National Association of Local Councils and the Countryside Agency.

The Scheme set out some straightforward tests that parish and town councils had to pass before they were awarded 'Quality' Parish Council status. The list for accreditation required a 'Quality' Council to:

- ?? have initially at least 80% of its seats filled by candidates who stood for election (rising to 100% for re-accreditation)
- ?? have a suitably qualified Clerk
- ?? have adopted a local Code of Conduct
- ?? hold at least 6 Council meetings each year
- ?? publish annual reports
- ?? provide regular information to residents on parish activities
- ?? produce properly prepared and audited accounts.

Applications would be assessed by County Panels who would be made up of people with experience of both principal authorities and town and parish councils.

The scheme also included a model charter where all parish councils were encouraged to negotiate with principal authorities to set out how these tiers of local government could promote partnership working. Once granted 'Quality'

status, it was hoped that local councils would be in a position to give their communities a better deal on local services and a stronger voice on decisions affecting people's day to day lives.

The Council was aware that the position regarding the possibility of further Local Government Reorganisation was unclear at the present time. The Government was holding a referendum on elected regional assemblies in the three northern regions, including Cheshire next year. If regional assemblies were established, local government within these regions must be changed to a wholly unitary pattern. This would have major implications for Town and Parish Councils who would have an enhanced role to play at the local level. The Council had no idea what additional responsibilities it would have if there was to be Regional Government and Unitary Authorities in Cheshire. Therefore, it was also unsure whether it would be able to cope.

The Boundary Committee would be submitting at least two options for unitary structure in Cheshire to be decided in the referendum. A consultation had been undertaken and preferred options had already been submitted for consideration.

Currently, Quality Parish Councils were under no obligation to take on additional functions. Obtaining accreditation in the short term was a demonstration to electors and Principal Authorities of a Parish Council's competence. The only Parish Council so far to do this in Cheshire was Poynton in the Macclesfield District.

The Council already considered itself for all intents and purposes to be a Quality Parish Council but recognised that the Clerk would have to complete a portfolio of evidence and reach an required standard to gain the Assessment and Qualification Alliance (AQA) Certificate (deemed the suitable qualification) to demonstrate her competency and that she could "carry out everyday duties and tasks with competence". It was acknowledged however that the Clerk did in fact have a number of Local Government qualifications, including a Final - Post Graduate qualification that was recognised by all Principal Authorities in England and Wales. Further, it was noted that DEFRA and its partners were backing a basic and inferior training package.

Members considered the Council's current work programme, noting its core functions, activities and ongoing initiatives. The Golden Jubilee Park development itself would create a lot of work for the foreseeable future. They noted the number of meetings and amount of administration that was generating on a monthly basis. The Clerk's contract of employment had recently been revised and although she was not a career clerk (as she worked full time for a Principal Authority – 37 hours a week) she was now working 20 hours a week for the Parish Council. This was 5 more hours a week than allowed for in her original contract when she took over as Clerk 6 years ago. She was the Council's only employee and there was no cover provided in times of sickness and during her annual leave.

It was generally accepted that although the Council met most of the tests required and wanted to obtain Quality Parish Council status it was not in a

position at the present time to seek it because of its intensive workload and the time both Members and the Clerk had available for Parish duties.

The Council was determined to work towards Quality Parish Council accreditation and hoped that it would be in a better position to make an application in 12 months time when the Referendum on Regional Government would have been held and the position on Unitary Authorities would be clearer.

The Clerk declined to comment on the possibility of achieving Quality Parish Council status. She had already privately informed the Chairman of her perspective on this initiative.

**RESOLVED:** That the Council be **RECOMMENDED** to

- (1) consider applying for Quality Parish Council status in 12 months time, subject to its workload; and
- (2) consider providing appropriate cover/assistance for the Clerk when the Council sets its 2004/2005 budget.

