

Woughton Community Council

Operations & Resources Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Monday 21st November 2022, 6:30pm at the Woughton Community Council Hub, the Council Chamber, 60, Garraways, Coffee Hall, Milton Keynes, MK6 5EG.

Present: Cllrs Jordan Coventry (Chair), Elina Apse (Vice-Chair), Maggie Ferguson, Donna Fuller, Ruth McMillan, Liz Simpkins, Sue Smith, Alan Williamson.

Also present:

Steve McNay	(Council Manager)
Marta Sobis	(Accounts Manager)
Brian Barton	(Committee & Member Services Officer)

OC 71/22 Apologies:

Cllr Luke Louis (unwell)
Cllr Amber McQuillan (unwell)

AGREED

OC 72/22 Declarations of Interest:

There were no declarations of interest.

NOTED

OC 73/22 Chairs Announcements:

The Services & Communities Committee meeting is being held on Wednesday 23rd November 2022 at 6:30pm.

NOTED

OC 74/22 Questions from the public (Max. 10 minutes):

There were no questions from the public.

NOTED

OC 75/22 Minutes of the previous meeting:

The minutes of the Operations & Resources Committee meeting held on Wednesday 10th October 2022 Were **AGREED** as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

OC 76/22 To provide an update on the proposed budget and precept setting for 2023/2024:

This is an update from the Full Council meeting that was discussed on the Monday 14th November 2022. Since that meeting, some further clarity has been found which

impacts on both this year and the coming year, as well as any longer term budget planning.

The council tax base for 2023/2024 has now been decided and sits at £2,514.29. This is an increase from last year and reflects the views from Milton Keynes City Council around collection levels, reduction / discount levels, impact of LCTRS and any housing growth. This base level is used to define the level of precept income likely, and, with this increase, precept income would rise next year (an increase of around £25,000).

In addition to this increase, a decision has been made that LCTRS (Local Council Tax Revenue Support) will remain at the same level.

There remain considerable questions around other sources of income, specifically the contractual amount that is paid for the Landscaping service. Following the last Full Council meeting, Woughton Community Council has been informed of the 'uplift' that relates to the current financial year (2022/2023) and the full amount is a 5.559% increase, an amount of **£8,510.66**, meaning a total 'grant' of **£161,607.68**. This is approximately £20,000 below the current budget and the 'uplift' doesn't cover the additional wage expectation, following the agreement under the JNC agreement.

There will also be a request for Woughton Community Council to extend the current contract for a six (6) month period until September 2023, where the new five (5) year (with potential additional five (5) years) contract will start. Woughton Community Council has also been told that they will receive an 'indicative' budget for this new contract prior to the end of 2022, so this *should* be able to be included in any budget planning.

The budget sheet provided for the purposes of this meeting includes the new agreed amounts above including the increase in Landscaping budget for the current year, with a further 5% increase from April 2023 if council continues with the contract. This will then be further clarified once the figures for the new contract are agreed from September 2023.

Some changes to spending have also been made (highlighted in red) on the budget sheet to reduce expenditure where possible. These include reductions in events spending, gazettes and uniforms, as well as some service budgets. Further savings could be made through reductions in key areas such as Service Plan (currently £20,000), emerging priorities (currently £10,000) and staffing contingency (currently £25,000), any reductions in these areas would have an impact on service delivery.

With this new information, combined with the unknown amounts being included with some logical assumptions, the budget for 2023/2024 remains in deficit by around £45,000. To deliver a 'balanced' budget (i.e. no deficit and no surplus), this £45,000 will need to be found, either through savings or through income increases. This amount has increased since the last Full Council meeting, due to a lower than expected uplift for Landscaping.

Each 1% of precept increase equates to around £6,500 of additional income, a 5% increase would be sufficient to 'break even'. This is half the current inflation level and is less than the increase in the wage bill that was agreed by the Joint National

Councils (the 'green book') for the current year. This would not enable any increase to the reserves, cover the deficit expected this year (due to repairs to the Tinkers Bridge Meeting Place roof, IT, wage increases and staffing cover costs) or build any resilience in for the coming years, where income will reduce.

The Council Manager has requested a breakdown of the current parish payments at each housing band but has used previous years figures for the following calculations. Each 1% of precept increase equates to around £1.20 per year / 10 pence per month for local council taxpayers, a 5% increase would mean around 50p a month additional payment for a Band A or B property (the vast majority of properties in the parish), with slightly more for higher bands.

It is important that this increase would only apply to the small part of the council tax bill that relates to the parish costs, the remainder of the bill is Milton Keynes City Council, Thames Valley Police, Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire & Rescue service and the social care precept element. Any further increases would be in the hands of the other authorities.

For the year coming, staffing can be maintained at current levels. At the present time, other than the additional capacity offered by the increased role of the Accounts Assistant, no further 'back filling' for the Responsible Financial Officer / Operations Manager role has taken place. This helps ensure budgetary balance, but places additional demands on other officers. It is recommended that a decision regarding any cover during 2023 be made once further clarifications are made around both the current and coming financial years.

Further changes may be needed over the coming years in terms of roles, with greater flexibility across the workforce and an ability to cover where necessary, when necessary, depending on the needs of the council (i.e. a multi-skilled workforce that can cover across departments). This is already very much evident a lot of the time, with cover offered on an ad hoc basis.

The budget setting process takes place every year and includes a three (3) year projection. It is recommended that this is increased to include a five (5) year projection too, especially with the significant changes that are likely over the coming years. These changes include the very likely loss of the LCTRS grant, potentially a new landscape contract, the ongoing impact of the 'cost of living' crisis and inflationary pressures as well as the unknown challenges that comes along regularly. This will be helped by the in depth look at the services that are provided by the council and a clear view on what the priorities are (also considering the feedback from the surveys).

This five (5) year projection (included for the first time) is a basis from which to work and cannot be seen as accurate, due to the variety of variables that impact each year such as reductions in the LCTRS grant, unknown Landscaping income, inflationary pressures that may or may not remain.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee notes this update.**
- 2. That the committee considers the impact of this update on overall budget, deficit, and potential impact on precept need.**

3. That further consideration is made at the December meeting, with a view to having a final decision at the January Full Council meeting, to enable a precept request to be made.
4. That alongside the budget setting for 2023/2024, an update is made to the three (3) and five (5) year budget projections to include any updated information around external funding.

OC 77/22 To present two (2) new policies from the 'Civility and Respect' working group, for consideration as additions to the Woughton Community Council policy suite:

The Civility and Respect project is a collaboration of groups (including the SLCC, NALC and others) to try and address some of the issues around poor behaviour within the local council sector. This council has previously looked at this project and agreed to sign the pledge. The working group has now published some further policies that committee may feel are worthy of inclusion and agreement within the wider Woughton Community Council policy library.

There are two (2) specific policies:

The Councillor and Officer Protocol is a policy that is already in place within Woughton Community Council, but this proposed policy is far more in depth. It covers in some detail that expectations that both parties can and should have (and abide with), clarifying the roles and duties of each party and specifying the scope of the roles. It is, in the opinion of the Council Manager, a useful and helpful document whether adopted or otherwise.

The second policy is a social media 'add on' element to the previous policies, a guide within the 'Civility and Respect' arena. Again, this is a thorough and complete guide for councillors and others around the use of social media, keeping safe, responding and managing interactions and being realistic about the pros and cons of this approach. As with the first policy, there is already a policy in place within Woughton Community Council that covers social media use, this guidance would sit nicely alongside this.

RESOLVED

1. That the committee notes the report and the two (2) policies as presented at the meeting.
2. That this committee agrees to adopt the following policies as useful additions within the Woughton Community Council policy suite
 - a. Councillor / Officer Protocol
 - b. Social Media Civility and Respect Guide and Policy supplement
3. That policies are formatted to the Woughton Community Council style and added to the policy library, online policy store and sent to all councillors and officers.

OC 78/22 To review the Investment Strategy:

The policy was ratified last year and is due for review.

On the first line, the policy states that it covers the 'surplus' funds held by the council. It is recommended that the word 'surplus' is removed, as this policy covers all funds held by the council.

The 'Policy' section of the policy discussed more specific elements, whilst remaining fairly broad. It is recommended that the following point be included within this list, to emphasise the importance of these considerations:

'Investments will include an evaluation of the ethical value of any funds and, where this is felt to be at odds with the aims of the council, investments will be made elsewhere. Woughton Community Council aims to ensure ethical investments are prioritised wherever possible, whilst accepting reasonable limitations on this.'

Reasons for removing or not investing in funds may include:

- a. Involvement in the creation or sales of weaponry*
- b. Involvement in the promotion of gambling*
- c. Involvement in the creation or promotion of pornography*

Concerns around business approaches relating to modern slavery, sustainability and biodiversity, employment practices or similar'

This area is touched upon later in the policy, where it states *'The Responsible Financial Officer will be encouraged to consider social, ethical and /or environmental factors or criteria when selecting retaining or disposing of assets'*. The above statement clarifies this position and places a duty on this committee to ensure responsible investment is at the heart of decision making. Any additional restrictions suggested can be included here too (or indeed, removed if these areas are not considered to be negative).

It is also recommended that the following paragraph and heading be included. This is in response to the significant turmoil within the financial markets over the past few months but also recognising that as a larger council, Woughton Community Council is not covered by the FCSC scheme, meaning that if any of our investments were to be held with a provider that became insolvent, there is no guarantee of receiving any money back. Whilst this remains an extremely unlikely occurrence, there were a number of local authorities that lost money following the financial crisis in 2008, due to this lack of protection on investments.

There are also some minor changes which are around the change of title for this committee from Policy and Resources to Operations and Resources and date changes within the policy. It is also suggested that the 'Lead' box is completed with a Job Title, rather than an individual name, so this has also been changed to 'Responsible Finance Officer'.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee notes the report and the policy document.**
- 2. That the committee note the inclusion of the following:**
 - a. Removal of the word 'surplus' on the first line**
 - b. Expansion of the ethical investment elements of the policy, and**
 - c. Inclusion of the paragraph titled 'Balance of Investments'**
- 3. That the committee agrees to these additions, as well as some 'housekeeping' changes.**

OC 79/22 To review the Lone Working policy and propose investment in lone worker systems, to offer protection to officers working in isolation:

The Lone Working Policy covers officers who work remotely from home and those who work in isolation within the wider community. Whilst the policy as a whole remains suitable, the review has raised some issues in terms of the 'community' based working element and a need to ensure all officers are aware of the policy, processes and agreements contained within.

There have been some issues over recent months where people working alone have been in difficult situations, without access to direct support. Whilst these have not resulted in anything lasting, this could have turned out differently.

In addition to these issues, the council has a duty to offer sufficient safe working practices to employees and our lone worker policy details the need for equipment where appropriate. The policy discussed the need to have a charged mobile phone, but no such phone is provided to caretakers.

To address this issue, research into safer working systems has been undertaken with some quotes and costings, plus different options offered by different providers. The cost of providing something that would offer suitable support is relatively small, starting at around £10 per month, per user (assuming five (5) devices, this equates to £600 per year).

These devices provide multiple layers of support, including:

- 'Officer down' notifications if there is a slip, trip or fall
- Direct access to a 24/7 call centre if there is an incident. This can ensure emergency services are contacted or escalation to a manager, this can be arranged with the company
- Geo location means that the operator can know where you are (and potentially managers too)

There are different types of devices, ranging from ID card and lanyard style, through to a 'pager' type. Some of the more expensive ones have a further range of operations, including a 'toggle' function to switch location on and off, latest locations memos, the option for officers to be 'at work' or not, touchscreens, 4G connectivity, etc.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee notes the report and attached Lone Working policy.**
- 2. That the committee agrees to include a training session for all officers around lone working within the training provision on Wednesday afternoons.**
- 3. That the committee considers the benefits of lone worker protective equipment.**
- 4. That the committee agrees to defer to the December meeting to decide on the most appropriate style of equipment, based on a budget of no more than £1,000 per year in total, and that contractors are invited to make a presentation on the equipment that can be provided, with the Caretaker Manager in attendance.**

- 5. That this support includes all caretakers, with an additional option for people who lone work occasionally, but don't require an individual one.**

OC 80/22 To propose the inclusion of a Menopause Policy, with a first draft for discussion:

Having undertaken research into menopause, the Council Manager believes that the opening paragraphs from the Unison policy explains the current situation well:

'Statistics show that around 1 in every 3 women has either experienced or is currently going through the menopause. Around 8 in every 10 women will experience noticeable symptoms and of these 45% will find their symptoms hard to deal with.

Some women may cope well with the physical and emotional changes, but for others they may cause particular difficulties both in work and out of work. And we all know how problems outside of work can also impact on performance at work.

These problems can be made even worse by the fact that there remains considerable ignorance and misunderstanding about the menopause, with it often being treated as an embarrassing or taboo subject, or even a topic to make fun of.'

This statement is replicated in many areas of research, policy, and discussion around menopause, lack of knowledge and understanding leading to women experiencing symptoms feeling excluded, marginalised and, at times, leaving the workplace as their situation is simply unmanageable without support.

This policy aims to take an initial step towards addressing some of these issues by providing a framework from which the council agrees to operate. This includes the overarching policy, some useful links, a template for agreements between employees and the council and an advice sheet on talking to GP about menopause.

This policy is specific to Woughton Community Council but has been created using a range of resources from a variety of sources, including existing policies for other organisations, sources of advice from both voluntary and statutory organisations and feedback from officers and others.

It was suggested to include in the policy some words on the impact potentially to partners and children.

Under 4.1 and 4.3 Need to consider the definitions mentioned in the policy document.

To consult with and to encourage others in the Local Government sector to adopt a similar policy.

Feedback is welcome on the policy document as this is the first version for consideration.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee notes the report and attached Version 1 policy.**
- 2. That the committee considers whether this policy is one that is wanted within the council and if so,**

- a. That the committee considers any additions, removals, or alterations to the policy
- b. That the Council Manager takes any views into consideration, alters the policy accordingly and represents at the next meeting for ratification and agreement

OC 81/22 To propose a review of the current maintenance contract and to investigate alternative options:

In early 2019, a procurement process was undertaken to find a suitable provider for delivering a reactive and planned maintenance service for the council, covering all buildings within Woughton Community Council's control. After discussions with several companies, 'Company 1' was appointed to deliver this across the parish.

Now three (3) years into the agreement and, since inception, 'Company 1' has been sold on to new owners, with the original agreements and people delivering having left. This has led to some concerns being expressed by officers around response times, quality of work, pricing of jobs and similar. It would appear that there have been some episodes where quotes haven't been provided, where quotes have been significantly high or that work has not been completed in a timely manner.

Even without these issues, three (3) years is a sufficient length of time for a contract and as such, a review and re-procurement is due.

It is recommended that the current provider is invited to resubmit a proposal, alongside a minimum of a further two (2) local companies. In addition, an article has been included in the Gazette, inviting local trades to get in contact this complies with the procurement policy, which prioritises keeping money within the local economy.

In the short term, Woughton Community Council will continue to work with 'Company 1' to maintain where necessary and, if they are unable to meet expectation, will explore a range of trades to help ensure responsive and affordable maintenance of Community Council properties. It is likely that this will continue to be a significant amount of work this year.

RESOLVED

1. That the committee notes this report.
2. That the committee agrees to review current maintenance provision, currently provided by Company 1.
3. That 'Company 1', plus 2 other options are contacted to assess suitability, cost, and ability to deliver what is needed.
4. That this is undertaken and reported back to this committee for a final decision in January 2023 (or December, if completed in time).

OC 82/22 To confirm the new pay scales and agreements for officers of Woughton Community Council:

It was agreed previously that the proposals for pay increases that were under discussion would be awarded, based upon the position at that time. This was:

- £1,925 for each scale point on the NJC scales

This was backdated to April 1st and has been awarded to all officers.

This has now been confirmed as agreed between unions and employers (the National Joint Council or NJC) as the settlement for 2022/2023.

The following was also included in that settlement:

'The National Agreement Green book will, with effect from 1 April 2023, be amended to read as follows:

7.2 Annual Leave

'With effect from 1 April 2023, the minimum paid annual leave entitlement is twenty-three (23) days with a further three (3) days after five years of service'.

This doesn't directly impact on Woughton Community Council, as twenty five (25) days is the starting point for leave within this council.

RESOLVED

- 1. That the committee notes the report.**
- 2. That the committee agrees to the new terms and notes the additional element of minimum leave entitlements.**

OC 83/22 To agree the Bank Reconciliations, list of payments and receipts since June 2022:

The list of bank reconciliations, list of payments and receipts covering from June 2022 onwards were **AGREED**.

The Chair will meet with the Accounts Manager to go through sample invoices and receipts and sign off for approval.

NOTED

Date of next meeting:

Monday 19th December 2022, 6:30pm at the Woughton Community Council Hub, 60, Garraways, Coffee Hall, Milton Keynes, MK6 5EG.

THE CHAIR CLOSED THE MEETING AT 7:58PM

Chair _____ Date _____