

Town Clerk report to F & GP meeting 27 September 2016

Agenda item 4 – Almonry

Update following meeting with RDC officers

Cllrs Favell and Kiloh met with conservation and planning officers from RDC on Tuesday 20 September to review the plans, along with architect Mark Anderson and the Town Clerk.

The officers highlighted a few areas where further investigation is needed prior to advancing the project. The architect is arranging to contact David Martin, who had written a previous report on The Almonry, to return to carry out these further investigations.

Security concerns at The Almonry

Members may already be aware of recent incidents at The Almonry, and the increased petty vandalism and anti-social behaviour in the Town of late. I received the following correspondence from Battle Museum for consideration by the committee:

We agreed today that the Museum would set out for Battle Town Council its concerns about the security situation in the Almonry Gardens, for consideration by a forthcoming committee.

After a large stone was smashed into the Museum front window 29/30 August, we at the Museum heard anecdotal reports of groups of youths being in the Almonry precincts, climbing over walls, leaving bottles and other litter etc. Daryl Holter of Sussex Police Crime Prevention came to the Museum this morning and opined that similar behaviour by youths with vandalism has been seen recently in Catsfield and other villages, so this is not just a Battle problem. But even as we talked with Daryl, we saw that a Jempsons trolley had been pushed through the side gate to the rear garden sometime overnight: a Museum volunteer, Robert Knight, has removed it.

Daryl Holter has suggested:

- 1. That the Museum insert a CCTV camera with warning notice, outside the front of the Museum above the door. This we will do.*
- 2. That the gate to the left of the Museum should have shrubbery removed (presumably by Beautiful Battle) and be locked at the end of the day by the Council.*
- 3. That Daryl and his colleagues will step up surveillance. It's important to make reports, even about minor incidents, in order to prompt the police algorithm that focuses attention on an area if there are n reports.*

We suggest that

- 4. The arrangements for locking of the side door on the High Street be reviewed. If the last person out of the Almonry building - Council or one of the tenants upstairs- forgets to lock it, the Gardens are in effect open all night, although we realise local youths may jump over the walls elsewhere in the Almonry Gardens, to get access. This is about not making life easy for such people.*
- 5. The Almonry Gardens be inspected periodically for bricks and lumps of concrete which could be picked up and used to cause damage.*
- 6. Motion sensitive lights be installed in the Almonry Gardens.*

We recognise that it is up to the Council to balance the benefits of access to the Almonry Gardens, with the requirements of security. But there seem to be reasons for a tightening of security, given local youth issues.

Agenda item 5 – Personnel Sub-Committee

The minutes of the sub-committee meeting are attached as a separate item, along with the draft Lone Worker Policy drawn up by the Deputy Clerk.

Members are asked to consider the introduction of a long service award for staff, and give due consideration to allocating sufficient budget for the introduction of this proposal for future years.

Agenda item 8 – Training

Attached separately is a copy of the 2017 SSALC training programme for information, prior to agreeing budgets at the next committee meeting.

Members are particularly encouraged to consider attending one of the Councillor Briefing & Awareness updates, Planning Update Events (for those on the P&T committee) and HR Training Events.

The high turnover of Clerks in the local area continues to cause concern for SSALC, and these HR Training Events are designed to provide the guidance needed for Members to deal with employment issues lawfully.

Agenda item 9 – Financial matters

Grant requests

Attached separately are two grant requests received from Battle Museum of Local History (£500) and Racing Snail (£500). For information, the amounts granted to Battle Museum over the last three financial years were:

2015/16	£500
2014/15	Nil
2013/14	Nil

Racing Snail have received no previous grant support from the Town Council.

The remaining grant budget for this financial year is **£4,229**.

- ❖ **Decision required: Members need to agree grant award amounts for the above requests**

Christmas Celebrations

Attached separately is a request for sponsorship for Battle's Christmas Celebrations 2016 from Battle Chamber of Commerce. Members will recall the agreement that Town Council staff will assist with the provision of the Christmas lights this year, before consideration of how to make arrangements in future years, either through employing an outside contractor to complete the work or continuing to use BTC staff.

- ❖ **Decision required: Members need to decide on a suitable contribution to the celebrations**

Payment authorisation

At the previous committee meeting held on 16 August, the following resolution was made:

*Members noted the **budget reports**. Cllr Favell expressed concern that Chairmen are no longer required to sign off invoices relating to their Committee and are therefore not as informed on expenditure as previously. Cllr Jessop proposed that, for clarity, prior to payment, the Committee Chairman be requested to sign invoices. This was seconded by Cllr Favell and agreed unanimously.*

I raised a number of concerns about this resolution upon my return from holiday, and detailed these in an email to committee members on 26 August. Further to the points highlighted in that email, I urge Members to consider the following:

The Town Council approved new Financial Regulations in April 2015, which included the removal of the need to pre-authorise payments by committee chairmen. These changes have operated efficiently for the last sixteen months without causing any issues.

Changes to the Financial Regulations, which this F&GP resolution amounts to, are a matter for Full Council only, as per Financial Regulation 1.1 which states *'these financial regulations govern the conduct of financial management by the council and may only be amended or varied by resolution of the council.'*

Further, Members are reminded of the role of the RFO detailed in Financial Regulation 1.6, in particular that the RFO *'determines on behalf of the council its accounting records and accounting control systems.'*

I am particularly disappointed therefore that no consideration was given to asking the RFO's opinion to making these changes, either before or after the meeting where it was discussed. My view, supported by the evidence of the internal and external auditor's reports, are that the existing Financial Regulations are sufficient for a Council of this size and do not require this amendment.

Additionally, I repeat the offer I have made since my employment begun, that I am happy to provide training to any Member requiring assistance with understanding any aspect of Council finances.

- ❖ **Decision Required: Members need to decide whether to make a recommendation to Full Council to agree an amendment to Financial Regulations, or to continue with the existing procedures.**

PWLB Details

The previously agreed Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) loan was drawn down on 1 September 2016, as works are underway at the Cemetery.

The amount received into the Town Council's bank account was **£249,912.50** (the £250,000 advance less the fee of £87.50).

Members will recall that the interest rate payable is set on the draw down date, and due to recent fluctuations in rates, was less than originally anticipated. The fixed annual rate of interest payable on the loan is **1.93%**.

Repayments are made half-yearly, and are due on 1 March and 1 September, commencing in 2017. The half-yearly payment is **£6,326.50**, meaning an annual expenditure of **£12,653**.

When the loan was originally discussed, we budgeted for repayments of £15,000 per year, so this results in a saving of **£2,347** per year. Further, it should be noted that only one repayment will be made this financial year, resulting in a saving of **£8,673.50** on planned expenditure.

Full details of the loan and the repayment schedule are attached separately for information.

Local Government Finance Settlement consultation

I emailed out details of this consultation to Members on 19 September, emphasising the potential importance to all Town and Parish Councils of the proposals being considered.

Below is a briefing released by NALC (National Association of Local Councils), who are urging all Town and Parish Councils to support their stance in opposing the proposals:

The government is planning to bring in new rules forcing local councils to hold costly local referendums over increases to the parish precepts.

These proposals are labelled as “a centralist sledgehammer to crack a nut” by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) which will “damage communities and local services as well as undermining the role of local councillors”.

The national body represents England’s 10,000 local councils and over 80,000 councillors and has issued this stark warning ahead of a consultation on local government finance expected to be published tomorrow (Thursday 15 September) by local government minister Marcus Jones MP.

The consultation paper from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) makes proposals to bring local councils in line with principal councils by requiring them to hold a referendum if they plan to increase their part of council tax above a certain amount, with the effect of introducing ‘capping’ for the first time.

The limit for principal councils – who spend around £100 billion a year – is currently 2%, with an additional 2% recently introduced to allow them to generate new income for social care costs.

In many cases the costs of holding a local referendum to ask local people if they support an increase in parish spending will run well into thousands of pounds, often wiping out the proposed increase.

Unlike principal councils, local councils do not receive grant funding from central government or a share of business rates and are primarily financed through the parish precept.

Cllr Ken Browse, chairman of NALC said: “This really is a centralist sledgehammer to crack a nut, at a time when government should be supporting not undermining councillors and their important role in communities.

“This move, costing upwards of £1 million, will seriously damage smaller communities’ ability to help themselves and threaten the government’s previous commitments to localism and devolution.

“Local councils are doing a brilliant job improving their areas; whether it’s by building community resilience, increasing house building through neighbourhood planning, providing local transport solutions, supporting the local economy and businesses, organising community events and festivals, helping meet social care needs and making places dementia friendly or giving grants to help local groups and organisations – all this and more for an average cost to residents of just over a pound a week.

“Our councils account for just 1.7% of the £26 billion raised through council tax in England and have demonstrated fiscal responsibility in recent years with overall increases in precepts going down, rising this year by just 6 pence per week as a result of local councils taking on services from principal councils and funding not being passed on to them.

“It is vital local councils continue to have the freedom and flexibility to raise the resources they need to invest in local services, especially at a time when they are taking on services and assets from principal councils, often much valued services which would otherwise cease completely and which communities want to see continue.

“Given their important and growing role, local councils should be celebrated and supported, not hindered by central government.

“While we will be opposing these plans very strongly, I am keen to work with the government and help them understand the impact of these proposals which will damage communities and local services as well as undermining the role of local councillors”.

❖ **Decision Required: Members need to agree a response to the relevant questions of the consultation.**