

**MINUTES OF THE POLICY & FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING HELD
ON 11TH.NOVEMBER 2024**

Present: Cllr. K Williams (Chair)

Cllrs. R Mills, G Etheridge, C Erasmus, D Box, C Clark & D Davies

Also present Cllrs J Griffiths & K Etheridge

Prior to the start of the Meeting the Chair requested members stand and observe a 2 Minutes Silence

1. Apologies for Absence

No Apologies for Absence received

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made at this point

3. To Receive the Minutes of the Policy & Finance Committee Meeting held 30th. September 2024

The Clerk reported that whilst the Minutes of the Meetings held on 1st. July & 12th. August (Interview Panel) had been received by Town Council, they had not been formally received by this Committee.

It was unanimously ***agreed*** the Minutes of the Meetings held on 1st. July 12th. August & 30th. September be received

4. To Receive Applications for Financial Assistance

The Clerk presented his report on Applications for Financial Assistance received , namely -
Wales Air Ambulance
Blackwood Town Cricket Club
Petwynmawr Juniors AFC
Cefn Fforest Scouts

and each were considered in turn.

After some discussion it was ***unanimously agreed to recommend*** to Town Council that £250 be awarded to Wales Air Ambulance and Blackwood Town Cricket Club.

In respect of Pentwynmawr Juniors AFC it was recommended no grant be awarded, as only a relatively small percentage of its members were from the Town Council area, and it was to celebrate the Centenary of a Club outside our area.

In respect of Cefn Fforest Scouts, it was recommended to defer any decision until financial information as requested by the Clerk has been received, and other points on the application clarified.

5. *Initial Discussion on Budget 2025/2026*

The Clerk presented his initial budget papers for 2025/26 & future years based on current spending patterns, plus inflationary increases on some expenditure heads, but which also reflects the Council's previous decisions to continue the provision of hanging baskets, the GAVO Volunteer Awards Evening and ongoing Events Programme and Grants to Voluntary Organisations, including Turn the Town Pink in support of the planned Breast Cancer Unit at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr (£250), whilst also including a budget of £1,000 to support the maintenance of the Remembrance Garden and provide assistance at the Remembrance Day Service which has improved so much over the past three years and now surely better reflects and honours the memory of our town's people that gave the ultimate sacrifice.

It also includes budgetary provision for the provision for a potential Civic Awards Evening in the sum of £2,000, and also £1,300 for the continued potential provision of Christmas Selection Boxes to Blackwood & Libanus Schools (in recognition of their continued support of Remembrance Services & Carol Concert)

Provision is again included for 2025/26, and future years in respect of the potential Contributions to Members Expenses, and assumes some 100% of members will claim all entitlements (£156 plus additional £52).

£1,500 is included for next year in support of the Members / Clerks Training Programme, Conference Attendance

Furthermore, it will be for the Council to determine each year whether or not Special Allowances be paid in respect of Chairs of Committees, Level of Payments to Mayor/ Deputy Mayor and whether Attendance Allowances are introduced. No such provision is included at this point.

Obviously, two major additional provisions are included next year –

Office Accommodation and the associated costs – Again, whilst we have some certainty around Lease Costs, NNDR, Water Charges & Phone/ Wi Fi costs, some uncertainties still exist surrounding heating/ and lighting costs of the offices (with winter approaching) it is, therefore, considered prudent to include a contingency sum of £5k in the budget figures to cover these potential costs.

Additional hours/ staffing to man the offices – With the Office open 20 hours per week, the current Assistant Clerk is contracted for those same number of hours. Adjustment may well be needed during the coming year, very much dependent upon the usage of the Offices by other organisations and the potential commitment of members to assist in the manning of the Offices throughout the week (in the hope that at least two people are in the office at any one time thus negating any lone working)

Realistically, these decisions are unlikely to be taken for another six months, and perhaps a Contingency of say £10k should be included to cover this potential eventuality.

No provision has been included in the figures regarding any potential income streams in respect of renting of rooms at this point, given the uncertainty, and adjustments will need to be made as and when decisions are taken by members with regard which (if any organisations) are charged, and at what rate.

It should come as no surprise to members, therefore, that the Precept requirement for 2025/26 to cover all budgeted costs would need to increase again as projected last year (especially considering that the current years budge was supported by use of reserves in the sum of £36,665 to keep last years increase to £7.50)

The Clerk also reminded members that decisions will need to be taken over coming weeks regarding the points raised in his report, but also gives members the opportunity to identify other potential

schemes and/or budgets they would like to see increased/ decreased/ included.

The Clerk was thanked for his report and much discussion took place on various issues.

Cllr D Box raised the issue of security within the Offices, especially following recent threatening behaviour towards some members and asked if additional safety/ security measures could be considered and introduced. Possible solutions discussed included replacement of door and screen from waiting area into reception area/ panic buttons / roller shutters for main door and side windows. It was agreed 3 quotations be sought for these works.

Furthermore, the Clerk stated he would check whether these works could be met via Community Infrastructure Levy

Cllr G Etheridge raised the issue of reimbursement of parking charges for members who man the offices throughout the week, and the payment of mileage costs within the Borough area for members undertaking official business on behalf of the Council. This was unanimously supported, and will be recommended to Town Council.

The Chair queried if the Training budget was sufficient to support both the training of the Assistant Clerk and members. The Clerk reminded members that a Training Plan had been produced and agreed by members about two years ago, and with a number of new members being co-opted since, perhaps the Plan be re –visited. From what he could recall, the Council had agreed all members should attend certain training to better equip them to fulfil their role more efficiently. Some members identified other potential areas of training eg. safeguarding. It was agreed by members that the Clerk and Asst. Clerk update the Training Plan, which could then assist in identifying a more realistic budget requirement.

As regards potential new schemes the Mayor highlighted the potential for a Deep Clean of the High Street as it was looking pretty dire at present. Members agreed and the Mayor volunteered to try and obtain quotes for this project.

The Deputy Mayor raised the issue of the Remembrance Garden stating he had prepared a Planning Application to raise the Poppy to make it more visible. A flag pole had previously been mentioned for the site, and an idea floated by the Asst. Clerk to perhaps purchase 2 large planters and ask Blackwood & Libanus Primary Schools to take responsibility of planting and tending same throughout the year. Again members agreed this a worthwhile project to recommend to Town Council.

The Deputy Mayor reported that with the sale of the Market Square it might now be advisable to place the Xmas Tree just outside the Office, but that an external power supply would be needed. It was agreed Fusion Electrics be contacted as a matter of urgency to ensure all is in place in readiness for Lantern Parade/ Carol Concert

6. Consider Revised Model Financial Regulations/ Standing Orders

The Clerk reported that he had forwarded a Copy of the One Voice Wales Model Financial Regulations for members attention. These would need some customisation and he suggested it might be advisable for he and the Assistant Clerk to go through same in detail, and present their proposed

version to the Committee or discussion and agreement prior to recommending adoption by Town Council.

Members *agreed* this course of action

During discussion on above, and to aid a smooth transition, it was *unanimously agreed* to recommend to Town Council that Claire Cook becomes an additional signature on the Bank Mandate

It was *agreed* the next meeting be held immediately before Town Council starting at 6.00pm on Monday 2nd December