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**STANSTED MOUNTFITCHET PARISH COUNCIL F&GP COMMITTEE**

MINUTES of a meeting of the FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE held at 7.45pm on Wednesday 6th December 2023 in The Mountfitchet Exchange, Crafton Green, 72 Chapel Hill, Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex,

**PRESENT** Cllr J O’Brien (Chair), Cllrs M Caton, J Hogg, P Jones, A Khan and G Sell

**ATTENDING** Mrs Ruth Clifford - Parish Clerk

 Cllr J Kavanagh – left after item 12a

 2 members of the public (via Zoom)

**287 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Ghosh – abroad due to a family issue.

 It was unanimously

 **RESOLVED** to accept the apologies for absence from Cllr Ghosh

**288 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST -** None

**289 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 25th OCTOBER 2023**

 **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 25th October 2023 as a true and accurate account.

**290 TO RECEIVE AN UPDATE ON ACTION POINTS FROM THE LAST MEETING**

229 – Cllr Sell has raised the query regarding funds for dealing with flood issues but will follow up again for a response.

 231 – letter sent to Boots.

**291 TO RECEIVE A REPORT FROM THE CHAIR, CLLR JOHN O’BRIEN** - attached

**292 LIGHTING**

**a) TO RECEIVE AN OUTAGE REPORT**

The Clerk advised that the light outside the Dog & Duck and a second one on Chapel Hill are still awaiting reconnection of the power supply by UKPN. A leaning column in Lower Street has been hit again and will be reported to our lighting contractor.

**b) TO RECEIVE A GENERAL REPORT ON LIGHTING**

The Chair reminded members that the structural safety test had been undertaken in the summer and we have 120 lights flagged as amber on a traffic light scale. Some of those will be discussed further during the item on the draft budget.

**293 FINANCE**

**a) TO APPROVE THE LIST OF PAYMENTS**

The list of payments was checked against the invoices by Cllr Hogg and the payments were approved.

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**b) INCOME AND EXPENDITURE STATEMENT TO 30 NOVEMBER 2023**

 The statement had been circulated prior to the meeting and no queries were raised.

**294 CRAFTON GREEN HOUSE/DAY CENTRE – TO DELEGATE AUTHORITY REGARDING REFURBISHMENT WORKS**

The Clerk reported that the Crafton Green working group had recently met with Touchpoint to discuss a programme of refurbishment works at the two buildings. In the main, this comprises the complete refurbishment of the Day Centre toilets and the knock-through and construction of a ramp between Crafton Green House and the Day Centre. Touchpoint has raised a large sum of money towards this and other more minor improvements. The Parish Council is holding £22,000 in grant money from UDC’s former Day Centre budget, some of which is required for kitchen improvements in the Day Centre. The Parish Council also has an Earmarked Reserve of £11,000 for the Day Centre. Cllr Sell offered to investigate whether there were any further funding options available from UDC.

 Deadlines for spending the Touchpoint grant money mean that the works must be completed by 31 March 2024 so there is a tight deadline. After some questions and discussion, and having been proposed by Cllr Sell and seconded by Cllr Khan, it was unanimously

**RESOLVED** to delegate authority to the Clerk, in liaison with the Crafton Green working group, to make decisions on the proposed refurbishment works provided that all expenditure approved is met from within the budgeted/earmarked funds.

**295 BUDGET 2024-2025**

The Chair stated that a draft budget had been circulated to all members, with explanatory notes from the Clerk, ahead of the meeting. He stressed that this is a draft, no decisions will be taken at this meeting, and he invited any questions or comments.

Cllr Jones stated that if the Council is to maintain its level of services, and improve some, then expenditure will increase significantly. He outlined the main increases for 2024-25 which include sums for play equipment repairs, tree works, salary increases, electricity price increases.

In her explanatory notes, the Clerk had referred to 30 Heritage-style lighting columns which will need to be replaced within the next three years at an estimated cost of £45,000 – the columns are probably around 40-50 years old although the heritage kits were added in the early 1990s. Cllr Jones pointed out that this draft of the budget included the sum of £15,000 towards this project with a view that if this was repeated for the next two years, the Council would have sufficient funds to proceed in year three.

(A member of the public joined the meeting via Zoom at this point)

Cllr Sell commented that the draft as tabled indicated an increase of around 16% and he was not sure that he could support that. However, he agreed that there were not many areas in which the Council could reduce its spending without just pushing problems further down the line. Cllr Khan raised queries over the potential new lights which were answered.

Cllr Hogg noted that the increase in expenditure was around £70,000 over the year and whilst small amounts could potentially be saved, this was merely “tinkering around the edges” and would not make substantial reductions.

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Members were agreed that the income from the Council’s investments – estimated at £12,000 for the year – should be included within the budget figures as shown in the draft and not ringfenced for any particular project.

Cllr Khan asked if there were items that could be left out, and questioned in particular the expenditure on The Link magazine. He believed firmly in modernity of services and suggested that the community be asked – via the next edition – if they would prefer this electronically or as a paper copy. Cllr Jones and Sell both voiced their opinions that the time is not yet right to drop the paper version as there were still a good number of parishioners who cannot access it digitally.

Cllrs Caton and Sell both questioned the CCTV system – do we need it? The Clerk reported that she had discussed with the Police and they would not be prepared to take on the system management if the Council decided to dispose of it. Evidence provided by the Council has assisted with successful convictions in the last few years. Cllr Sell agreed that it would be a risk to dispose of it.

The Chair referred to the Parish Grants which have increased to 2% of precept this year. He considered that this was a policy that the F&GP committee should be able to vary if circumstances required. Cllr Sell spoke in support of this view. After brief discussion, Cllr O’Brien proposed the following

**RECOMMENDATION** that the F&GP Committee be authorised by the Council to vary the rate of Parish Grants each year between 1.5-2% of precept depending upon the prevailing circumstances.

 Seconded by Cllr Caton and unanimously approved.

In responding to further queries regarding ways in which expenditure could be reduced, the Clerk suggested that members study the draft budget in detail, considering each item, and come back to her and the Chair and Vice Chair with areas where they considered money could be saved. However, they must bear in mind areas where the Council is committed either contractually, through insurance requirements or health and safety. Cllr Jones suggested that the committee members might like to meet informally to have a wider discussion and it was agreed to do this in early 2024.

The Clerk offered to circulate the list of the current EarMarked Reserves so that members could consider those also and decide if they still wish to allocate funds to those projects.

**296 WINDMILL – TO RECEIVE ANY UPDATES**

The Chair reported that the Windmill sub-committee had met prior to this meeting. Grant applications have been submitted for funding towards the re-pointing project and, to date, £8,500 has been pledged. The stocks and sails will need to be replaced in the next few years and an updated maintenance “to do” list will be available soon.

**297 STAFF MATTERS – TO RECEIVE ANY AVAILABLE UPDATES**

The Clerk reported that she would be asking the Chair of Personnel sub-committee for dates for a meeting early in 2024. The Projects Officer will be commencing maternity leave towards the end of January.

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**298 YOUTH MATTERS**

**a) YOUTH COUNCIL**

Cllr Caton reported on the recent meeting at which the young people had put forward ideas for projects. Some of these needed more thought and they were given advice on further points to consider. They have been invited to come and view a Council Meeting and indicated that they would be happy to support the Litter Pick proposing a date of Saturday 16th March 2024.

**b) TO RECEIVE AND CONSIDER BIDS FROM POTENTIAL PROVIDERS OF THE YOUTH CLUB SERVICE FOR 2024**

The Chair stated that copies of the confidential bids received had been circulated with the agenda. Both of the bids came within the Council’s budget.

It was unanimously

**RESOLVED** that under Section 1(2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, in view of the confidential nature of the business to be discussed, the public and press be instructed to withdraw.

Cllr Kavanagh left the meeting and the two members of the public listening on Zoom did the same.

A discussion ensued with the Clerk and Cllr Caton answering a number of questions as they had met with each bidder.

At the end of the discussion, the Chair re-opened the meeting to the public.

**c) TO SELECT THE PROVIDER OF THE YOUTH CLUB SERVICE FOR 2024**

 Having been proposed by Cllr Sell and seconded by Cllr Khan, it was unanimously

**RESOLVED** to appoint Fairycroft House CIC to take on the provision of the Youth Club Service for 2024, starting as soon as practicable.

Meeting closed at 9.25pm

**ACTION POINTS**

295 – Clerk to circulate the EMR to all members