



MINUTES

Meeting: FINANCE & GENERAL
PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Date: 16 December 2024

Time: 7.15pm

Venue: THORNWOOD COMMON PARISH HALL, WEALD HALL LANE, THORNWOOD

PRESENT:

Councillors (10) A Buckley (Chairman), R Spearman, Mrs S Jackman MBE, A Tyler
Mrs S Hawkins, N Born, B Clegg, C Kinnear, Mrs P Etherington, M Stroud

Also in Attendance (2)

Susan De Luca – Clerk to the Council

Adriana Jones – Principal Finance Officer

Members of the Public (1)

Members of the Press (1)

F.2401 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (4)

NOTED apologies had been received from Councillors Bedford, Ms Wood, Blanks, and Irvine.

F.2402 OTHER ABSENCES (0)

NOTED no other absences.

F.2403 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

F.2404 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There was one member of the public present, but no questions.

F.2405 BUDGET / PRECEPT 2025/2026

Members had been issued with Income and Expenditure papers which, following thorough investigation by the Principal Finance Officer and Clerk included suggested budget figures for 2025/2026, along with supporting notes. Papers also included details of earmarked reserves and proposed additional items for consideration. Members had been advised to review these figures prior to the meeting, and if any members had any questions, these could be individually discussed at the meeting or they could speak with the PFO prior to the meeting. As part of the deliberations, Councillors **NOTED** the **CONSIDERED** the following points:

EXPECTED INCOME FOR 24/25 VERSUS BUDGET

The total income for the current financial year is expected to be higher than budgeted for (budgeted £269,283 versus expected £300,246, including precept receipt – an expected increase of around £30,963). This can be broadly accounted for as follows:

- Interest received (bank and investment) – Budgeted to receive £5,000, but expected is £14,900
- Receipt of Neighbourhood Plan grant of £5,970
- Receipt of Rural Prosperity Grant for Parish Hall for Windows - £5,414
- Hall hire income – An additional £3,200 versus budget
- Insurance payout for Street light 6019 - £4,729

EXPECTED EXPENDITURE FOR 24/25 VERSUS BUDGET

The total expenditure for the current financial year is expected to be higher than budgeted (budgeted £258,600 versus expected £291,727, a difference of £33,127). This can be broadly accounted for as follows:

- Tax and NI (admin) – budgeted £21,500, but expected £26,128 – a difference of £4,628 – NJC salary increased, additional staff member and under budgeted
- Neighbourhood Plan works – expected £7,007 (was not budgeted for as had agreed not to progress, plus any expenditure comes from EMR)
- New windows Thornwood Hall - £6,768 (some grant funding was received as detailed earlier in the agenda, however the Parish Council had to pay 20% of the cost)
- Street Lighting – budgeted £4,700, however expected spend it 21,457. Due to replacing two new columns and associated UKPN of both, plus retrospective payment for another

WEALD COMMON

Councillors **NOTED** that following the planting of around 2,500 trees on Weald Common in 2023, the Parish Council continues to manage this project in accordance with the funding agreement as follows:

- Replace any tree that dies for the first 5 years
- Ensure planted trees are kept free from competing vegetation and grazing animals
- Maintain the tree protection
- Maintain the area
- Ensure trees are protected against herbivores for the obligation period

An annual funding payment continues to be received via the Forestry Commission (and will do for the next 8 years) and its annual maintenance is budgeted for, as well as holding funds specifically earmarked for the project.

PUBLIC WORKS LOAN

Councillors **NOTED** that the payments for the public works loan originally taken out 40 years ago for works associated with the Pavillion at the Queens Hall will conclude on 31st March 2025.

CHANGES TO EMPLOYERS NI

Following the Governments budget announcement regarding lowering the threshold at which employers NI is paid, Councillors **NOTED** that the expected increase in employers NI for 25/26 is roughly £2,900 per annum. This increase has been factored into the proposed 25/26 budget figures. It was also noted that NALC continues to lobby Government regarding the impact this change has on Parish and Town Councils, so far without success.

STREET LIGHTING ELECTRICITY SUPPLY COSTS (UMS)

Councillors recalled from recent Parish Council meetings that the Parish Councils fixed 3 year contract with Npower for supplying electricity to the parish council owned street lights ceased on 30th November 2024. The Clerk and PFO have been working with Utility Aid (who are working with NALC) to try and secure a new fixed rate contract, however at present nobody is offering a fixed rate due to expected upcoming changes in how the unmetered supply is set to be calculated. Taking into account what has happened to other Councils across the county, it is expected the costs will increase significantly from 1st December 2024. As such, the cost to continue to provide lighting to the Parish Council owned street lights is expected to rise from around £7,500 per year to around £16,000 – a 213% increase. These costs have been factored into the 25/26 budget, however staff will continue to look for a favourable fixed rate. The Clerk advised that this Council had been quite astute by entering into a fix term 3 year contract when it did.

BOWLS CLUB

Following a lengthy delay, the finalisation of the transfer of land and the Bowls Club near to Weald Common has now been completed. The North Weald Scouts have formally approached the Council asking that consideration be given to using the facility as a new Scout hut, however

Councillors noted that there is a restriction on the land detailed within the transfer dated 1998 that requires the land only to be used as a bowling and social club (the permitted use). Councillors discussed the possibility of the site being used as both a bowls club and a community facility where groups such as the Scouts, Brownies, and Rainbows could be based, and were in general agreement that they would support this, however prior to moving forward the first step is to establish if the permitted use restriction could be removed. It was noted that at present there is no building on the site, as it was destroyed by arson. There was also discussion regarding access to the site in terms of the road which is owned by Peer Group. It was **AGREED** to obtain legal advice as to if this was a possibility, prior to establishing how to move forward, and that funds of up to £5,000 could be used to progress this possible project. Monies to come from the HMRC EMR.

CCTV

It was **NOTED** that the Parish Council is currently under a three year service level agreement with EFDC for the monitoring and maintenance of the CCTV outside the shops in North Weald. This agreement ceases in May 2025 with an option to extend for a further 3 years. This has previously been discussed at Parish Council in terms of both ownership and if the Parish Council should self manage this CCTV. The current costs are £325 per year. Councillors **AGREED** that this matter would be considered in full in the coming months, and if the Council agreed to take on the service, Council would decide at that time where the funds should come from.

VEHICLE ACTIVATED SIGNS (VAS)

This Parish has a very active Community Speedwatch Team (CSW), and Cllr Clegg provided a brief update on the consistent speeding issues at both Upland Road and Weald Bridge Road. The CSW team would like Council to consider the installation of a VAS at both locations. This would be a visible deterrent to speeders, and is something physical residents can see showing that the Council is trying to address the issue. It was noted that the process would be to apply to the Local Highway Panel (LHP), who would undertake the various checks to establish if there was in fact a speeding issues at these locations, as well as ensuring any VAS could be located in accordance with the ECC requirements, however if the Parish Council wished to wait for the LHP to fund the works, they could be waiting years given the funding situation. The Parish Council has the power to provide such signs, subject to agreement by Essex County Council, and if it was agreed that the Council want to fund both signs, they could be installed in a much quicker timeframe. It was suggested that there could be other locations in the Parish that would benefit from such signs, and that potentially developers could be asked to fund them. Councillors **AGREED** to progress a LHP application for permission to install two VAS for Upland Road and Weald Bridge Road, the cost of which was expected to be around £8,000 and would be funded by the Parish Council, with funds coming from the HMRC EMR.

AIR AMBULANCE

As per minute reference C24.109, the Chairman asked the committee to consider a donation to the Air Ambulance following members of this Councils visit to their base on North Weald Airfield in September. It was also noted that the Parish Council is providing the Thornwood Common Parish Hall free of charge for the EFDC Chairmans Chairty Quiz in February 2025, with all proceeds going to the North Weald Air Ambulance. The committee **AGREED** a donation of £1,000, given the vital life saving work that the charity does.

HASTINGWOOD EMR / VILLAGE HALL FLOOR

Attached to the agenda was a proposal from Hastingwood Councillors Cllr Mrs Etherington and Cllr Irvine regarding monies for Hastingwood Village Hall floor. Councillors noted that the village hall was successful in receiving grant funding via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to entirely replace the hall floor, however they would need to fund 20% of the costs. Councillors recalled that it holds three Earmarked reserves for Hastingwood, with agreement reached at the December 2023 F&GP Meeting that these funds should continue to be earmarked for 24/25. Councillors **AGREED** to

provide £5,400 of funding from the Hastingwood EMR towards the 20% proportion which the hall is required to pay, with the hall paying £1,000 themselves.

DOG BIN EMPTYING RECHARGE

Councillors noted there were two dog bins which the Parish Council empty and recharge the costs to St Andrews School and North Weald Village Hall. Whilst historically this agreement was reached as a result of these two organisations requesting the dog bins and agreeing to pay for emptying, it was noted that both bins are used by all members of the community and not just patrons of both facilities. As such, the Committee **AGREED** to take on the cost of emptying these two bins from 1st April 2025. It was noted that dog waste can also be placed in litter bins.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Earlier this year the Parish Council agreed to progress their Neighbourhood Plan. As at 30th November 2024 the Earmarked reserve stood at £18,594. The costs up to 31st March 2025 are expected to be around £7,000, however grant funding has been received via Locality of £5,970 towards this project, and as such it is expected that at 31st March 2025 the Earmarked reserve will be around £17,564. Taking into account that it is possible that further grant funding could be obtained in 25/26, and the balance of the EMR, it was **AGREED** not to precept for any funds towards the Neighbourhood Plan, and that all costs should come from the EMR for the 2025/2026 year.

PERMANENT OFFICES

The Parish Council is not expected to secure new permanent premises for an office in 2025/2026, however it was noted that another room will be available at the Queens Hall early 2025. Councillors felt it was important the Parish Council had a more formal office base, and that this would be a good opportunity. The cost to hire the room would be £61.48 per week, or £3,196.96 per year. The Council currently pays £960 per year for the other room, so collectively this would be an annual cost of £4,156.96. The office could be used every day if needed. It was noted there would be some moving costs. The question was raised as to if these costs included electricity and water, to which Cllr Kinnear advised they did. Councillors **AGREED** that the Parish Office should be formally relocated to the Queens Hall as a permanent base, with office staff no longer using the Thornwood Hall as an office or it being open to the public. The cost of the rent would come from the Office EMR held by the Council.

LITTER BIN QUEENS HALL

1. A request had been received for the Parish Council to install and empty a new litter bin on the Memorial Playing Fields to stop people placing rubbish in the dog bin, causing it to overflow. This was **AGREED**, with the exact location to be agreed between the Clerk and the Queens Hall charity.
2. It was **AGREED** to move the dog bin by the old pavilion site to the far end of the Memorial Playing Fields.

SLEEPERS GARDEN OUTSIDE SHOPS, NORTH WEALD

Following the replacement of 3 sleepers in 2024, it is expected that further replacement sleepers will be needed for the garden outside the shops in North Weald next year, and there will not be sufficient funds in the EMR to pay for this. It was noted that not all the sleepers may need to be replaced. It was **AGREED** to cost £1,500 for the replacement, with the funds coming from the General Maintenance EMR.

VE DAY CELEBRATIONS

8TH May 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of VE Day, and it had been previously agreed that this Council should mark the occasion which will occur over a 4 day weekend. Councillors **AGREED** the sum of £1,000 towards a community event, taken from the HMRC EMR, with details of the

event being agreed in the coming months. Cllr Tyler advised that it was his understanding that the Kings Head PH would be holding an event.

NEW DOG BIN, GREEN AT ELM GARDENS

Councillors considered the installation of a new dog bin on the green at the end of Elm Gardens, noting that there was a dog bin less than 25m away on the other side of the road. It was noted, however that there are very few dog bins on this side of the road, and that it could be quite difficult to cross the road at this location. It was **AGREED** to purchase and install a new dog bin at this location, to monitor its use, and if after a period of time it was felt to be underused, a new location should be considered.

LITTER BIN AT SENSORY GARDEN / WEALD COMMON WOOD

It was noted that there had been frequent litter at the sensory garden, despite a bin being located a short distance away in the play park. Cllr Stroud suggested that a bin would also be beneficial by the benches near the Copper Beech tree in the Woodland area. After discussion it was **AGREED** to purchase a litter bin to be located by the benches near the Copper Beech area, and not at the sensory garden, which should be emptied once per week.

NOTICE BOARDS

It was noted that 5 of the parish councils notice boards were old and exposed to the elements, making annual maintenance an issue, along with potential issues reading notices. It was **AGREED** to replace these 5 notice boards, with funding from the Notice Board EMR and specifically precepted for.

EARMARKED RESERVES

Earmarked reserves, which are set aside for specific purposes and for savings for future projects, should be realistic and approved by the council. However, the amount of general reserves should be risk assessed annually and also approved by the council. It is recognised general good practice that the minimum level of General Reserves a Parish Council should hold is between 25%-100% of the precept. Larger councils would be nearer the 25% end. The current predicted figures for 31st March 2025 show that the level of General Reserves (i.e. those reserves that have not been placed into an earmarked fund) is expected to be around 29% of the account balance, and 54.6% of the precept. This is within acceptable limits. The Parish Council has a high level of Earmarked Reserve (71% of the account balances but greater than 100% of the precept). Councillors were happy with the levels of reserves, and noted that some of the earmarked reserves would be amalgamated, as they were in effect for the same area.

Councillors felt that there were sufficient funds in the EMR for Emergency Play Area works, and would not be precepting for this item this year. Councillors agreed to precept £2,500 towards the street light rolling replacement fund, noting that the cost to replace a street light is around £5-7,000. The structural test and report were completed earlier this year, and after completing some remedial works and one replacement, there were no further works expected over the coming two years.

The following baseline budget figures were **AGREED** for 2025/2026:

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION		
Income		£
	Total Income	-
Expenditure		
4001	Staff Salaries	85,500
4003	Superannuation	34,275
4004	Overtime	800
4008	Training	800

4009	Travelling Costs	600
4013	Rent (monies from EMR)	0
4020	Misc. Expenses	800
4021	Phone Fax Internet	1,500
4022	Postage	100
4023	Stationery	1,400
4024	Subscriptions	3,200
4025	Insurance	3,400
4028	Books & Publications	50
4029	Photocopier Costs	2,000
4030	Software & Computer Mgt	5,500
4040	Equipment Maintenance	250
4041	Equipment & Small Tools	300
4051	Bank Charges	200
4057	Audit Fees - External	840
4058	Audit Fees - Internal	1,100
4070	Tax and NI	32,409
Total Expenditure		175,023

PRECEPT AND INTEREST		
1190	Interest Received	8,000
Total Income		8,000

CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC		
Income		
Total Income		0
Expenditure		
4019	Hospitality / Chairman's allowance	150
4020	Misc. Expenses	3,000
4027	CCTV	1,200
4035	Publicity/Press	1,500
4036	Property Maintenance	600
4037	Grounds Maintenance	300
4102	Notice Boards	400
4153	Play in the Park	200
4160	Neighbourhood Plan (from EMR)	0
Total Expenditure		7350

REMEMBRANCE DAY		
Income		
1041	Remembrance Day Income	1,100
1084	Sponsorship	150
Total Income		1,250
Expenditure		
4019	Hospitality / chairman's Allow	100
4020	Misc. Expenses	100
4142	Remembrance Sunday	2,200
Total Expenditure		2,400

**PARISH HALL AT
THORNWOOD**

Income		
1001	Hall Hire - Regular Users	11,000
1002	Hall Hire - Occasional Users	3,000
1003	Hall Hire - Storage charges	500
1004	Hall Hire - Public Liability	500
1007	Hall Hire - Music Licences	70
Total Income		15,070
Expenditure		
4001	Staff Salaries	6,800
4003	Superannuation	1,600
4004	Overtime	800
4014	Utilities	8,000
4016	Cleaning Materials	600
4020	Misc. Expenses	500
4026	Music Licence	150
4036	Property Maintenance	2,300
4037	Grounds Maintenance	1,750
4040	Equipment Maintenance	500
4049	Paladin Hire	1,150
4070	Tax and NI	1,355
Total Expenditure		25,505

CEMETERY

Income		
1011	Cemetery Interment Fees	4,500
1012	Cemetery Memorial Fees	1,500
1083	Cemetery Plot Purchase	2,500
Total Income		8,500
Expenditure		
4014	Utilities	200
4020	Misc. Expenses	300
4036	Property Maintenance	300
4037	Grounds Maintenance	6,400
4043	Grave Digging	1,500
4049	Paladin Hire	1,100
Total Expenditure		9,800

WEALD COMMON

Income		
1178	Grants Received	711
Income		711
Expenditure		
4064	Weald Com Play Area	2,500
4074	Weald Common Grounds Maint	5,241
Total Expenditure		7,741

OPEN SPACES

Income		
1084	Sponsorship	500

		Total Income	500
Expenditure			
4008	Training		500
4020	Misc. Expenses		3,000
4036	Property Maintenance		250
4037	Grounds Maintenance		1,200
4066	Thornwood Play Area		3,000
4102	Notice Boards		50
4104	Bus Shelters		100
4106	Dog Waste Bins		6,060
4148	Bluemans End Rental		300
4149	Bluemans End Maintenance		2,100
4150	Norwegian Mem Grnds Maint		1,100
4155	Pike Way		1,200
4156	Village Sign		600
4157	Thornwood Common		2,000
4159	SGL Play Area		2,000
Total Expenditure			23,460

STREET LIGHTING			
Income			
			0
Expenditure			
4068	Street Lighting Maintenance		5,000
4072	Street Lighting Electricity		16,000
Total Expenditure			21,000

ALLOTMENTS			
Income			
1021	Allotment Rents		2,900
Total Income			2,900
Expenditure			
4014	Utilities		1,100
4020	Misc. Expenses		1,200
4036	Property Maintenance		700
4037	Grounds Maintenance		2,750
4040	Equipment Maintenance		350
Total Expenditure			6,100

TOTAL INCOME	£36,931
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TOTAL EXPENDITURE	£278,379
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Councillors **AGREED** the following additional items:

ITEM		Proposed Precept Amount	From Earmarked Reserve
1	Noticeboards - to replace the old wooden notice boards in the Parish (5 number) with new Perspex fronted boards	£1,500	£1,000

2	Bowls Club – Pursue legal assistance to review the legal restriction on the land to allow it to be used for community use. Monies to come from HMRC EMR		£5,000
3	Vehicle Activated Signs - the purchase and installation of two vehicle activated signs - one in Upland Road, and one in Weald Bridge Road. Monies to come from HMRC EMR		£8,000
4	Hastingwood Village Hall - contribution towards floor repair works. Monies to come from Hastingwood EMR.		£5,400
5	New Sleepers for Garden outside the shops in North Weald. Monies from General Maintenance EMR		£1,500
6	VE Day Celebrations 2025. Monies from HMRC EMR		£1,000
7	Dog Bin Elm Gardens	£500	
8	Litter Bin at Queens Hall	£600	
9	Litter Bin at Copper Beech area, Weald Common Wood	£600	
10	Donation to Air Ambulance	£1,000	
11	Street Lighting - Rolling Replacement Fund.	£2,500	
Total Additional Items		£6,700	£21,900

FINAL PRECEPT FIGURE

It was noted that the Tax Base for 2025/2026 had not yet been received from EFDC, despite chasing. As such, the Committee had no option but to use the current tax base in its calculations. This will need to be reviewed again by full council after the new Tax Base figures had been received in order to accurately calculate any percentage changes on last years precept.

The Committee considered all the points raised throughout the meeting in detail. Councillors felt that the exponential rise in electricity prices for Street Lighting, along with the Employers NI increases imposed by the Government would necessitate an increase in the precept. Councillors looked at the last 5 years precept, and reviewed all the figures again to ascertain where savings that could be made. After review, it was **PROPOSED** by Cllr Spearmen that a 4% increase should be made to the precept, based on current tax base figures this would be £244,240, representing an increase per week on a Band D property of £0.06p. This was **SECONDED** by Cllr Stroud. A vote was taken, the result of which was as follows:

9 – For
1 – Against

It was therefore **AGREED** to put forward a proposal for ratification at the January 2025 Parish Council meeting that the Parish Council precept for 2025/2026 should £244,240, expected to be approximately 4% increase on 2024/2025. This would need to be reviewed by full council against the updated Tax Base figures. In addition, full Council will be asked to **RATIFY** all the decisions made by this committee as detailed within these minutes.

Meeting closed 8.52pm

Signed **Date**