



MINUTES

Meeting: FINANCE & GENERAL
PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Date: 6 December 2021

Time: 7.00pm

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

PRESENT:

Councillors (10) A Buckley (Chairman), T Blanks, R Spearman, Mrs S Jackman MBE, A Tyler
Mrs A Grigg, Mrs S Hawkins, Cllr Mrs Etherington, Cllr Clegg A Irvine

Also in Attendance (2)

Susan De Luca – Clerk to the Council

Adriana Jones – Principal Finance Officer

Members of the Public (0)

Members of the Press (1)

F.2101 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (4)

NOTED apologies had been received from Councillors Bedford, Stroud, Mulliner, and Ms Wood.

F.2102 OTHER ABSENCES (0)

NOTED no other absences.

F.2103 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Mrs Grigg, Buckley, and Blanks declared a non pecuniary interest in any item concerning the Royal British Legion.

F.2104 BUDGET / PRECEPT 2022/2023

Members had been issued with Income and Expenditure papers which, following thorough investigation by the Principal Finance Officer (PFO) and Clerk, included suggested budget figures for 2022/2023, along with supporting notes. Papers also included details of earmarked reserves, and proposed additional items. 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 21/22 VERSUS BUDGET

Despite the continuing effects of COVID, the total income for the current financial year is expected to be significantly higher than budgeted for (budgeted £244,132 versus expected £296,651, including precept receipt). This has been assisted by a grant of £10,800 from RCCE secured by the Clerk for works or items for the Parish Hall to ensure it continues to be COVID safe, and £40,000 received via HMRC/ EFDC regarding the Inland Border Facility (which has been placed into an EMR for use to be agreed by the Parish Council).

EXPECTED EXPENDITURE FOR 21/22 VERSUS BUDGET

The expected total expenditure for 2021/22 shows an underspend of roughly £8,000. Whilst there were fluctuations in all the nominal codes, broadly the underspend can be accounted for as follows:

- £5,490 cost for moving paperwork to electronic files not having taken place (money placed into Earmarked Reserve)
- £2,000 WFG Car Park works not having taken place (placed into Earmarked Reserve)

COVID

As we entered the 2021/2022 financial year, the potential impact of COVID was a complete unknown. For 2020/2021, the COVID pandemic affected both the way the Council office operated, and almost all areas of the finances, specifically the income from the Parish Hall at Thornwood. Thankfully, this financial year has seen a slow return to a relatively normal state, albeit COVID continues to affect some elements of Parish Council business.

COMPUTER SOFTWARE

As a result of the Pandemic, it was necessary to purchase new computer software for Cemeteries, Allotments, and the Parish Hall Bookings, driven by the need to work remotely. It was hoped this software would also make the management of these services easier. This software was installed in September 2020. This was facilitated by the hosting of the software remotely to allow all staff to access it during the Pandemic. After a year of use, and numerous issues, it has been established that neither the hall booking software, nor the Cemetery software, is bringing any added value to the Parish Council, and is in fact necessitating significant additional staff time to manage for no tangible benefit. It has therefore been agreed not to continue with these two software packages from 2022. This will also negate the need for remote hosting (a saving of £1,044 per year). The Clerk is currently negotiating an early release payment from what is a three year contract.

DOG BINS

In September 2021 the Council was notified by their previous contractor who emptied the dog bins on a weekly basis that their prices were increasing by 78% from £2.90 to £5.00 from October. It was agreed by the Parish Council that as of 31st October 2021 the Council's supplier would change. The Parish Council has 14 dog bins, two of which are located adjacent to North Weald Village Hall and the pedestrian entrance to St Andrews School. These bins were originally installed at the request of these bodies, and under agreement that both North Weald Village Hall and St Andrews School would be recharged for their emptying. However, this increase in charge has prompted a challenge by both St Andrews School and North Weald Village Hall that the cost of emptying these bins should be borne by the Parish Council. Councillors **CONSIDERED** this at length, and it was **AGREED** that as both these dog bins had been requested by said organisation under the agreement that the organisation would pay for the emptying, this agreement should continue. As at 1st November 2021, the cost is £4.75 per empty, increasing to £5.00 per empty as of April 2022.

INLAND BORDER FACILITY

In January 2021, the Clerk and Chairman had a meeting with the Chief Executive of EFDC and Cllr Chris Whitbread, during which it was agreed that a sum of money would be provided to the Parish Council each year the Inland Border Facility was operating from the Airfield. This was negotiated between the Clerk, the Chairman and Cllr Whitbread last year to be £40,000 per year. £40,000 was indeed received in April 2021, and the Council is expecting a further payment in April 2022, however this is not guaranteed income and as such is not included in the budgeted figures for the next financial year.

PUBLIC WORKS LOAN BOARD

Cllr Spearman asked what the outstanding balance of the PWL was, to which it was confirmed that as at 30th September 2021 this was £8,652.63. Cllr Spearman stated he would like to know what the figure would be to pay this off early, as there was no sense in paying interest for the sake of it. The PFO advised that the current outstanding interest amount payable on the loan was £724.34, however she would establish the early repayment figure and advise Council. The loan was due to finish in 2025.

EXTERNAL PAINTING OF THORNWOOD COMMON PARISH HALL

Cllr Hawkins advised that the external façade of the hall was in need of painting, as whilst the hall looks attractive and well maintained on the inside, the outside is not particularly pleasing to the eye. Cllr Hawkins advised that she felt this would increase bookings. The Clerk advised she

following some changes, she had some grant funding from which these costs could be used. Cllr Hawkins advised that some planters with flowers outside would also be good. Councillors **AGREED** these works.

ACCESS TO WEALD COMMON PLAY AREA

Cllr Etherington advised that a local resident had spoken to her regarding the poor access to Weald Common in terms of ground surface, especially if pushing a buggy or for disabled access. It was unclear exactly what part of Weald common was being referred to, as there is a path up to Weald Common Play Area, and the whole play area is covered in safety surfacing. It was thought this could potentially refer to the area of path that goes under the Willow Tree and on land owned by the North Weald Village Hall. The Clerk advised that this area was originally gridded, however the hall has asked the PC to remove the gridding. The Chairman advised that drainage on Weald Common remains a constant problem, with the play area being difficult to use for roughly three months of the year. After further discussion it was **AGREED** would liaise with the village hall in the new year regarding this.

GRANT FUNDING

Councillors **NOTED** that the Parish Clerk has been hugely successful in securing a number of grant funds in 2021/2022, including £10,800 from RCCE, £40,000 from EFDC/HMRC, £250 Lockdown Support Grant, £2,000 Locality Fund Grant for Allotments, and just over £300 towards Christmas lighting. The Clerk continues to apply for relevant grants where she can.

STREET LIGHTING

As part of our green commitment, and as agreed in 2020/2021, the Councils rollout of LED Street Light replacements is underway. The Office staff are in the process of obtaining an up to date certificate from our local distribution company so that this can be sent to the Councils electricity supplier to reduce the cost of street lighting.

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 2022 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 30% of the precept. This is still relatively low, but greater than last year. However the Parish Council has an exceptionally high level of Earmarked Reserve, greater than 100% of the precept. This is mainly due to the HMRC/EFDC receipts of £90,000 over the last two years. Councillors **NOTED** that this build-up of Earmarked reserves is as a result of prudent financial management and the Clerk taking every opportunity to source any funding opportunities that are available, which may not be forthcoming in future years. Councillors **CONSIDERED** the Ear Marked Reserves, and no changes or movements were proposed.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

Councillors **AGREED** that the cost of the following agreed additional items for 2022/2023 should come out of the HMRC Earmarked Reserve as each was specifically recognised as having a clear benefit to the local community:

- New Flat Swing School Green Lane Play Area
- Works associated with tree planting of the new small forest on Weald Common
- Wheelers Farm Gardens Allotment Parking Area
- Renovation of Norwegian memorial obelisk, Parish War Memorial, and any costs associated with the rededication taking place June 2022

- Provision of information Board on Weald Common for small forest
- Provision of Gateway signs in Hastingwood
- Provision of new leaflets for Bassett Millennium Walks

The following baseline budget figures were **AGREED** for 2022/2023:

2022 / 2023 budget paperwork

2022/2023

BUDGET

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION		
Income		£
	Total Income	0
Expenditure		
4001	Staff Salaries	74,000
4003	Superannuation	19,500
4004	Overtime	1,700
4005	Temporary Staff	0
4008	Training	2,000
4009	Travelling Costs	1,000
4013	Rent	2,000
4020	Misc. Expenses	1,750
4021	Phone Fax Internet	2,000
4022	Postage	400
4023	Stationery	1,500
4024	Subscriptions	2,100
4025	Insurance	3,600
4028	Books & Publications	50
4029	Photocopier Costs	1,750
4030	Software & Computer Mgt	5,214
4040	Equipment Maintenance	500
4041	Equipment & Small Tools	150
4051	Bank Charges	100
4053	Loan Capital Repaid (PWLb)	2,111
4054	Loan Interest Paid (PWLb)	283
4056	Professional Fees	0
4057	Audit Fees - External	600
4058	Audit Fees - Internal	950
4070	Tax and NI	26,000
4075	Website	0
4108	COVID 19	250
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
	Total Expenditure	149,509

PRECEPT AND INTEREST		
1176	Precept	229,766
1190	Interest Received	0
	Total Income	229,766

CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC		
Income		
1082	Donations Received	0

1084	Sponsorship	0
1178	Grants Received - Other	0
Total Income		0
Expenditure		
	Hospitality / Chairman's allowance	150
4019		
4020	Misc. Expenses	4,000
4035	Publicity/Press	1,500
4037	Grounds Maintenance	1,200
4040	Equipment Maintenance	200
4071	Grants Other	0
4102	Notice Boards	600
4105	Vandalism	0
4108	COVID-19	250
4143	Election Expenses	0
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
4160	Neighbourhood Plan	0
Total Expenditure		7900

REMEMBRANCE DAY		
Income		
1041	Remembrance Day Income	1,200
1084	Sponsorship	0
Total Income		1,200
Expenditure		
4019	Hospitality / chairman's Allow	100
4020	Misc. Expenses	100
4142	Remembrance Sunday	1,900
4152	Additional Items	0
Total Expenditure		2,100

PARISH HALL AT THORNWOOD		
Income		
1001	Hall Hire - Regular Users	6,500
1002	Hall Hire - Occasional Users	3,000
1003	Hall Hire - Storage charges	384
1004	Hall Hire - Public Liability	400
1007	Hall Hire - Music Licences	100
1080	Miscellaneous Income	0
1082	Donations Received	0
Total Income		10,384
Expenditure		
4001	Staff Salaries	6,500
4003	Superannuation	2,000
4004	Overtime	500
4014	Utilities	6,000
4016	Cleaning Materials	600
4020	Misc. Expenses	2,000
4026	Music Licence	100
4036	Property Maintenance	2,300
4037	Grounds Maintenance	1,200
4040	Equipment Maintenance	500

4041	Equipment & Small Tools	0
4049	Litter Collection Contract	1,000
4070	Tax and NI	500
4105	Vandalism	0
4108	COVID 19	350
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
Total Expenditure		23,550

CEMETERY		
Income		
1011	Cemetery Interment Fees	4,500
1012	Cemetery Memorial Fees	1,500
1013	Cemetery GOR Purchase	0
1015	Cemetery Transfers	0
1019	Miscellaneous Income	0
1083	Cemetery Plot Purchase	2,500
Total Income		8,500
Expenditure		
4014	Utilities	80
4020	Misc. Expenses	1,000
4036	Property Maintenance	500
4037	Grounds Maintenance	6,250
4043	Grave Digging	1,500
4049	Litter Collection Contract	600
4073	Cemetery Memorial costs	1,300
4105	Vandalism	0
4152	Agreed Additional Items	0
Total Expenditure		11,230

WEALD COMMON		
Income - NIL		0
Expenditure		
4037	Grounds Maintenance	0
4064	Weald Com Play Area	4,000
4074	Weald Common Grounds Maint	5,000
1405	Vandalism	0
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
Total Expenditure		9,000

OPEN SPACES		
Income		
1031	Dog Bin Recharge Income	520
1080	Misc Income	0
1084	Sponsorship	500
1178	Grants Received - Other	0
Total Income		1,020
Expenditure		
4008	Training	0
4020	Misc. Expenses	5,000
4036	Property Maintenance	500
4037	Grounds Maintenance	200
4040	Equipment Maintenance	0

4066	Thornwood Play Area	3,000
4102	Noticeboards	0
4104	Bus Shelters	100
4105	Vandalism	0
4106	Dog Waste Bins	4,500
4107	Street Signs & Furniture	0
4108	COVID 19	200
4148	Bluemans End Rental	300
4149	Bluemans End Maintenance	1,500
4150	Norwegian Mem Grnds Maint	1,100
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
4155	Pike Way	1,200
4156	Village Sign	800
4157	Thornwood Common	2,200
4159	SGL Play Area	2,000
Total Expenditure		22,600

STREET LIGHTING		
Income		
		0
Expenditure		
4068	Street Lighting Maintenance	4,300
4072	Street Lighting Electricity	7,847
4105	Vandalism	0
4152	Agreed Additional items	0
Total Expenditure		12,147

ALLOTMENTS		
Income		
1021	Allotment Rents	2,570
1022	Allotment Key Deposits	0
1178	Grants Received	0
Total Income		2,570
Expenditure		
4014	Utilities	1,100
4020	Misc. Expenses	1,200
4036	Property Maintenance	500
4037	Grounds Maintenance	3,500
4040	Equipment Maintenance	350
4041	Equipment and small tools	0
4056	Professional Fees	0
4108	COVID 19	0
4152	Agreed Additional Items	0
Total Expenditure		6,650

TOTAL INCOME	£253,440
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TOTAL EXPENDITURE (excluding any agreed additional items)	£244,686
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Councillors **AGREED** the following additional items:

<u>ITEM</u>		Proposed Precept Amount	From Earmarked Reserve
1	Play Area Emergency Works Fund (Move to EMR). In 2021/2022 £4000 was taken from EMR towards emergency repair works to the various play areas in the Parish which took place in 20/21, mostly for Wetpour surface works. The expected total held in EMR as at 31/3/22 is £2,000. Councillors AGREED to build up this fund in case of any emergency works that are needed.	£1,000.00	
2	Historically the Council held an EMR fund following a Section 106 agreement back in 2001. There is no income now received from Weald Common. The Budget for 2022/2023 has been increased to cover the cost of maintaining Weald Common, however Councillors may wish to precept for a sum to go directly into EMR for any emergency works that may be needed. Historically this has been £3,000 per year, however in light of the increased budget this could be reduced. Council AGREED to place £1,500 into this EMR to build up the fund.	£1,500.00	
3	Provide replacement set of flat swings at School Green Lane. From HMRC EMR.		£7,500.00
4	It was agreed at the November Environmental Committee that the Weald Common Tree Project would be given full Council support. It was noted by Councillors that whilst the intention was to source funding for the entire project, there is the potential that funding may not be forthcoming and as such the cost of planting the trees may need to be borne by the Council itself. Council AGREED that in the case funding could not be sourced, £3,000 should be taken from the HMRC EMR.		£3,000.00
5	Councillors recalled that the Council already holds £2,000 in an EMR for works to make good and improve the Car Parking Area at Wheelers Farm Gardens Allotments. After numerous visits to site, the current proposal is to lay type 1 media following works to prepare the ground, which are expected to be quite significant to ensure the longevity of the work. £900 was being used from grant funding received, and it was AGREED a further £2,000 would be taken from the HMRC EMR.		£2,000.00
6	Street Lighting - Rolling Replacement Fund. Based on the average cost of replacing 1 x street Lighting Column of between £4-5,000.	£5,000.00	
7	Councillors were reminded that in 2022 there will be a rededication of both the Norwegian Stone and the Parish War Memorial to coincide with the Queens Jubilee, which includes the cleaning of both structures and repairs / repainting of the lettering, and possible addition of any names of those no longer missing. This also includes the cost of providing an afternoon Tea. Councillors AGREED these costs should come out of the HMRC EMR.		£2,500.00
8	Following the five year electrical inspection for the Thornwood Common Parish Hall, all necessary and required works were completed. However, the report indicated a number of other faults that whilst not big enough to result in a test failure, are still recommended for rectification. Works AGREED .	£805.00	
9	The provide an information board on Weald Common to advise residents of what work has taken place regarding the planting of the new small forest. AGREED to be taken from HMRC EMR.		£1,500.00
10	EFDC is currently looking at the provision of a gateway sign in Hastingwood. It is expected that if this gateway is agreed, the Parish Council will be required to match fund the cost, the total cost expected to be around £8000. AGREED £4,000 to come from HMRC EMR.		£4,000.00
11	Due to a pattern of excessive rubbish in the litter bins at School Green Lane play area, a larger bin is required. Councillors AGREED this.	£500.00	

12	Two local residents and the Ramblers are currently looking at accessibility of all three millennium walks. Some of the walks are overgrown, and it is expected that these parties will work together over the coming months to ensure all PROW are cleared. Councillors AGREED once this was done, new pamphlets / leaflet should be created with new maps promoting the walks, to be taken from HMRC EMR.		£500.00
13	At the Environmental Committee meeting in November, Councillors were appraised of the damage to the gate by the Cross of Sacrifice in St Andrews Churchyard. It was agreed at this meeting that the Clerk would make further enquiries for repairs with the War Graves Commission, however Councillors AGREED that if these works were not forthcoming, they should be paid for taken out of the Handyman EMR.		£380.00
14	Contributions towards Surface Repair outside North Weald Village Hall (out of £40,000 HMRC) agreed a Parish Council meeting.		£5,000.00
Total Additional Items		£8,805.00	£26,380.00

FINAL PRECEPT FIGURE

Councillors **NOTED** that last year, the Parish Council element of the Precept for a band D property was £85.91 (£1.65 a week). The calculation to get to this is the amount the Council request in precept divided by the tax base (no. of houses EFDC are expecting to collect council tax from). The tax base for 2022/2023 has increased to 2596.60. If the Parish Council wishes to show a NIL increase in the parish council element of Council tax for next year, the maximum amount the Council can demand of EFDC in terms of precept would be £223,074

$$£223,074 / 2596.60 = £85.91$$

Councillors **CONSIDERED** all the discussion points throughout the meeting. Councillor Tyler **PROPOSED** a 4% increase in the precept, which was **SECONDED** by Cllr Etherington. Cllr Blanks then **PROPOSED** a 3% increase, which was **SECONDED** by Cllr Mrs Jackman. The first proposal of 4% was voted on, the results being as follows:

1 – For
9 – Against
0 – Abstention

The second proposal of 3% was then vote on, the results being as follows:

9 – For
1 – Against
0 – Abstention

It was therefore **AGREED** to put forward a proposal for ratification at the January 2022 Parish Council meeting that the Parish Council precept for 2022/2023 should be set at £229,766, resulting in the Parish Council element of the Council Tax being £88.49/year for a Band D Property - an annual increase of just over 21p per month per band D property.

Meeting closed 9.01pm

Signed

Date