

Harrietsham Parish Council
Finance and General Purposes Committee
Minutes of meeting held on Thursday 11th January 2024 at 7:30pm

1. Present: Cllrs T Sams (chairman), Luck, Roots, Stanley and M Cuerden (RFO/Amenity Manager)
Visiting: Cllr Brown Apologies: None Members of the public: None

2. Disclosures: None

3. Minutes of the last meeting: (9th November 2023) were approved as a true record of the meeting.

4. Publication of Draft Minutes: The RFO explained that this had arisen by a reference from Council. He and the Clerk had looked into the regulations, and determined that if we were a Small Authority, (which we aren't), we would need to publish minutes immediately after the meeting. Similarly, if we were in Wales, (which we aren't), then there is a duty to publish draft minutes as quickly as possible. However, since neither circumstance apply to us, the matter is at Councillors' discretion. He had checked with the Clerk, and to publish draft minutes – suitably labelled to avoid confusion and mis-interpretation – would not greatly add to her workload. It was agreed to **Recommend to Council** that we publish draft minutes shortly after the meeting, but after councillors have had a chance to cast an eye over them. Proposed Cllr Luck, seconded Cllr Roots, All in Favour.

4. Review of 2023/24 Accounts. The RFO went through the income and expenditure spreadsheets column by column, answering questions as they arose. It was agreed that the year was progressing as expected, and no concerns or issues were raised. This included reviewing the bank reconciliation, during which it was noted that we are likely to conclude the year with rather more in the Natwest accounts than the FCA's protected limit of £85,000. The RFO reported that he had been looking at other possible banking services; two Building Societies (Yorkshire and Skipton) both seemed to fit the bill, and would sit along our Nationwide account quite nicely. He had also looked at a "proper" bank, to be informed by them that we would need to be registered with Companies House – clearly not appropriate for a local authority. Cllr Stanley suggested that we also look at Kent Reliance BS. The RFO was mandated to open one or two (as required) accounts in order to spread our funds across to get the maximum protection. **Proposed** Cllr Luck, seconded Cllr Stanley, All in Favour.

5. Confirmation of Bank Balances: Unfortunately, in the excitement of discussing extra bank accounts, the meeting omitted to check the bank balances. The RFO will make a point of ensuring that this is done at the January Council meeting.

6. Grants and Donations: The RFO reminded the meeting that the last Council had not been able to agree all the grants and donations due to lack of suitable members. He then ran through the list of outstanding grants to see if any should be re-considered. It was agreed that all were still appropriate, so the list before Council remains as:

Harrietsham In Bloom	– requested £100; agreed to recommend
Harrietsham Fish Scheme	– requested "Upto £3,000"; agreed to recommend £1,000
Harrietsham Lawn Tennis Club	– requested £1,000; agreed to recommend £500 , payable in April 2024 thereby putting the cost into next year, and keeping this year in budget
Friday Morning Coffee	– requested hall hire fees through 2024/25; agreed to recommend

A grant request for the Harrietsham Knit, Crochet and Craft group was withdrawn.

9. Budget for 2024/25: The RFO started by explaining the process by which he had arrived at the draft budget and the effect of various options had upon it. There then followed a wide-ranging discussion. It was acknowledged that this year was a particularly challenging one in which to be setting a budget, as there are more "unknowns" than we usually have.

We noted that the KCC consultation on the future of Community Wardens has yet to produce a published result, and we cannot therefore know with certainty what may transpire. It was agreed that should Harrietsham lose its Community Warden, then councillors may wish to discuss the possibility of employing our own. Due to the timescales, this is a decision that would need to be made after we have agreed the precept, so in order to facilitate this, it was agreed that we should build into the budget at least a provision for this, based on a part-time position.

The impact of the Local Plan and the as-yet unpublished Inspector's report was also considered. It was noted that we are not, as yet, even sure that we shall need a budget provision to fund further action, let alone on what scale such funding would be. It was also noted that there was a wide range of opinion on the subject, encompassing a considerable range of "acceptable" financial provisions. It was agreed that the council should make no specific allowance within the precept for any appeals or judicial reviews. Instead, we would wait and see what transpired, and then the council as a whole would discuss and agree a way forward. Any financial impact of such agreement would be taken out of reserves in the year, on the basis that we would then precept to rebuild these reserves over an agreed timespan (two or three years being mentioned).

On the basis of the working papers presented, plus the above, it was **Agreed to Recommend** to Council that we set a precept for 2024/2025 of £107.24, representing a £11.77 increase on the previous year's precept of £95.47, or about 12.33%. This gives a precept of £147,723, (up from £131,481 in the current year). Proposed Cllr Sams, seconded Cllr Roots, All in Favour.

Cllr Roots also asked about the Christmas lights, and whether we would be extending them this year – it was agreed to consider this at a later date, although the RFO did agree to clarify (a) what happens when the 3-year hire agreement for the existing lights expires, (b) will we be charged the same each year for their installation, or will it be a lower price in subsequent years and (c) what sort of prices are we looking at if we did want more at Christmas. Cllr Roots also noted that it would be useful if we had a power source on the West Street Green, and wondered if either he or the Clerk could find out about feasibility and cost – the RFO commented that he thought that the Clerk already had quite a bit to do, but if Cllr Roots wanted to have a look then he was sure that would be fine. Cllr Roots therefore offered to see what he could find out – the RFO commenting that he thought UK Power Networks had, a few years ago, been digging up the Green to do some work, so there might be power readily available.

8. Date of next meeting – Thursday 18th April 2024 at 7:30pm.

Meeting closed at 9:00pm.