

# **WARBOYS PARISH COUNCIL**

Minutes of a meeting of the **Finance and General Purposes Committee** held on 16th March 2020 at the Parish Centre, Warboys.

## **PRESENT**

Councillor Dr S C Withams, Chairman

Councillors D W England, Ms L A Gifford, S J Green, Mrs M H Harlock, J A Parker, P S Potts, Mrs J A Tavener, G C M Willis and Mrs A R Wyatt.

## **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Mrs J M Cole, R J Dykstra and Mrs S J Wilcox.

## **10/19 MINUTES**

Upon being moved by Councillor Green and seconded by Councillor Parker, the Minutes of the meeting held on 25th November 2019 were signed as a correct record by the Chairman.

## **11/19 MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

No Members declared interests in respect of the items appearing on the agenda for the meeting.

## **12/19 MATTERS ARISING**

The Committee noted the following matter arising from the meeting held on 25th November 2019:-

### **Budget 2020/21**

Arising from Minute No. 09/19, the Clerk reported that he had been informed by County Councillor Rogers that the increase in the council tax precept set by the County Council for 2020/21 was 1.6% with a further 2% for social care. Councillor Mrs Tavener reported that the increase set by the District Council was 2.6%.

## **13/19 ASSET REGISTER**

The Clerk circulated copies of the Council's current asset register sub-divided into categories for land, play equipment, miscellaneous equipment and property. Members were informed that the register was kept up to date to include new equipment, disposals and items that had been scrapped.

The Clerk pointed out that the asset register circulated to Members showed the value of the assets for replacement purposes and that it was no longer necessary to have an itemised schedule for insurance purposes under the new policy with RSA. However a separate register had to be held showing the original purchase price of assets for submission to the external auditors as part of the Annual Return in accordance with the Practitioners' Guide on Governance and Accountability for Local Councils issued by NALC and SLCC.

#### **14/19 RISK MANAGEMENT**

As more extensive assessments were being prepared for the risks encountered by the Council, the Clerk explained that it was impractical to copy and circulate the information to all Members. Under the circumstances, it was

#### **RESOLVED**

that the Clerk be authorised to liaise with the Chairman and Vice Chairman to ensure that the necessary risk management measures are in place.

#### **15/19 INTERNAL CONTROL**

Members' attention was drawn to the requirement in the Accounts and Audit Regulations for the Council to review the effectiveness of its systems of internal control and internal audit as set out in the Practitioners' Guide to Governance and Accountability in Local Councils in England and Wales published by NALC and SLCC.

The Clerk submitted a checklist (a copy of which had been circulated to all Members) summarising the controls that should be in place and explained the measures that were undertaken by the Council. Under the circumstances, the Committee expressed its satisfaction as to the effectiveness of the existing controls.

#### **16/19 INVESTMENT STRATEGY**

The Clerk submitted a report (copies of which had been circulated) on the need for the Council to review its Investment Strategy annually to comply with guidance issued by the Secretary of State under the Local Government Act 2003. The guidance required authorities to include information about their investment activity, including the use of performance indicators. The guidance was now mandatory for parish councils with reserves in excess of £100,000 but the Clerk pointed out that many of the requirements were not applicable in the case of Warboys.

Having regard to the nature and extent of the Council's investments, the Committee did not consider there to be a need for any additional capacity or skills in terms of either Members or the Clerk in managing the Council's assets.

#### **RESOLVED**

that the Council be recommended to approve the Investment Strategy appended to the report now submitted.

## **17/19 PARISH CENTRE – CONDITIONS OF HIRE**

The Committee reviewed and confirmed the conditions of hire of the Parish Centre (copies of which had been circulated).

## **18/19 INSURANCE POLICY**

Members were reminded that Community Action Suffolk had brokered a new group insurance policy with RSA that had been specifically designed for local councils. A summary of the main aspects of the policy had been circulated to all Members.

## **19/19 SECTION 137 LIMIT**

Members were advised by the Clerk that the appropriate sum set by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for the purposes of Section 137 expenditure by local authorities for 2020/21 was £8.32. As the number of people on the electoral roll for Warboys on 1st January 2020 was 3,195, this meant that the Council's expenditure under Section 137 should not exceed £26,582.40 in 2020/21.

## **20/19 URGENCY**

Having regard to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on all aspects of public and private life, the Chairman announced that she was prepared to admit the following business to the agenda in view of the urgency of the situation.

## **21/19 COVID 19 – COUNCIL BUSINESS**

(Ms V Musson, Secretary of Warboys Community Association was in attendance for this item.)

The Clerk drew attention to the current advice being issued by the Government to address the current Covid 19 pandemic and its impact on the population. Anyone with symptoms of the disease had been told to self-isolate for 7 days and it was probable that before the end of the week, everyone in a household with a family member displaying symptoms would be told to self-isolate for 14 days. In addition, anyone over the age of 70 or with underlying health problems were likely to be told to self-isolate for a lengthy period of potentially up to 4 months.

The Clerk advised Members that this would apply to all employees of the Council with one exception. It was also likely that schools would close with effect from the end of the week.

The Clerk asked Members to consider a range of measures to reduce social contact and protect the Council's employees from the risk of infection. The Clerk indicated that he could continue to work from home and that the Timebank Co-ordinator would not be affected by the advice. However the Handymen and Cleaner were likely to be advised to self-isolate shortly and would be unable to undertake their jobs on behalf of the Council in

such circumstances. Members accepted that salaries should continue to be paid if employees were required not to work.

As the Cleaner would be unable to work, the Clerk suggested that the Parish Centre would need to close as it would not be possible to ensure that it was cleaned for users. Moreover it appeared likely that the Government would be issuing advice imminently for venues to close where people congregated.

(Councillor Mrs Tavener left the meeting at this point in the proceedings.)

The Clerk reported that legislation required all meetings to be open to the public and that it was not possible to conduct meetings by electronic means. Although advice on the holding of meetings in the present emergency had not yet been issued, many of the Members and the Clerk fell into the category of the advice on self-isolation. The Clerk explained that decisions could be delegated to an officer and that, in such circumstances, it was usual to consult first with the appropriate chairman and/or vice chairman. Further legislation required all decisions taken by an officer that would otherwise have been taken by a council or committee to be recorded on the Council's website.

Members were informed that a similar mechanism could be introduced for the Parish Council to comment on planning applications, with application details being available on the District and County Councils' Public Access systems and the views of individual Members sought where they were able to comment electronically by e-mail.

Legislation required a parish council to hold an Annual Parish Meeting between 1st March and 1st June in each year. The meeting in the current year was due to be held on 22nd April but the Clerk suggested that the current emergency was highly unlikely to have been resolved by that time. Although there was a legal requirement to hold the meeting, the Clerk pointed out that the Council had a duty of care to its Members, employees and the public and that it was unlikely that any action could be taken by the Government or external auditors if the meeting was not held.

The Clerk reported that it was possible that Timebank members would be able to assist those in the community affected by the current situation. However the Timebank Co-ordinator was limited to only 10 hours per week and because of her other employment commitments was only available on Thursdays and Fridays.

It was reported that a group of volunteers was forming in the village to help in the current crisis and that a telephone conference call was being held on 18th March involving interested parties. Councillor Ms Gifford offered to join the conference call and the Clerk advised that he would arrange for the Timebank Co-ordinator to do likewise.

A series of events had been planned by a working group of representatives of various organisations in the village to take place over the VE Day 75 weekend. Posters, advertisements and tickets would be available shortly. Given the difficulty in reimbursing ticket holders in the event of cancellations and the likelihood that advice on the avoidance of social contact would still be in place by 8th May, it was suggested that it would be advisable for the events to be postponed.

Members were reminded that the Council paid for visits by the Connection Bus Project that operated sessions for local youngsters on Friday evenings during term time. The

organisation had advised that they were introducing measures to help protect young people attending the sessions but would be reviewing the situation in the light of Government advice.

In view of the seriousness of the current situation and the likelihood of further advice from the Government on avoiding social contact and exercising self-isolation, Members were of the opinion that the Council had little choice other than to take emergency measures in the interests of protecting themselves, employees and the public generally.

Ms Musson advised that she would be co-ordinating information on decisions taken for inclusion in an early edition of the Warboys Diary.

## **RESOLVED**

- (a) that those employees over the age of 70 or with underlying health issues be advised to work from home and, where this was not possible, to stay away from work from the date of the meeting, subject to review as Government advice is issued;
- (b) that employees unable to work as normal be entitled to receive their basic wage from the Council in the current situation;
- (c) that the Parish Centre be closed with immediate effect for a period of 12 weeks with the situation kept under review as Government advice is issued;
- (d) that meetings of the Council and its committees be suspended until further notice with the situation kept under review as Government advice is issued;
- (e) that all decisions of the Council and its committees be delegated to the Clerk, after consultation with the appropriate Chairman or Vice Chairman until further notice with the situation kept under review as Government advice is issued;
- (f) that Members' views be invited electronically on invitations to comment on planning applications circulated by the District and County Councils before a decision is taken by the Clerk under delegated authority;
- (g) that decisions taken by the Clerk be recorded on the Council's website in accordance with the Openness of Local Government Regulations;
- (h) that the Annual Parish Meeting due to be held on 22nd April 2020 be cancelled;
- (i) that the events being organised by the Council for the VE Day 75 weekend, i.e. the Band Concert on 8th May and Afternoon Tea on 10th May, be postponed in the hope that it may be possible for them to be re-arranged on the anniversary of VJ Day in August; and
- (j) that the Connections Bus be permitted to continue to provide sessions in Warboys until such time as the schools are shut by the Government.

There being no further business, the meeting was declared closed.

**Chairman**