

Minutes of the meeting of Belbroughton Parish Council Finance Committee held on 21st November 2011

Present: Councillors J Kitson, K Green, C Hine, S MacDonald, C Scurrell (from 357/11), and P Shotton. Clerk : Katie Limm.

353/11 Apologies

Apologies were received and accepted from Councillors Bradley, Jones, and Roberts. Cllr Scurrell sent apologies for his late arrival.

354/11 Declarations of interest

No interests were declared.

355/11 Minutes of the meeting on 17th October 2011

The Minutes of the previous meeting were approved and were signed by Cllr Kitson.

356/11 Accounts for payment

Payments for November set out in a schedule circulated by the Clerk, including capital grants for Belbroughton Rec. and Belbroughton Church Hall, were approved.

357/11 Parish Council's budget for 2012/13

A draft budget proposed by the budget sub-group had been circulated. Cllr Kitson outlined the main points. The sub-group had suggested keeping the precept at the same level as in the current year (£55,000) due to the difficult economic times. Items of note in relation to 'ordinary' expenditure were:-
inclusion of £2k for Clerk's potential overtime on project work taking into account current workloads, but no increase in underlying rate of pay; 10% increase in lighting costs; £300 reduction in external grant to Belbroughton Recreation Ground; additional costs of meetings as the Parish Room would no longer be used; £2.5k estimate for legal advice on splitting the Council and a £1k reduction in contingency. This produced an overall deficit of £2,200.

The Committee reviewed proposed expenditure and suggested that provision for village tidying (£3,500) should be removed in order to set a realistic budget. Litter picking was a service which the District Council had a statutory duty to provide. The Parish Council provided a top-up to this service which could not necessarily be justified in current circumstances, especially since the Committee had already discussed concerns about whether the expenditure was providing value for money. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Council that the precept should remain at £55,000 and that it should set a balanced budget by ceasing to provide a village tidying service. The Council could monitor the level of litter in the parish and consider one-off tidy ups if necessary. Other budgetary assumptions in relation to ordinary income and expenditure were agreed by the Committee.

In relation to 'other' income and spending, the budget proposed setting total grant and project expenditure at £9,000. This excluded investment income (estimated at £3,500) because this interest would need to be reinvested to maintain the value of the capital in line with the investment strategy. This approach was agreed by the Finance Committee but needed to be made explicit for consideration by the Council.

358/11 Grass cutting contracts

The Committee agreed the draft specifications circulated by the Clerk. It was also agreed that 3 year contracts should be offered, subject to satisfactory performance each year, and that a fixed price should be sought to cover the three years. The Committee recommended that monitoring arrangements should be set up with one or more Councillors from each village taking responsibility for this. The Clerk was asked to put notices about the contracts on the notice boards as well as sending the specifications to contractors who had expressed an interest in the work.

359/11 Village Tidying

Further discussion was deferred pending the Council's consideration of the budget recommendation concerning village tidying.

360/11 Street lighting

The Committee endorsed the working group's recommendations. The main recommendation was to abandon the policy of having a proactive maintenance programme to replace a significant number of lights over a number of years in favour of a policy of leaving lights in place until they needed attention and then considering whether to replace or remove them. This would require an active inspection programme to ensure that any problems were identified and dealt with.

Some lights do currently require attention. The County lighting engineer had recommended that wooden lighting poles should be replaced as soon as possible and the previous year's inspection identified one metal light at Belbroughton Rec. as needing to be replaced in the current year. The group had therefore recommended replacing the one at the Rec, moving light No 9 attached to a house on Church Hill to outside the Church Hall, and replacing two wooden pole lights on Hartle Lane. This would cost around £7,500 of the £10k set aside for street lighting in previous years and in the current year's budget. In the next 2 years the final 2 wooden poles which are the Parish Council's responsibility should be replaced. The working group had recommended that after this a fixed amount should be included in the budget each year for lighting repairs and replacements as they arose, but that a large sum should not be carried forward for this.

The Committee noted that Cllr MacDonald had identified a number of additional lights which had not been considered in Peter Bridge's original report to the Council. Some belonged to the Parish Council but the ownership of others was uncertain. These needed to be considered and responsibilities clarified. If any of these lights prove to need urgent attention which should be funded by the Council, then some of the improvements already identified could be deferred.

It was agreed to recommend to the Council that:

1. the approach set out in the Street Lighting Working Group's report should be adopted
2. the Working Group should be asked to consider the position of the additional lights identified by Cllr MacDonald and make recommendations to the Finance Committee as appropriate

3. the Working Group should also consider whether any additional lighting improvements should be made, including possibly reducing the times that lights are illuminated.
4. the Finance Committee should be given delegated power to agree spending on street lights within the overall policy and financial framework agreed by the Council

361/11 Footpaths

The Committee agreed to purchase a strimmer for the footpath wardens at a cost of between £200-£300. Further work by the Community Payback team proposed by Paul Hardcastle was also agreed provided this could be completed within the 1-2 days suggested.

362/11 Maintenance items

Cllr Green suggested that the Council should replace the fence, which is in poor repair, separating the spinney at Fairfield Rec. from the farmland next to it. There was some uncertainty about whether the fence belonged to the Council or adjacent tenant farmer, but the farmer had suggested that it was the Council's and that the Council should replace it. The Committee noted that the Council had no need to have a fence in place and that it was the responsibility of landowners to fence to protect their livestock. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Council that the Clerk should write to the farmer to say that the Council would be removing the fence at a specified date since it considered that it was in a potentially dangerous state. If the farmer wished to have a fence in place he was free to repair it before that date or replace it thereafter.

The meeting closed at 9.05pm.

SignedChairman