

## SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL

### Finance & General Purpose Committee Held at Guildhall, Frankwell Quay, Shrewsbury At 6.00pm on Monday 2 December 2019

#### PRESENT

Councillors A Mosley (Chairman), P Adams, Mrs G Burgess, Mrs H Fraser, I Jones, Ms J Mackenzie, Mrs P Moseley, A Phillips & D Vasmer.

#### IN ATTENDANCE

Helen Ball (Town Clerk), Gary Farmer (Operations Manager), Andy Watkin (Responsible Financial Officer), Carol Pullen (Acting Committee Clerk) and 2 members of public.

#### APOLOGIES

None

#### 43/19 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Twin-Hatters	All twin-hatted Councillors declared a personal interest in all matters relating to Shropshire Council.
--------------	---

#### 44/19 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on 30 September 2019 were submitted and circulated as read.

#### RESOLVED:

**That the minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on 30 September 2019 be approved and signed as a correct record.**

#### 45/19 MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

#### 46/19 PAYMENTS

Prior to the meeting, the Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) circulated the Schedule of Payments for the period 1 September 2019 – 30 November 2019. No comments or concerns were raised.

**RECOMMENDED:**

**That the schedule of payments passed for payment for the period 1 September 2019 – 30 November 2019 be approved.**

**47/19 QUARTER 2 ACCOUNTS**

The Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) presented the statement of accounts for the second quarter of the 2019/20 financial year and the year to date position.

When comparing the income and expenditure account there was an overall negative variance of £276,889 compared to budget for the quarter. Expenditure was a negative variance of £310,089. There were small positive and negatives variances due to timing issue of spending budgets. The variance occurred due to capital or earmarked expenditure for Radbrook, LED lights and machinery. There was a negative play variance of £20,200 due to spending \$106 and £19,479 town promotions/events due to one off £16,000 CCTV contribution.

There was a positive variance on income of £33,200 due to income not budgeted from Shropshire Council regarding Youth and a negative variance from Commercial due to Town & Country Markets CVA but under the temporary arrangement the income is higher.

Year to date overall there is a positive variance of £90,024.

Councillor Phillips asked what investment properties were held by the Council and how frequently they were valued. The RFO confirmed the addresses at 128-130 Frankwell and 8 Henry Close. The properties are re-valued every 5 years and adjustments made for impairment.

**RECOMMENDED:**

**That the Statement of Accounts for period ending 30 September 2019 be noted and accepted.**

**48/19 SUNDAY MARKET TENDER**

The Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) reported on the outcome of the Sunday Market Tender process. It had been advertised on NABMA and Contract Finder and two tenders had been received and scored against criteria in the tender. Scores had been similar but Tender A had scored higher on income and credit experience where Tender B had scored higher on experience.

Members were in agreement that the Contract to run the Sunday Market be awarded to Tender A.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the contract to run the Sunday Market be awarded to Tender A.**

## **49/19 BUDGET 2020/21**

### **(i) Fees & Charges for 2020/21**

The proposed Fees & Charges for 2020/21 had been circulated to Members ahead of the meeting. Inflation of circa 2.5% had been added to increase the fees across the board rounding up or down in some scenarios. The RFO drew Members' attention to the new charge for events in the Quarry where a percentage would be applied to the rental fee for increased capacity by organisers.

Councillor Jones expressed concern at the cost of hire of Grange Community Centre. Currently a fee of £53.50 is charged for a three-hour period but there is a discounted rate of £31.50 offered to organisations with charitable status. Members discussed this in comparison to hire costs for other community centres in and around the town and felt that the discounted rate should be extended to individuals wishing to hire the facility for private functions.

#### **RECOMMENDED:**

- (i) That a discounted rate for individuals wishing to hire of the Grange Community Centre be applied.**
- (ii) That the revised Fees & Charges for 2020/21 be adopted.**

Discussions on the proposed budget for 2020/21 were deferred to enable Group Leaders to meet and discuss the budget in more detail. Further recommendations would then be presented to the Finance & General Purpose Committee meeting on 13 January 2020.

Councillor Mosley asked that a reminder be sent to all members requesting them to highlight any capital projects that they wish to be taken into account during the Group Leaders discussions.

## **50/19 ELECTORAL REVIEW**

A map was circulated to members showing the current Parish boundaries and highlighting anomalies that have occurred as new developments within Shrewsbury encroach into surrounding Parishes. It was felt this could lead to the Town Council having to provide infrastructure whilst the precept for part of the development was paid to another parish. The sensible boundary would seem to be the proposed A5/A49 North-West Relief Road.

The current Councillor to electorate ratio mean that Shrewsbury currently has the highest ratio in the country and it was felt that it may be pertinent to consider this also. Recruiting more Councillors in the future could reduce the number of twin-hatted Councillors and give stability to the future of the Mayoralty.

Members asked that the Town Clerk make contact with Electoral colleagues in the New Year and begin to investigate the process by which the boundaries can be considered to reflect the developments in and around the town.

**RECOMMENDED:**

**That the Town Clerk contact Shropshire Council to discuss the process for reviewing the Shrewsbury Parish boundaries in the future.**

**51/19 CLIMATE EMERGENCY**

**(i) Update on Peat-free Compost Trials**

The Operations Manager reported on the peat-free compost trials. A compost substitute made up of green waste had been bought in and was currently being trialled with the Spring bedding and it was intended to extend this to the Summer bedding. If successful the hope would be to be totally peat free by Autumn of 2020.

The compost shows no difference in quality but is more expensive but the cost may come down with bulk purchase.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the update on compost trials be noted.**

**(ii) Approval of Solar Light Tenders**

Tenders have been sought, reviewed and evaluated using a scoring matrix for the provision of solar powered LED lights along Victoria Avenue in the Quarry between Clement Memorial and Kingsland Bridge. Five tenders had been received and evaluated giving consideration to a design in keeping with a heritage park. Contract D3 was far superior. It was reported that the same traditional style lantern (but for a power supply) is already being used in other parts of the town as part of the current LED replacement programme.

A £60,000 budget had been allocated originally for 20 light columns but the siting distance required 21 light columns to avoid any dark gaps, at a cost of £72,710. Members were asked whether they were happy to agree the additional funding.

**RESOLVED:**

**(i) That the additional spend of £12,710 be accepted.**

**(ii) That the contract be awarded to Tender D3.**

**(iii) Update on battery powered equipment procurement**

The Operations Manager reported on trials of battery powered blowers, trimmers and hedge cutters in the Quarry. The trials using Stihl and Husqvarna machines had proved successful and there had been positive comments from the public that the machinery was so quiet. The batteries are the expensive item with each machine needing three batteries to get through the day. A full twelve months is needed and

if successful this could be rolled out to all of the fleet. Officers would keep the Committee informed of progress.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the update on battery powered equipment be noted.**

## **52/19 CAPITAL PROGRAMME**

The Capital Programme Report had been circulated prior to the meeting and the Town Clerk gave an update on current projects.

**BMX** – The Operations Manager had met with the contractors and work would begin in the New Year, depending on climatic conditions. It was intended to start on Shorncliffe Drive as this enjoyed a reasonable dry surface.

**Street Lights** – Were progressing although there had been a slow down due to Christmas light installation taking priority with the Electrical Contractor.

**Toilets** – A full feasibility programme was continuing. Discussions being held with Shropshire Council to set up a working group to look at the whole of the Quarry and pool facilities.

**Footpaths/Cycleways** – The Countryside & Greenspace Team Leader was preparing specifications to go out to tender for all footpaths including Belvidere Paddocks. Officers had investigated whether there were any S106 monies due for Belvidere Paddocks. None had been flagged up. Cllr Mrs Moseley would investigate further as she advised there would be.

**Defibrillators** – Defibrillator ordered for Weeping Cross. Red phone box on Castle Street is being adopted for a defibrillator.

**Community Centres** – Still awaiting quotes for the Castlefields Community Centre kitchen. Housing Plus have agreed to contribute £20,000 to the Meet Place extension. They had instructed MECA to consult widely to determine local need. In the meantime the Town Council would ring-fence £20,000 for the future project.

**Countryside Sites** –The artwork for the interpretation boards has been prepared and the cost for five boards had come in under budget at £1,800 + VAT with a small cost on top for the boards and legs. Ready for Council to consider in January.

**Abbey Gardens** – The Operations Manager would be meeting with the Ward member to discuss this further.

**Springfield Recreation Ground** – improvements to footpaths had been included in the wider tender specification for footpaths.

**Roundhill Green** – The play area was nearly ready for signing off.

**Dana Footpath** – Discussions were still taking place between Shropshire Horticultural Society and Shropshire Council's Legal Department. The Operations Manager reported that the Town Council had been asked not to replace the summer bedding as the Contractor wished to use the area as a compound when work commences.

**Castlewalk Recreation Ground** – Discussions were taking place with local developers re utilising excess top soil from development sites. Currently ground conditions were not too good; this was likely to be a late Spring/early Summer project.

**Monkmoor Recreation Ground** – Astro turf pitch progressing well, fencing & floodlighting in, on target for mid January opening. Wooden kickboards were found to be in poor condition and instructions have been given to undertake a wholesale replacement. The project was still likely to come in under budget as budgeted contingency is not required. Need for a specialist brush machine to keep the rubber crumb agitated; options are being investigated.

**RESOLVED:**

**That the update be noted.**

## **53/19 MOUNT HOUSE**

The meeting was joined by Mr Mike Marchant who is currently in the process of securing the lease on Mount House, birthplace and former home of Charles Darwin.

Mr Marchant introduced himself to members and welcomed the opportunity to describe his venture. He has a background in academia, having retired from the state education system thirty years ago and more recently working globally as an education advisor to the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

His aspirations for Mount House are to develop a world class research and education centre, developing university programmes, already having 13 universities on board, 9 of which are in the UK, each being paid £1m a year for three years to supply research teams, supply research capability into digital framework, send teachers and create a continuous cycle of people coming into the town to deliver university style lectures and bringing a centre of research to Shrewsbury

His feeling is that the site is currently under used, under-valued and under promoted and his intention is to make better use and higher value with a digital format.

The current site is divided into three parts:

- The north side previously stabling and servants' quarters – this part is intended to become a field studies centre with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.
- The current workshop building would be flattened with a view to looking at the architecture to consider what was originally on the site. He would run a worldwide architectural competition to build a glass house where the conservatory once was for the study of botany and zoology.
- The house would be developed as an education facility designed to produce future natural scientists, offering courses for children upwards. It was hoped to create access to the

property along the river behind, this being subject to discussions with landowners, of which the Town Council and Shropshire Wildlife Trust were ones.

The site would provide a twenty-four hour use, during the daytime educating young people and in the evening hosting events so due to this there are no plans to offer access to the public. There would be two likely full time residents, a Concierge and a resident Scientist.

The refurbishment will be done in very strict sequence with input from the Civic Society and other specialists to interpret the building and ensure that original features are protected and then to develop a digital walk through of the building and develop this as a future interest. Refurbishment will be driven by a local economic multiplier to ensure that as much work on the buildings is done by local hands.

Mr Marchant then took questions from members and said he would answer them in the most informative possible way.

Cllr Mackenzie introduced herself as the Chair of the Mount House Steering Group whom had been working with University Centre Shrewsbury to acquire the site for the local and global community. She stressed that she hoped collaboration with the Town Council would be full and frank with a sharing of expertise and wondered if Mr Marchant planned to involve the University Centre Shrewsbury who had been instrumental in working towards acquiring the site and how was it intended to ensure the heritage of the site that tell stories of Darwin and make these accessible to the community.

Mr Marchant did not envisage The Mount being anything other than an Education facility. There would be very little space to accommodate anyone else other than children and researchers. They would look to having digital accessibility for the public instead.

Mr Marchant advised that working with the University would depend on what the University saw as a potential relationship but he hoped to have dialogue. He feared that UCS would lead to a second class University as their development model was not the right one. He felt that Shrewsbury as a first class town and Shropshire as a first class County deserved better.

Cllr Mosley asked about the business plan.

Mr Marchant stated that he was not concerned about the money as there was a guaranteed income of £28m a year available, this from a donation in Liechtenstein. They had no intention of charging children or students and the investors expected no return on their investments.

Cllr Vasmer said he welcomed proposals and ideas of the cultural impact of Darwin.

Mr Marchant said his interest in Darwin extended much further. Darwin was a man of many parts and he believed there was still much research to be done surrounding this.

Cllr Vasmer asked if there were plans to link in with the Sixth Form College.

Mr Marchant said they had not been in conversation yet.

Cllr Fraser advised on the number of Hydrogeologists within the town (she being one of them) and the fact that they had pooled skills to develop the Ground Water Forum and work with CREST at UCS to develop an MSc programme.

She made reference to her studies in the History, Philosophy of Science and Darwin's influence in the whole study of Science; this was a perfect opportunity to feature his thinking heavily in this project. Mr Marchant advised he was scoping the History of Science including Darwin and among others Humbolt and Anning.

Cllr Phillips enquired further on the provenance of the £28m dowry. Was this some latter-day Carnegie style Philanthropist. Mr Marchant advised that this donation was from Liechtenstein, referring to it as legally clean money. When asked to expand he said there were four people who looked certain to donate including an 83 year old UN Diplomat and a 40 year old who had been bad but wished to make good.

Cllr Jones made reference to his visit to China during his Mayoral year. He spoke of the major interest in Darwin in China and asked whether he was looking to tap into that interest and potential resource. Mr Marchant advised that he was holding continuous dialogue, but the vision was not yet complete. He would however not touch Chinese money.

Cllr Mosley asked which had come first, the vision or the building opportunity. Mr Marchant advised that knowing the building was coming available it set a chain in motion and he has had discussions with English Heritage about links to Down House and the National Trust about holding Darwin related events at Attingham Park.

When asked about his timescales for delivery he advised that he was hoping that the 167 year lease of the building would be granted by the end of the year to Davis Holdings Company Ltd. There would follow three months discussions with planners. The lease would be re-assigned to the Darwin Observatory Ltd, which will hopefully have achieved Charitable Status by March/April.

The Chairman thanked Mr Marchant for his attendance.