

SHREWSBURY TOWN COUNCIL

Meeting of the Finance & General Purpose Committee Held Virtually on Microsoft Teams At 6.00pm on Monday 11 January 2021

PRESENT

Councillors A Mosley (Chairman), P Adams, Ms G Burgess, J Dean, Mrs H Fraser, Ms K Halliday, Mrs P Moseley, A Phillips & D Vasmer.

Councillors P Nutting & K Pardy joined during the meeting

IN ATTENDANCE

Helen Ball (Town Clerk), Amanda Spencer (Deputy Town Clerk), Gary Farmer (Operations Manager), Andy Watkin (Responsible Financial Officer), Ruth Jones (Office Manager) and Carol Pullen (Committee Clerk).

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Ms J Mackenzie.

39/20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Twin-Hatters	All twin-hatted Councillors declared a personal interest in all matters relating to Shropshire Council.
Councillor A Phillips	As he is the Ward Member, Councillor Phillips declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 9 – Greenfields Recreation Ground.

40/20 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on 7 December 2020 were submitted and circulated as read.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting held on 7 December 2020 be approved and signed as a correct record.

41/20 MATTERS ARISING

- (i) **Minute 35/20(i) – Climate Emergency Advisory Group** – The Town Clerk reported that the Climate Emergency Advisory Group would be meeting on 21 January and she would feedback thoughts regarding the Climate Emergency Fund allocations to both Full Council meeting on the 25 January and F&GP Committee on 1 February.

- (ii) **Minute 12/20 – Shropshire Pension Fund Investment** - Councillor Phillips enquired if there had yet been a response to the Town Clerk's letter. The Town Clerk confirmed there had not and at Councillor Phillips request she would chase this up.

42/20 PAYMENT SCHEDULES

Prior to the meeting, the Responsible Finance Officer (RFO) circulated the Schedule of Payments for the period 28 November 2020 – 31 December 2020. No comments or concerns were raised.

RECOMMENDED:

That the schedule of payments passed for payment for the period 28 November 2020 – 31 December 2020 be approved.

43/20 COMBINED SEWER OUTFLOWS

This item was moved up the Agenda

The Chairman welcomed Pete Lambert, the River Projects Manager/Shropshire Pond Co-ordinator from Shropshire Wildlife Trust who would report on his work in relation to Combined Sewer Outflows.

Prior to the meeting a briefing note on Combined Sewer Outflows had been circulated to members. Mr Lambert reported that he had already had considerable discussions with the Town Clerk, the Countryside and Greenspace Manager and Andy Jones from the Shrewsbury Town Fisheries to raise awareness about the significant negative impact on the river from old infrastructure and he welcomed the opportunity to address the Committee. There was a significant and growing economic dimension to the town that was dependent upon the quality of the river and its waters as it looped around the town. The briefing note was intended to share some information and direct members to some of the sources that were available about the national impact caused by the discharge of untreated sewage that was mainly domestic sewage released through the system called a Combined Sewer Outflow. In times of normal amounts of rain fall the Combined Sewer Outflows do not activate but in a storm event that creates large amounts of surface water resulting in an overload of the sewer system, this old fashioned infrastructure discharges untreated effluent at the same time as storm water flows into the river. An issue for Shrewsbury is the number of Combined Sewer Outflows, not all of which are monitored that discharge directly into the river as it passes through the town.

Mr Lambert shared a map produced by the Rivers Trust showing Shrewsbury's Combined Sewer Outflows, referring as an example of the outflow at Castlefields. In 2019 this had spilled 170 times for a total of 2,514 hours over the year discharging directly into River Severn.

Shrewsbury is an old town with very old infrastructure and the River Severn supports a growing amount of leisure and recreation activities, draws people to the town and is a major

part of the visitor economy but suffers a significant water quality problem. Shropshire Wildlife Trust recognise the harm to wildlife and others recognise the long term damage that is being done to the health of the town.

The Sewage (Inland Waters) Bill published by The Rt Hon Phillip Dunne MP for Ludlow who is Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee has widespread support from environmental charities and NGOs including Shropshire Wildlife Trust and has its second reading in Parliament on 22 January. Shropshire Wildlife Trust have written to all five local MP's asking them to support the Bill. The Bill primarily raises discharge standards of Combined Sewer Outflows. This is an interim measure but an important step in recognising the damage that is currently being done on a regular basis and secondly raising those standards to move towards greater investment from Severn Trent. Some Combined Sewer Outflows are owned by Severn Trent but some are actually private discharges on the river.

Councillor Dean asked if this was only a river issue or affected other watercourses such as the brooks. Mr Lambert confirmed that tributaries that ran into the Severn were also affected by consent to discharge. These tributaries were a backwater for the migratory salmon and trout. There were also Grayling on the river, which were notoriously pollutant intolerant and those Grayling would not survive that level of discharge so would be pushed out of the town quite quickly, this was not just a main river issue but an all river issue.

Councillor Vasmer asked if the Bill would deal with private discharges. Mr Lambert said anything that was consented would fall under the legislation. There had been a whole range of legislation over the last twenty years but the Bill would amend those and push those water quality standards up and that would include any consented discharges. There was also the issue of septic tanks which were small private waste treatment plants which in England were not as regulated as they should be but they still had to comply with discharge standards in terms of quality

Councillor Mosley questioned the historical trend of increase in outpourings and the amount of overflows, given that some of these must be in the summer when there was less rain. Mr Lambert said it was right to challenge the statistics and the licence and monitoring and he thought with having increasingly powerful enforcement and regulation some of these anomalies would be addressed because the Combined Sewer Outflows should not be discharging during dry periods. The results from the River Trust Survey demonstrated there was something else going on.

Councillor Fraser asked whether there was much dialogue with Severn Trent or the Environment Agency about what might be done within the local area. Mr Lambert reported a good working relationships with both although he was aware that part of the limitations for Severn Trent were that they worked on five-year cycles and clearly the level of investment that was required in a town the size of Shrewsbury exceeded a five-year rotation. They were aware of the issues locally, those discharges that they do monitor they are trying to tackle. Because the legislation is not tough enough and the water quality standards are not high enough they can effectively just work to within the standard, whereas if the standards were to change they would be pushed a little bit harder but an organisation such as STW can just fall back behind the legislation.

In summing up Mr Lambert said that although there was a lot more to do we have a local opportunity of actually responding collectively and collaboratively and saying we care so much about it and we really want to make progress at all levels in planning and control

policy in terms of how we respond to protect our natural resources, our natural capital in town. He thanked the Town Clerk for working alongside Shropshire Wildlife Trust and bringing this to a much wider attention. He thanked the Committee for their time and for the support on the Monkmoor Meadows work, which had now been completed.

The Chairman thanked Mr Lambert for attending the meeting and his presentation and looked forward to supporting Shropshire Wildlife Trust and the Angling Trust in due course.

RECOMMENDED:

- (i) That Shrewsbury Town Council recognises the impact of the Combined Sewer Outflows into the River Severn;**
- (ii) That the Council supports the work of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust locally and the Angling Trust nationally in raising the profile of this issue and support the current Private Members Bill;**
- (iii) That the Town Clerk writes this week to Daniel Kawczynski MP to seek his assurances of voting for the Private Members Bill;**
- (iv) That Council flags its concerns directly with Severn Trent and invites them to a public meeting to discuss how they intend to address local impact.**

44/20 WEBSITE

The Deputy Town Clerk reported on the progress of the development of the new Shrewsbury Town Council website, following the appointment of Web Orchard.

It was planned that the design and implementation of the new website would be completed by 1 March 2020 and would meet the following criteria:

- Is accessible to all and easy to navigate
- Creates easy to up-date websites with an understandable content management system
- Is user friendly, colourful and engaging to all
- Reflects the Shrewsbury One-Off branding but also feature our town coat of arms
- Continuously complies with current/new website legislations i.e. GDPR, Website Accessibility Regulations
- Complies with the Code of Practice on Data Transparency

In addition, the new website is to have increased functionality from the previous version including:

- An online payments facility
- Interactive maps
- A facility to allow members of the public to make online bookings
- The ability to create and launch surveys
- The creation of an online newsletter

The Group Leaders had met with officers recently to discuss the design and were happy with the progress and the Deputy Town Clerk was going to arrange a session for all Councillors ahead of the website going live.

RESOLVED:

That the Update on the Development of the New Website Report be noted.

45/20 BUDGET 2021/22

(i) Revenue Budget for 2021/22

Details of the draft 2020/21 budget had been circulated to members for comment ahead of the meeting.

The RFO reported that the budget had been produced with various caveats in relation to COVID Impact, namely lockdown would be over before the new financial year commenced. There may be a slight hangover eg commercial properties cannot trade at full capacity but most income was expected to be back to normal levels and general reserves would be utilised if this was the case as the amounts would be minimal.

Expenditure excluding capital and transfers to reserves had increased from £3.313m last year to £3.404, primarily due to inflationary pressures on costs.

There was no increase in staff numbers, although there would be recruitments from March onwards for staff who had left over the past year and who had not been replaced to provide savings for the lost income during the current year.

STC follow the NJC pays scales and the Chancellor had announced pay would be frozen except for those staff earning below £24k who would receive a £250 increase or a minimum 1.14% increase, which partly explained the increase in wages compared to last year's budget, coupled with the fact wages had been under budgeted when the pay settlement was agreed for current year's budget.

Due to the uncertainty of the Coronavirus, no enhancements to service had been made which could have necessitated a precept increase as income was expected to decrease but towards the bottom of the expenditure budget there was a new project heading called Community Projects with a budget of £10k.

Income was budgeted to decrease from £3.726m in the last budget to £3.667m, despite slight increases in some income streams. Returns on interest received were at all-time.

The effect of the reduced Livestock Market income is also factored as a reduction into this year's budget.

Regards capital and reserves, a further £75k is budgeted for the carbon mitigation fund, as well as £33k for bus shelters and £33k for ash dieback per commitments last year, all this is detailed in the earmarked reserves summary along with usual commitments for elections, and various capital sink funds for replacement fleet and equipment.

It was expected that a number of capital projects which use reserves or CIL would go ahead per capital projects list but as the money was set aside was not reflected in the accounts.

The RFO had made a forecast projection for this current year which took into account the third lockdown announcement which increased the deficit for the year to £85,000 which would be met from general reserves. This was based on the current lockdown ending at the end of February and effects commercial and sporting income.

Councillor Phillips sought more detail on what he believed was a 9% increase in wage costs between the forecast and budget, and the 4% change from 20/21 to 21/22 budgets

The RFO reported that the forecast was low when compared to the current year budget as leavers during 2020 had not been filled in order to offset loss of income. This had led to wage savings in the current year but makes it appear costs are increasing. For next year's budget as well as pay increase for the majority of staff who are on lower grades, there were also increases in staff costs driven by Job Evaluation and the under provision from last year's budget which was factored in at 2% but went up by 2.75%.

(ii) Precept for 2021/22

To help residents of Shrewsbury during these difficult financial times it was proposed to keep the Band D rate unchanged at £60.25, which due to a slight increase in tax base, would raise a precept of £1,525,610. This would represent an £8,575 increase in income but it should be noted many towns throughout Shropshire had seen the tax base decrease due to coronavirus and needed to increase to cover the loss.

The Chairman thanked the RFO for his update and thanked the Town Clerk for her report in summarising the requests made by members for developments within their own. Some members were still making submissions which he proposed should be subject to more discussion and analysis by Group Leaders before asking Officers to review the final list and working with Group Leaders to prepare a prioritised list for acceptance by both the Recreation & Leisure Committee and the Finance & General Purpose Committee.

He reported there were plans to significantly increase the wildflower verges, install more benches, bus shelters and bins. It was intended to extend floral blooms more out of the town centre and it was hoped to develop planters and hanging baskets in major local community hubs and on many entrances to the town. There was a full programme in that respect as well as some larger capital projects such as some nature trails, Upton Lane and major improvements of Kynaston Road play area.

There would be major expenditure in the budget but it was hoped these projects would improve the services being provided to local residents. He would not propose an increase in the Precept because it was recognised that local residents had suffered enough from the effects of Covid and the financial hardship that had imposed. The budget contained some interesting ideas and he foresaw a significant amount of spending during the forthcoming year. It would be another challenge for the Officers to implement but he believed that going forward it would be much appreciated by the residents of Shrewsbury.

RECOMMENDED:

- (i) That the revenue expenditure budget be set at £3,679,021.**
- (ii) That a Precept of £1,525,610 be levied against the ratepayers of Shrewsbury.**
- (iii) That Group Leaders further consider members submissions for projects to be considered from the 2021/22 budget and progress these with officers.**

46/20 GREENFIELDS RECREATION GROUND

(i) Court of Appeal Judgement

A copy of the Judgement for the Court of Appeal in relation to the appeal against the Judicial Review Judgement on the case between Dr Peter Day and Shropshire Council had been circulated to members ahead of the meeting. STC had received this judgement as they were cited in the original Judicial Review, there was no action required but members were asked to note the content.

(ii) Independent Investigation

The Chairman reported that he had spoken recently to Michael Redfern QC regarding the publication of the Independent Investigation into the sale of Greenfields Recreation Ground. It was hoped the report would be finalised within the next few weeks and could be presented to the next Finance & General Purposes Committee meeting on 1 February.

Councillor Phillips made a couple of points on behalf of the Greenfields residents:

- Why had the report not already been published when it had been expected in the Autumn of 2020 and the contracting process that had led to there being no formal completion date built into the Contract.
- The Town Council to disclose conveyancing information on the property information form and the documents collected for disposal and it had been noted that through the solicitors recommendations to both parties solicitors had advised that the Town Council led to the disposal.

The Chairman acknowledged that the report was a little later than expected but that it had been a major piece of work carried out in very difficult circumstances and it had taken increased effort and further time to do it satisfactorily. In addressing Councillor Phillips' concerns about technical questions, he confirmed the Council had been receiving a significant number of Freedom of Information request from the residents and the questions were dealt with by officers on an individual basis as they were posed.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted

47/20 CLOSING REMARKS

In closing the meeting, the Chairman thanked Councillors for attending and taking part in this virtual Town Council meeting and also thanked the staff involved in this meeting. He thanked members of the public for logging in. All papers relating to this meeting could be found on the website www.shrewsburytowncouncil.gov.uk and the minutes would appear in draft on the website within the next month.