

Minutes of the **FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**
held at the Town Hall, Swanage on **WEDNESDAY, 20th MARCH**
2024 at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT:- Councillor T Foster (Town Mayor) – Chair

Councillor J Bishop
Councillor M Bonfield
Councillor A Harris
Councillor C Moreton
Councillor C Tomes
Councillor W Trite
Councillor M Whitwam

Also in attendance: -

Dr M Ayres Town Clerk
Miss A Spencer Finance Manager

There were no members of the public present at the meeting.

1. **APOLOGIES**

None.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were invited to declare their interests and consider any requests for Grants of Dispensations in accordance with Section 9 and Appendix B of the Council's Code of Conduct.

There were no declarations to record on this occasion.

3. **UPDATE ON ACTION POINTS FROM INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT 2022/23**

Members reviewed the updates on the recommendations that had been made by the council's internal auditor in six Internal Audit reports issued relating to the 2022/23 financial year. The status updates on the recommendations made in those reports were noted.

4. **INTERNAL AUDITOR REPORT 2024/25 – VISIT 3 OF 5**

Consideration was given to an Internal Audit Report – Visit 3 of 5 of the 2023/24 financial year prepared by Darkin-Miller – Chartered Accountants.

The following areas had been reviewed during the audit visit:-

- Risk Management - (minute review) work in progress
- Payroll
- Car parks income - completion
- TIC rent – work in progress

It was noted that the report contained only one recommendation, regarding document retention, and Members thanked Council staff for the hard work that had resulted in such a positive report.

5. **ANNUAL HEALTH & SAFETY REPORT**

Consideration was given to a report, prepared by the Assets and Compliance Manager, setting out the number of accidents and incidents involving the Council's

workforce during the period April 2023 to March 2024. It was noted that there had been ten incidents/accidents, none of which were RIDDOR reportable. Training attended by staff members was also reported. The content of the health and safety report was noted.

6. **PROCUREMENT OF UTILITIES-TO CONSIDER LASER FRAMEWORK OPTIONS**

Members discussed a briefing note outlining the options available for the procurement of electricity through the LASER flex green basket. It was noted that if this was considered to be the Council's preferred procurement route this would need to be confirmed by 31st March 2024. The benefits of using a framework were outlined, with the availability of green basket options now available to the Council in fulfilment of its net zero pledge.

Following discussion, during which the need to give consideration to both the financial impact as well as environmental factors in the evaluation of the preferred tariff, it was proposed by Councillor Tomes, seconded by Councillor Bonfield and
RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

TO RECOMMEND:

To commit to procuring electricity from September 2024 via the LASER framework flex green basket.

7. **DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN**

Consideration was given to the draft Medium Term Financial Plan which was submitted to Members. It was reported that this document was written to sit alongside the Corporate Plan which had been adopted in March 2023.

The document brought together information contained in the Annual Budget Report 2024/25 (incorporating the revenue and capital budgets), the Reserves Policy and the Treasury Management & Investment Strategy which had all been reviewed by Members previously. It was noted that the plan covers a three-year period, 2024/25 to 2026/27, but will be reviewed in the next financial year by the newly elected Council.

Attention was drawn to the fact that the plan highlighted the financial challenges arising from managing the Council's asset base, which included coastal structures, land suffering from ground instability due to local geological conditions and a range of historic structures. The impact upon the level of the Council's reserves as a result of funding essential works to these assets was noted. The need to agree action to address the forecast divergence between income and expenditure over the coming year was also highlighted. It was proposed by Councillor Trite, seconded by Councillor Moreton and
RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

TO RECOMMEND:

That the draft Medium Term Financial Plan be approved and adopted.

8. **CIVILITY AND RESPECT PLEDGE & DIGNITY AT WORK POLICY – UPDATE**

Further to Minute No. 85 (a) of the Extraordinary Council Meeting held on 26th September 2022, consideration was given to a briefing note outlining a joint National Association of Local Councils and Society of Local Council Clerks initiative to encourage councils to demonstrate their commitment to measures which support civil and respectful conduct. It was noted that 1,448 local councils had signed the pledge to date, and that by doing so the Town Council would confirm that it:

- Has put in place a training programme for councillors and staff.
- Has signed up to the Code of Conduct for councillors.
- Has good governance arrangements in place including staff contracts and a dignity at work policy.

- Will seek professional help at the early stages should civility and respect issues arise.
- Will commit to calling out bullying and harassment if and when it happens.
- Will continue to learn from best practices in the sector and aspire to be a role model/champion council through for example the Local Council Award Scheme.
- Supports the continued lobbying for change in legislation to support the Civility and Respect Pledge including sanctions for elected members where appropriate.

Consideration was given to a number of ways in which the Council was fulfilling the above criteria, and it was proposed by Councillor Moreton, seconded by Councillor Bishop and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

TO RECOMMEND:

That the Council signs up to the Civility and Respect Pledge.

In connection with the requirement for the Council to adopt a Dignity at Work Policy, and further to Minute No. 4 of the Personnel Committee meeting held on 10th October 2022, it was noted that the Council’s existing Bullying and Harassment Policy covered most of the issues contained in the NALC/SLCC model Dignity at Work Policy. Consideration was, therefore, given as to whether or not to rename the Bullying and Harassment Policy as the Dignity at Work: Bullying and Harassment Policy. However, on balance it was felt that the existing title would be more easily understood.

One item missing from the existing policy was a section titled ‘Complaints against Councillors’ which provided guidance on how any such complaints should be managed in light of the Ledbury case of 2018. Given the importance of handling any such matter that might arise in future in a lawful manner it was agreed that this section should be incorporated into the existing Bullying and Harassment Policy. Consequently, it was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Bishop and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

TO RECOMMEND:

That the suggested wording regarding ‘Complaints against Councillors’ be incorporated into the Town Council’s existing Bullying and Harassment Policy, which forms part of the Staff Handbook.

9. **VEXATIOUS CORRESPONDENCE POLICY**

Consideration was given to a draft Vexatious Correspondence Policy, which had been prepared following discussion at a meeting of a working party that had been appointed for this purpose under Minute No. 6 (b) of the Finance and Governance Committee Meeting held on 1st November 2023. During the discussion it was noted that the volume of correspondence sent to the Council by one individual over recent years had at times diverted considerable administrative resources away from Council priorities. Members, therefore, welcomed the fact that, if adopted, this policy would put measures in place to help deal more effectively with such activity in the future, although it was noted that the Council would still honour its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Chairman thanked those involved in formulating the policy and, following discussion, it was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Bishop and **RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:**

TO RECOMMEND:

That the draft Vexatious Correspondence Policy be approved and adopted.

In light of the pending elections, consideration was given as to how best to make Council policies available to newly elected councillors. It was suggested that a folder of relevant documents could be uploaded on to councillor laptops, thereby negating any need to print large numbers of lengthy documents.

10. **ITEMS OF INFORMATION AND MATTERS FOR FORTHCOMING AGENDAS**

(a) **Minutes of the Capital Projects Sub-Committee Meeting held 6th March 2024** – It was reported that the minutes of the Capital Projects Sub-Committee Meeting held on 6th March 2024 had inadvertently been omitted from the Agenda. It was noted that these had been circulated to Members prior to the meeting for consideration, and it was further noted that no recommendations had been made for the Finance & Governance Committee to consider.

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Proposed by Councillor Harris seconded by Councillor Bonfield and
AGREED:-

That, under Standing Order No. 1 c), in the public interest, the press and public be excluded from the Meeting in view of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted under agenda items 11 & 12 (in relation to legal and financial matters).

11. **SCHEDULE OF DEBTORS**

An aged debtors report dated 29th February 2024 was submitted for information. It was noted that the majority of debts were anticipated to be collected, with only two doubtful. It was noted that the Bad Debt provision would be retained at £35,000 pending resolution of an ongoing debt recovery process.

12. **ANNUAL REVIEW OF RISK REGISTER**

Consideration was given to the Council’s Corporate Risk Register. It was noted that, in accordance with the *Practitioners’ Guide*, Members were expected to be fully engaged in the annual review of the Council’s Risk Register. The register summarises the most significant risks faced by the Council in relation to achieving its objectives and priorities. The register also sets out the control procedures in place to mitigate the risks, and identifies any further action needed to manage the risks effectively.

Other than amending target dates, the following significant additions and amendments were considered:

Financial Risks	
Add new risk: Overpayment of business rates	Control: Periodically review accuracy of Valuation Office Agency listings for Council property; ensure Valuation Office Agency is informed of any disposals of property; consider challenging valuation of Council property where evidence of wrongful valuation exists. Target: Ongoing.
Compliance Risks	
Failure to comply with Equality Act/Disability Discrimination Act; and	Control: Add ‘Regular consultation with Accessible Swanage as Disability Reference Group’.

Failure to take effective action to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and diversity.	Target: Add 'Equality Policy to be reviewed together with Accessible Swanage during 2024/25'.
Strategic Risks	
Inadequate performance planning and monitoring arrangements to effectively deliver the Council's corporate priorities.	Target: Add 'Review Corporate Plan during 2024/25, including whether to agree performance indicators'.

It was proposed by Councillor Bonfield, seconded by Councillor Tomes, and RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:-

TO RECOMMEND:

That the amended Corporate Risk Register for 2024/25 be adopted.

The possibility of introducing a summary of key issues to address was raised. It was noted that for the following year this would include a review of the Council's Asset Management Plan, work with Accessible Swanage to review the Council's Equality Policy, and the development of a business continuity plan. It was also acknowledged that the newly elected Council would commence a review of the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Plan.

13. **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next scheduled meeting was noted as 24th July 2024.

The meeting concluded at 10.35 a.m.
