

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE HELD ON 11TH MARCH, 2014

Present: Councillor Mrs S Forster (Chair) and Councillors B Allen, Mrs B E Allen, R Arthur, Mrs M R Baird, E Bell, Mrs J A Bell, Mrs G Bleasdale, B Burn Snr, B Burn Jnr, Mrs H Cahill, S Cudlip, Miss S Morrison, N R Page, I Paul, K Shaw, G A Shepherd, C Snowball, R Whitehead, K Younger

1. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

Members were reminded prior to the start of the meeting of the need to disclose any interests, prejudicial or personal, in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

2. GREATER DURHAM CITIZENS ADVICE BUREAU

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Mr Neil Bradbury the Chief Executive of the Greater Durham Citizens Advice Bureau who was in attendance to provide Members with an update on the changes that have taken place within the Bureau.

Mr Bradbury began by thanking the Town Council for his invitation to attend this evening's meeting. He stated that the last time he had attended a meeting with the Town Council it had been in his capacity of Chief Executive of the East Durham CAB. As a result of the cost cutting measures throughout the country the organisation had been streamlined and was now the Greater Durham Citizens Advice Bureau which consisted of a number of merged offices such as, among others, Chester le Street, Wear Valley and Durham City and eventually Derwentside, Sedgefield and Teesdale services would also be merged into Greater Durham.

He went on to say that Seaham was something the Bureau was proud of as initially when he joined the Easington Bureau some years ago, it was apparent that there was insufficient coverage of the CAB services in Seaham. An objective was set up which still continues today with the aim of all towns of this size getting an equal quality service. The Greater Durham CAB had taken over Shakespeare Hall which was closed some years ago but they now had a peppercorn lease on these premises. £70k has been spent on refurbishing the premises which had been funded by grants and other monetary donations. The offices had been operating for over for a year, however the official opening was only held recently.

In this financial year the Bureau had seen 761 from the County Council electoral division of Seaham: - 305 from Dawdon, 167 from Seaham and 289 from Deneside. The intention is to get more signage displayed around the town to ensure that the public are aware of the location of the Bureau as there is a lot of potential to grow the service in Seaham. The offices are open 3 days a week for drop-in, which is the same as all offices in County Durham and there are now specialist workers, who

were previously based in Peterlee, who are now in Seaham. Previously people would be initially seen in Seaham and then referred to Peterlee but this is now all done in Seaham. The Bureau can provide many services including budgetary advice, i.e. debt management, mental health difficulties etc. Because of the financial constraints throughout the country it is possible to predict the demand.

Seaham has 10 volunteers currently whereas previously we had one paid worker who now supervises the volunteers and therefore there is more capacity. The numbers of people seeking advice is increasing. The way people can speak to officers at the Bureau by telephone has also changed. It used to be open only 1 or 2 mornings a week. There is now one telephone number across the County and the services are available from 10 am to 4 pm Monday to Friday. 2,500 people tried to call last month and 50% were answered. There is always a need for more volunteers and there is a major recruitment drive ongoing in this respect. Since 2008 the Bureau had consistently seen 50% more people presenting each year. A lot of the issues are relating to benefits where cuts are in place – there are more sanctions being faced by people. Payday loans are creating issues where people are paying back these before they pay for their rent, heating or council tax. The message must be put out that people should not pay for advice when the Bureau provides it free, funded by bodies such as the Town Council. Support such as this type of funding helps with the recruitment and training of volunteers. Although the Bureau is now a bigger organisation with £1.4m income, there is only a surplus of £2k and the County Council is cutting the funding by 60% - 20% over each of the next 3 years.

At this point Mr Bradbury invited questions and below is a summary of the comments made:

- (i) Asked what 3 days the Bureau opened in Seaham, Mr Bradbury advised Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 10 am until 1 pm as a drop in, but the Centre itself was open for longer.
- (ii) Community groups are allowed to use the building on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
- (iii) Ideally would like to see the Centre open 5 days a week even if it is not for drop in on all those days. It is however one step at a time.
- (iv) A Member queried whether the Bureau used social media to promote itself. Mr Bradbury stated that there are some volunteers and staff who use Twitter, however the Facebook account is not as yet as active as he would like it to be. He went on to say that when the merge was completed in County Durham they would be launching a new website which would enable people to go on and start their own debt management plans and send them to the Bureau to be reviewed.
- (v) A Member asked whether the Bureau had a community leader's mailing list and Mr Bradbury advised that they did not however they would like one.

They now had 50 staff over 7 offices. They had to consult with all staff about the changeover. Over the next year the key issue was to get the message across about where the Centres are and what services they provide to people.

- (vi) Mr Bradbury was asked whether funding was universal throughout the County or were other offices getting more or less? He advised that there used to be massive variations however the merger has created more equality. He went on to say that they do receive funding streams for specific areas. In terms of local funding it is variable, i.e. County Councillors, AAPs and Town Councils and the requests for funding has ranged from £50 to £30k. The Bureau spends whatever it can in local communities and therefore they get a better service. The aim is for all towns to have 3 days, any funding we can get on top of that is a bonus.
- (vii) There are 10 volunteers in Seaham and training is carried out in Seaham as well as Peterlee. If there is a volunteer who can go to another town easier the Bureau pays for them to travel to where-ever to get the training.
- (viii) Asked what the target figure for volunteers in Seaham is, Mr Bradbury stated that the ideal number would be 40. He stated that a project had been launched to get to this number, however at the moment there are only 180 volunteers across the County.
- (ix) Mr Bradbury was asked whether there was an internship system in place for people. He advised that they do take on a lot of law students as volunteers but usually this is at the end of their course and he would prefer to have them earlier. He stated that they used to have a scheme whereby they took on people who were long term unemployed – they had taken on 23 people out of which 21 people obtained a job upon leaving. It would be good to run similar schemes however these cost a lot of money.

At this point the Chair thanked Mr Bradbury for his informative address and he then advised that he would be happy to return in the future before he left the meeting.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 11TH FEBRUARY, 2014

RECOMMENDED the Minutes of this meeting, a copy of which had been previously printed and circulated to each Member, be approved and signed as a correct record by the Chairman.

4. PAYSHEET NUMBER 11 - 2013/2014

a) Expenditure

RECOMMENDED

- (i) all payments in Paysheet Number 11 – 2013/2014 be approved, it being noted that the direct debits, BACS and cheque payments including Imprest

expenditure amount to £128,582.65 being the total sum authorised under this Paysheet;

- (ii) the BACS authorisation sheet be signed by three Members and the credit transfers be actioned immediately;
- (iii) the cheques relating to suppliers not being paid by BACS be signed by three Members and the payments be released immediately; and
- (iv) the Clerk's Imprest Account be reimbursed the sum of £3,397.12 for Civic Expenditure which includes the sum of £167.18 for petty cash, and authority be granted for this to be signed by the Chairman and Responsible Financial Officer.

b) Income

RECOMMENDED the summary sheet showing the range of income received by the Council during the current month be accepted.

5. BANK BALANCES

RECOMMENDED the report of the Finance Officer a copy of which was circulated, be approved.

6. SPECIAL BACS PAYSHEET

RECOMMENDED that authority be granted for the Finance Officer to arrange a special BACS paysheet in order to facilitate payments and avoid unnecessary accounting processes involving accruals in the period up to 31st March, 2014.

7. APPLICATIONS FOR GRANTS

a) Letter of Thanks

RECOMMENDED the Council note the letter received from the Durham Miners' Association which thanked Seaham Town Council for its membership renewal to the Friends of the Durham Miners Gala.

8. AUDIT ISSUES

a) Internal audit report

RECOMMENDED the report published by the Internal Auditor in relation to the work undertaken in examining the Town Council's payroll arrangements, be accepted.

b) Internal Audit – Annual Report

The Committee considered the Annual Report of the Internal Auditor which outlined work completed over the 2013/14 financial year and Mr. Fletcher elaborated on the report which gave Full Assurance to the Town Council.

RECOMMENDED:

- (i) The Council accept the report.
- (ii) The Finance Officer and relevant staff be commended for their efforts in attaining Full Assurance over the controls implemented throughout the year.

c) Internal Audit Annual Plan of Work for 2014/15

RECOMMENDED the Council accept the report of the Internal Auditor which detailed his proposed annual plan of work for the 2014/15 financial year.

e) Renewal of Contract

Prior to discussion of this item, Mr Gordon Fletcher left the meeting.

The Committee was reminded that the contract between Seaham Town Council and Mr Gordon Fletcher, the Internal Auditor, be reviewed on an annual basis. The renewal of his contract was conditional on evidence being provided to show his continued professional development at the end of each year to show that he continued to be cognisant with current legislation and best practice. Members were advised that this information was included within the quality assurance section of the Annual Audit Report. Mr Fletcher had advised that if the contract was renewed, his prices would remain the same as in previous years.

RECOMMENDED authority be granted for the renewal of the contract with Mr Gordon Fletcher for another year.

9. BUDGET STRATEGY – MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Committee considered the Town Clerk's report which identified the key financial issues the Council were to face over the next three years. This initial draft of the Medium Term Financial Plan took account of central Government advice, the loan repayment policy and borrowing strategy, the revised budget for 2013/14 and the budget for 2014/15, budget issues for 2015/16 and risk management issues and had been prepared for discussion by Members and also for initial guidance.

In discussion the Town Clerk was asked to consider two amendments to enable any required further consideration at the next meeting, one being in relation to item 7.7

whereby because of the unpredictability of the operation of the new town hall, alternative wording be used with regard to the minimum level of reserves the Town Council should endeavour to maintain. The second issue related to contributions towards any future revenue commitments and capital projects and in addition the risk management paragraph should also be reviewed as there was no reference to the new town hall under financial hazards. In discussion Members stated that there was a need to be flexible with regard to expenditure in relation to the new town hall and it may not always be possible to maintain a specified fixed level of reserves. They recognised also that there was the possibility of extra monies being received with the sale of various properties and land. It was also commented that the new facility would generate additional revenue however this may be a slow process. The Town Clerk clarified that, in accordance with accounting principles, capital receipts from the sale of assets could only be spent on capital projects however he would review the flexibility aspect and report back at the next meeting.

RECOMMENDED:

- (i) The Town Clerk to review the wording in relation to the comments made and report back to Members at the next meeting of this Committee.
- (ii) A review of the risk assessment paragraph in relation to the new facility be undertaken with revised wording being reported back to the next meeting of this Committee.
- (iii) Subject to clarification of the above issues, the Council accept the Medium Term Financial Plan.

10. CONFERENCES, COURSES AND SEMINARS

a) NAC Tackling Anti Social Behaviour Conference

The Committee considered details of the National Association of Councillors' Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour Conference to take place in Scarborough on 4th to 6th April, 2014.

RECOMMENDED the standing representative, Councillor E Bell, together with the next two Councillors from the appropriate rota be authorised to attend this event as the Council's representatives, and such attendance rank as an approved duty for payment of appropriate allowances; the bookings would not be made until places were confirmed by Members wishing to attend

11. NALC REQUEST TO LARGER COUNCILS TO SUPPORT SEVENOAKS TOWN COUNCIL'S SCA SUBMISSION TO DCLG

The Committee considered a communication from the County Durham Association of Local Councils which detailed the support requested by Sevenoaks Town Council

in relation to its proposal under the Sustainable Communities Act with regard to changes to the Business Rates system.

RECOMMENDED the Council agree to support Sevenoaks Town Council in its proposal.

12. PRESS OPPORTUNITIES

The Committee considered the items previously discussed and agreed that the support given by the Town Council to the Greater Durham Citizens Advice Bureau as detailed in item number 1, together with the opening times of the Bureau's facility within Seaham should be notified to the press.

RECOMMENDED the press be notified of the Town Council's support to the Greater Durham CAB, and also the opening times of the Bureau's facility within Seaham.

13. CUSTOMER FIRST STRATEGY CONSULTATION – FOCUS GROUPS

The Committee was advised that Durham County Council were to hold Customer Focus Groups as part of their Customer First Strategy Consultation, one of which was to take place at Murton on Wednesday, 19th March, 2014.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported.

14. THE CO-OPERATIVE BANK

The Committee was advised of a letter received from the Town Council's bank, the Co-operative Bank, a copy of which was circulated, which advised of their progress to date and future proposals.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported.

15. RESOLUTION TO EXCLUDE THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RECOMMENDED in view of the confidential nature of the following item, the formal resolution be hereby passed to exclude the press and public from the meeting pursuant to the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act, 1961.

16. MULTI-USE PAVILION

The Committee was advised that a query had been raised by a Member in relation to this issue which had been discussed at a recent meeting of the New Town Hall and Community Facility Working Party. As a result of this it was suggested that a re-tender exercise would take place to ensure the Council were compliant with financial regulations with regard to the tender process.

RECOMMENDED the Council note the information now reported and await the results of the tender exercise.

17. **REPORT OF NEW TOWN HALL AND COMMUNITY FACILITY WORKING PARTY**

A Member commented on the report of the New Town Hall and Community Facility Working Party following their recent meeting. His concern was with regard to the contract with Mr Tighe and he felt that the terms of this particular contract, which was on a fixed price basis, should clearly show that he would be contracted to the Council for whatever period of time was necessary in respect of negotiations after completion of the work and for dealing with contractual disputes in relation to any claims and any subsequent litigation.

RECOMMENDED Mr Tighe be contacted to seek clarification and confirmation of what would be required of him under the terms of his contract.