

HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL
Corporate Services Committee
Minutes of the meeting held on
2nd December 2024 7.00pm.

Present:	Councillors:	D Jones	Chairman
		E Billington	
		P Burgess	(Sub)
		J Carroll	
		C Rollins	
		C Slough	(Sub)
	Officers:	Debbie Marsh	Head of Corporate Services
		Amanda Samuels	Administration Officer
	Public:	0	
Apologies:	Councillor:	E Costello	
		M Herber	
		W Henderson	

13038 APOLOGIES & SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies were received from Cllr Costello, Cllr Henderson (Cllr Slough substituted) and Cllr Herber (Cllr Burgess substituted).

13039 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None.

13040 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & REQUESTS FOR DISPENSATIONS

Cllr Carroll declared an interest as a recipient of the Bedfordshire Pension Plan.

13041 MINUTES

To approve the Minutes of the meetings held on 9th September 2024

Resolved: To approve the Minutes of the meeting held on 9th September 2024 and for these to be signed by the Chairman.

13042 INCOME AND EXPENDITURE REPORT

Members were provided with the income and expenditure report, highlighting significant variances, for Corporate Services Committee to date.

Regarding the property fund redemption, there was an objection to the internal auditor's statement 'the value of the general reserve is significantly understated', which took into account the proceeds from the disposal but not the original cost. The

internal auditor's recommendation had not included that the full value of the investments sold should be recorded in the accounts.

The advice submitted by DCKB was that the redemption had been treated correctly and an adjustment would be made in the AGAR at year end.

13043 BANK AND CASH RECONCILIATION STATEMENTS

Members were requested to receive the monthly bank and cash reconciliation statements for August, September and October 2024.

Resolved:

- 1. To approve the monthly bank and cash reconciliation statements for August, September and October 2024;**
- 2. For these along with the original bank statements to be signed by the Chair of Corporate Services Committee and the Council's RFO.**

13044 LIST OF CHEQUE PAYMENTS

Members were provided with a list of payments for the period August to October 2024 (inclusive)

13045 INVESTMENT REPORT

In accordance with Committee Functions, Financial Regulation 8 and Banking Arrangements, Investment Strategy & Investment Arrangements.

The Corporate Services Committee are to oversee and manage the financial obligations of the Council, including:

To receive quarterly reports on investments containing a forecast of capital expenditure, investment opportunities and a recommendation for further investment including where, length and amount.

The Chair reported that it had been suggested at the Corporate Peer Challenge Review that HRTC consider a special reserve account. Based on Monetary Policy Committee base rate predictions for 2025, it was felt HRTC had sufficient time to research investment options while the CCLA Deposit Fund continued to provide a good return. A report outlining investment options could be presented to Members at the March meeting and the Head of Corporate services was requested to carry out further research to this end.

Members suggested that the investment sum was likely to be the minimum amount of general reserves, plus the majority of the balance in the CCLA account, minus payments for the remainder of the year and that funds should be easily accessible. A sum of £500,000 was proposed.

The savings platform Flagstone had been suggested by the internal auditor but further investigation into this – and other options - was needed. It was noted that Flagstone would enable HRTC to spread investments and manage these in-house.

It was suggested that a decision regarding investment was deferred until the next meeting when further investigations had been made.

Proposed by: Cllr Carroll

Seconded by: Cllr Billington

Members agreed unanimously to defer the decision until the next meeting.

Resolved: To defer consideration of an appropriate investment opportunity for CCLA Property Fund monies until the next meeting on 3rd March 2025.

13046 WORKER PROTECTION (AMENDMENT OF EQUALITY ACT 1010) ACT 2023

Members were advised that a new Act came into effect on 26th October 2024 which introduced a new legal duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment during the course of employment.

The Town Councils HR provider informed the Head of Corporate Services that they had carried out a review of their employment policies that would be impacted by this new duty. Those policies affected would be sent to the Town Council, most notably the Bullying and Harassment Policy. This policy had been scheduled to be reviewed at this meeting; however, in light of the new duty, it was considered prudent to defer the review until a revised policy had been received. Members were advised that it was also likely that the Whistleblowing policy would be affected by the new duty. This policy was similarly scheduled to be reviewed at this meeting but would be deferred until it was ascertained whether there would be any revisions.

Furthermore, employers would also need to show that they had provided meaningful training to all staff and managers. Training opportunities on this topic, i.e. Protection from Sexual Harassment at Work, were currently being researched and it was hoped that this could also be offered out to members.

13047 REVIEW OF TOWN COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP TO OTHER BODIES

In accordance with the approved Committee Functions and Terms of Reference the Corporate Services Committee was required to annually review the Council's and/or employees' memberships of other bodies.

<i>Membership</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>Annual Subscription 2025/26</i>
Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)	Annual	£480
Bedfordshire Association of Town & Parish Councils (NALC)	Annual	£2,295
Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management	Annual April to March	£105
Information Commissioners Officer (ICO)	Annual	£60
National Allotment Association	Annual	£58
Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)	Annual	£60
LGA Associate Membership (fee paid via NALC)	Annual	£580

It was highlighted that the NALC rate would be increasing by 3% but it was confirmed that an increase had been incorporated into the figures.

13048 REVIEW EXISTING CONTRACTS

In accordance with the approved Committee Functions and Terms of Reference the Corporate Services Committee was required to annually review existing contracts.

Members were provided with a report for information.

Regarding CCTV redeployable cameras, it was highlighted that an additional camera had been agreed recently and the figures would require amendment.

13049 FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Members were informed that one freedom of information request was received, 9th October 2024, and responded to within the timescale as per the Town Councils Freedom of Information Policy.

13050 RETIREMENT POLICY

Members were requested to recommend to Town Council, the adoption of the Town Council's Retirement Policy.

Members were provided with a report.

Members questioned the implications if several members of staff wanted to retire early under the new policy. The Head of Corporate Services advised members that staff have always had a right to request to flexibly retire but by adopting this revised policy there would no longer be a requirement for an employee to reduce their working hours/pay by 40% to have their request considered. In submitting a flexible working request each request would be considered individually, regardless of the persons circumstances, and the council would consider, very carefully, the impact on the business when considering such requests.

Following a request from Members, it was agreed that the policy would be reviewed after one year. Members were happy to accept the recommendation on this basis.

Resolved: To recommend to Town Council, the adoption of Houghton Regis Town Council's Retirement Policy.

13051 HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT PENSION SCHEME (LGPS) EMPLOYER POLICY STATEMENT

The current LGPS regulations, which came into effect from 1 April 2014, required each scheme employer within the LGPS to formulate, publish and keep under review a statement which set out their policy on certain discretions which they had the power to exercise under the LGPS regulations.

Following information received from Bedfordshire Pension Fund, Members were advised that the Town Council's Discretionary Statement needed reviewing to ensure it reflected the current regulations.

Members requested the Head of Corporate Services to give a brief description of the changes proposed. It was explained that the wording would be tightened up to mitigate certain appeals and would state that consideration would be given to certain exceptions at certain times.

The Chair went through the amendments to establish Members agreement with these each point. Members accepted the proposed changes, but the following points were highlighted:

- References were made to the Leader of the Council, which no longer applied.
- References to the Chief Executive should be substituted with Town Clerk
- Pg 97 – HRTC email address needed amending
- Pg 106 – Amend wording to 'this rationale is further strengthened'; reference was made to the current Flexible Retirement Policy which should read Flexible Working Policy.

Members were happy to adopt the policy with the amendments noted.

Resolved: To recommend to Town Council, the adoption of Houghton Regis Town Councils Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) Discretion Statement

13052 FINANCIAL REGULATIONS

A new Model Financial Regulations template had been produced by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) for the purpose of its member councils and county associations.

Officers felt it was important to highlight to Members one new section of the updated regulations. Financial Regulation 4.8 (extract below) which was in bold text and therefore referred to a statutory obligation the council could not change.

4.8 Any member with council tax unpaid for more than two months is prohibited from voting on the budget or precept by Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and must disclose at the start of the meeting that Section 106 applies to them.

The following items were raised by the Chair for further clarification

- Pg 120 - It was agreed to remove the brackets from ‘Unspent funds for partially completed projects...’.
- Pg 127 – Payment of Salaries – It was agreed that the reference to Finance Committee be changed to Corporate Services. This item could be presented at meetings of the Corporate Services Committee under ‘exclusion of the press and public’.

Members agreed to the adoption of the Financial Regulations with the above amendments.

Resolved: To recommend to Town Council, at the meeting to be held on the 16th December 2024, the adoption of Financial Regulations based on the 2024 model version as provided by NALC (National Association of Local Councils)

13053 FLEXI-TIME SCHEME

Houghton Regis Town Council operated a Flexi-Time scheme. Flexible working was one element which helped to increase employee motivation, reduce sickness absence, promote employee wellbeing and also served to promote recruitment and retention.

Members were presented with the Town Council Flexi-Time Scheme policy. This policy was last reviewed 14th September 2020. There had been no updates to this operational policy and therefore was fit for purpose.

It was highlighted that this was not a new policy but one that had been separated from the Flexible Working Policy.

Resolved: To recommend to Town Council the re-adoption of the Town Councils Flexi-Time Scheme policy.

13054 CEREMONIAL ROBES POLICY

Houghton Regis Town Council adopted a Ceremonial Robes policy at the Town Council meeting held on the 9th December 2019.

Resolved: To recommend to Town Council the re-adoption of the Town Councils Ceremonial Robes policy.

13055 TOWN COUNCIL OFFICES

At the special meeting of the Corporate Services committee, held on the 23rd July 2024, it was agreed (minute number 12923) to obtain quotes from design architects for the development of comprehensive remodelling options aimed at:

1. Enhancing the functionality and aesthetics of the main foyer
2. Expanding office and administrative spaces, including the potential relocation of the council chamber if necessary
3. Improving the external visibility and public presence of the council

The Head of Corporate Services informed Members that three quotes had been received. When questioned, the Head of Corporate Services confirmed that Company 'A' had been used previously and were known to carry out work to a satisfactory level. It was emphasised that this was simply a feasibility exercise to explore how the offices could be reconfigured and to provide costings. The viability of expending funds on the offices was debated; however, it was highlighted that this had already been agreed at the meeting in July and followed CPC recommendations to improve areas of the current offices.

Members were invited to move on the recommendation:

Proposed by: Cllr Billington

Seconded by: Cllr Slough

In favour: Cllr Billington, Cllr Slough, Cllr Jones

Against: Cllr Carroll, Cllr Rollins

Abstained: Cllr Burgess

Members agreed by a majority to proceed with the appointment of Company 'A'.

Resolved: To appoint PCH Associates as the Town Councils design architect.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 8.43pm

Dated this 3rd day of March 2025

Chairman