

HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Town Council meeting held on 16th December 2024 at 7.00pm

Present: Councillors: E Cooper
J Carroll
E Billington
P Burgess
E Costello
Y Farrell
W Henderson
D Jones
T McMahon
C Rollins
A Slough
C Slough
D Taylor

Town Mayor

Officers: Clare Evans
Amanda Samuels

Town Clerk
Administration Officer

Public: 2

Apologies Councillor: M Herber

13062 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Herber.

13063 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

It was queried when the Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee (Minute 12981) would be established as there had been interest from members of the public regarding participation. It was confirmed that this topic was due to be discussed under agenda item 5.

13064 SPECIFIC DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & REQUESTS FOR DISPENSATIONS

None.

13065 MINUTES

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14th October 2024.

Resolved: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14th October 2024 and for these to be signed by the Chairman.

13066 COMMITTEE AND WORKING GROUP MINUTES

Members received the minutes of the following committees and considered any recommendations contained therein

Corporate Services Committee	<p>9th Sept 2024</p> <p>Minute number 12967 – Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Misuse Policy: To recommend to Town Council the adoption of the Town Councils Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Misuse Policy.</p> <p>Minute number 12968 – Freedom of Information Policy and Model Publication Scheme: 1) To recommend to Town Council the adoption of the Town Councils Freedom of Information Policy 2) To recommend to Town Council the adoption of the Town Councils Model Publication Scheme</p> <p>Minute number 12969 – Reserves Policy: To recommend to Town Council, the adoption of the Town Councils Reserves Policy</p> <p>Minute number 12970 – Internal Audit Planning, Reporting and Review Policy and Internal Audit Specification: To recommend to Town Council that the Internal Audit Planning, Reporting & Review Policy and Internal Audit Specification be approved.</p> <p>Minute number 12971 – Health and Safety Policy: To recommend to Town Council the adoption of the Town Councils Health & Safety at Work Policy (as amended).</p>
Community Services Committee	22 nd July 2024
Environment & Leisure Committee	None to present
Planning Committee	<p>16th Sept 2024 and 7th Oct 2024</p> <p>16th Sept - Minute number 12981 – Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Group: 1. To recommend to Town Council a Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee be formed, consisting of a combination of councillors and representatives of the community. 2. To consider the creation of an Implementation Sub-Committee to monitor the usage and effectiveness of the Neighbourhood Plan (NHP) and provide regular reports on its application in planning matters.</p>

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3. To consider the frequency of meetings to track the NHP's impact and propose updates as required.
 4. To approve the use of £3,000 from General Reserves, as set out in the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan and supported by Town Council.
- Town Partnership Committee 30th Jul 2024

To receive the minutes of the following sub-committee and consider any recommendations contained therein

New Cemetery Sub-Committee None to present

It was suggested that the agenda recommendation 'to approve the recommendation contained therein' should be amended to read 'to adopt the policies'. Members were otherwise in agreement to adopt the policies listed.

Regarding Minute 12981, Members were keen to ensure continued participation by residents in the implementation of the Neighbourhood Plan. There was some discussion among Members about the need for an additional sub-committee, or whether it would be more effective to extend the remit of the Planning Committee.

The recommendation on the Town Council agenda to 'refer consideration back to the Planning Committee' was not proposed by Members. Members were, therefore, asked to consider the recommendation from the Planning Committee which was to:

1. To recommend to Town Council a Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee be formed, consisting of a combination of councillors and representatives of the community.
2. To consider the creation of an Implementation Sub-Committee to monitor the usage and effectiveness of the Neighbourhood Plan (NHP) and provide regular reports on its application in planning matters.
3. To consider the frequency of meetings to track the NHP's impact and propose updates as required.
4. To approve the use of £3,000 from General Reserves, as set out in the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan and supported by Town Council.

Resolved: **To receive the Minutes detailed above and to adopt the policies contained therein as follows:**

1. **Minute number 12967 – Drugs, Alcohol and Substance Misuse Policy;**
2. **Minute number 12968 – Freedom of Information Policy and Model Publication Scheme**
3. **Minute number 12969 – Reserves Policy**
4. **Minute number 12970 – Internal Audit Planning, Reporting and Review Policy and Internal Audit Specification**
5. **Minute number 12971 – Health and Safety Policy**

To approve Minute 12981 regarding the establishment of a Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee.

13067 TOWN MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Town Mayor updated Members on some of the events that had been visited since October. These had included:

17th October Quiz night at L & D hospital

18th October Circus

7th November Hospice at Home Volunteer Charity Dinner

12th December Attended a charity bingo evening for South Beds Dial-a-Ride.

Seven care homes had been visited in December and six carol services attended.

13068 REPORTS FROM REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS & ON TRAINING SESSIONS ATTENDED

Councillors were requested to provide verbal reports from meetings they had attended of outside organisations or from training courses they attended on behalf of the Council.

Cllr A Slough gave an update from the Friends of Windsor Drive who remained focussed on preventing any build on the area's green open space and to ensuring the land was handed back to the people of Houghton Regis in perpetuity. The Friends of Windsor Drive also expressed their support for the community of Houghton Regis as a whole and thanked the Town Council for their continued support.

Cllr Jones had attended the BATPC AGM with Cllr Herber on 24th October. Presentations had been received on the revision to local plans in respect of Bedford Borough Council and CBC. There had also been a presentation on the work of the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity.

There had been a Finance and General Purposes Committee on 4th November which had focussed on the budget and also confirmed an increase in fees for 2025/26 of 3%. There had been a County Committee meeting on 20th November where it was noted a small budget deficit had increased as a result of a raise in NALC fees.

The Consultation on remote attendance and proxy voting was another topic discussed at this meeting. Bedfordshire Council had voiced concern that, if approved, remote attendance would become the norm. There had been some support for the proposal to introduce remote voting but this did not extend to voting by proxy.

The Hospice at Home Volunteers Trustee meeting had been attended on 21st November. Additional volunteers were still required, but a recent donation had provided additional funding.

13069 SPORTS HALL IN HOUGHTON REGIS

Members questioned whether, as part of the asset transfer process, it would be possible for the sports hall to be adopted separately to the rest of the leisure centre. It was confirmed that certain areas of the building could theoretically be blocked off, e.g. swimming pool, ancillary areas etc.

It was thought that the building was in a decent condition, but a condition survey by CBC would identify works to be undertaken. The Academy of Central Bedfordshire (ACB) had previously informed Members that they could apply for grant funding to cover repairs that needed to be undertaken.

The Town Clerk emphasised that the asset transfer process consisted of a number of stages and there was no financial commitment at this point. Members sought confirmation that the application would not preclude or hinder the involvement of a community interest group making an application to CBC. The Town Clerk confirmed that HRTC were in discussions with ACB and would look to shape any agreement in partnership with them.

It was highlighted by Members that pursuing an asset transfer in no way resolved the issue of the new facility failing to meet the requirements of the residents of Houghton Regis. It was felt that this still needed to be impressed upon CBC.

Resolved:

- 1. To explore a way to secure the retention of the sports halls as an interim measure;**
- 2. To submit a community asset transfer application to CBC for the transfer of the existing leisure centre sports hall to enable public usage of a sports hall to be maintained when the new hall at Houstone School is unavailable for public use.**

13070 FINANCIAL REGULATIONS

At the Corporate Services Committee meeting held on the 2nd December 2024, Members resolved to approve and recommend to council the adoption of new Financial Regulations, based on the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) model template.

In order to expedite the use of the new regulations, council was being requested to agree to the adoption of the regulations at this meeting, see attached.

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

Resolved: **To adopt the Town Councils Financial Regulations.**

13071 PROPOSED STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PRIORITIES COMMITTEE

To enable Members to consider the CPC recommendation to establish a committee to consider matters of strategic importance which may have an impact on Houghton Regis.

Members discussed this matter and raised the following points:

- An additional sub-committee ran counter to some of the CPC's other recommendations

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- These matters could be covered by existing committees
 - Committee agendas could be streamlined and strategic issues form the lead items on these agendas

The Town Clerk clarified that the purpose of the recommendation had been to encourage the Council to be more forward thinking and strategic in their approach. The respective CPC recommendation was:

‘improve the quality of your decision making by focussing on Strategic issues at your council meetings’

And the response in the Action Plan was:

‘consider establishing a Futures Committee to discuss and consider high-level strategic issues’

It was highlighted that Members had approved the action plan.

It was suggested that the Standing Committees could introduce work plans of upcoming matters and schedule agenda items accordingly. This would enable a more robust contribution to discussions.

Members questioned to what extent HRTC would follow the recommendations set out by the Corporate Peer Challenge Review. The Town Clerk highlighted that the recommendation to look at committee agendas and remove items deemed as operational or within the scope of the Scheme of Delegation came from the agreed Action Plan.

Members agreed that they did not support the proposed sub-committee having authority to make decisions on behalf of the Town Council.

Members did not propose or second the recommendation and it was not carried. The Town Clerk agreed to examine the agenda items on standing committees.

13072 COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE REVIEW PROCESS

To enable members to discuss the Community Governance Review process and options for community engagement.

This was a matter that the CPC had highlighted the Community Governance Review as a risk to the Town Council. Members questioned budget availability for this process and the Town Clerk confirmed that a draft budget had been allocated.

Resolved:

- 1. To use appropriate communication means to promote the Community Governance review Process in due course;**
- 2. To hold a series of public engagement events to promote the process further subject to budget availability in 2025/26.**

13073 DUNSTABLE MARKET CHARTER

Members had questioned the right of Dunstable Council to impose charges, fines and restrictions on markets held within Houghton Regis, especially when community groups and volunteers were affected. Members felt that Houghton Regis should have the right to hold its own markets but were keen to emphasise that this should not be to the detriment of markets held by neighbouring councils.

There were some questions about the feasibility of the recommendation in regard to cost and the length of process. The Head of Environmental and Community Services advised the Committee that this was simply to explore whether HRTC had grounds to challenge the Market Rights policy and that the cost to do this would be under £4,000. An approach had been made to a law firm with experience in these matters and they would establish whether Houghton Regis had a case. Since both CBC and NALC had not provided clarity on the issue, Members were generally in agreement that legal advice on the ability for HRTC to challenge Dunstable Town Council's Market Rights Policy was the preferred option.

Resolved: To seek legal advice on challenging Dunstable Town Council's market rights policy and for this to be funded through 190-4059.

13074 INTERIM INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

Members were advised that the interim Internal Audit (IA) for 2024/25 was completed on 20th November 2024 by IAC Audit and Consultancy Ltd.

Members were provided with:

1. Cover Letter dated 22nd November 2024 – this detailed the areas covered by the audit
2. Observations – this included detail on the audit test, the IA observation and any IA recommendation. In the Comments column Members would find the Clerks response to the Recommendation. Members were requested to consider the Recommendation and the response in the Comments Column.
3. Summary – this summarised the audit

There were no objections to the report; however, observations were made regarding the following items:

Pg 75 The comment 'the value of general reserve is significantly understated' was incorrect.

Pg 76 It was questioned whether there was a copy of the Practitioners Guide

Pg 77 There was an oversight as the comments had already been recommended in June

Pg 77 Comments regarding item J, CCTV maintenance, were not technically correct

Resolved: To support the Comments provided on the interim Internal Audit Observations report.

13075 ENABLING REMOTE ATTENDANCE AND PROXY VOITING AT LOCAL AUTHORITY MEETINGS – OPEN CONSULATION

Members were reminded that the Government had announced a commitment to allowing councils to hold remote meetings, and a consultation had been opened to gather feedback. The consultation closed on 19th December 2024. NALC had strongly encouraged participation by parish and town councils, county associations, councillors, and clerks in this consultation. Input was vital to maintain the momentum from the previous call for evidence and ensured the continued benefits of remote meetings for councils across the country.

Members were encouraged to take part in the consultation and respond individually.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 8.30pm

Dated this 20th day of January 2025

Chairman