

HOUGHTON REGIS TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Town Council meeting held on 20th January 2025 at 7.00pm

Present: Councillors: E Cooper
J Carroll
E Billington
E Costello
Y Farrell
M Herber
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: 4

Apologies Councillor: P Burgess

13091 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Burgess.

13092 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

A statement was made by a member of the public, urging the Town Council to continue with its efforts to secure sports hall facilities in Houghton Regis once the new leisure centre opens.

A representative from the Friends of Windsor Drive addressed the meeting to ask when the Town Council would be reviewing its Neighbourhood Plan and whether that review would include looking at some of the aspirations contained in the Plan. For example, the provision of parking at Windsor Drive between the road and the existing shared use path.

13093 SPECIFIC DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST & REQUESTS FOR DISPENSATIONS

None.

13094 MINUTES

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 16th December 2024.



Resolved: To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 16th December 2024 and for these to be signed by the Chairman.

13095 COMMITTEE AND WORKING GROUP MINUTES

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

Corporate Services Committee	None to present
Community Services Committee	None to present
Environment & Leisure Committee	None to present
Planning Committee	28 th Oct and 16 th Dec 2024
Town Partnership Committee	None to present

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

New Cemetery Sub-Committee	None to present
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Resolved: To receive the Minutes detailed above and to approve the recommendation contained therein.

13096 TOWN MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Town Mayor updated members on events that had been visited. These included:

17 th December	Mayor of Harpenden's carol concert
19 th December	visit to Lady Spencer House
21 st December	festive disco at Johnson Court
8 th January	meeting with the Bishop of Bedford, buffet supper

The Deputy Mayor confirmed they had also attended the Mayor of Harpenden's carol concert and Bishop of Bedford's buffet supper, in addition to a number of other carol services in the run-up to Christmas.

13097 REPORTS FROM REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS & ON TRAINING SESSIONS ATTENDED

Due to the Christmas and New Year period no updates were presented.

13098 GENERAL RESERVES

Members were updated on the actual and predicted level of General Reserves (GR).

Members were informed that the opening GR balance was £485,804 at 1st April 2024 and it was predicted to be approximately £414,898 at the end of the current financial year. In accordance with the Practitioner's Guide, HRTC should have a GR level of 3-12 months net revenue expenditure. Based on revenue expenditure in the current year, a level of 3 months net revenue expenditure was around £406,000.



Members highlighted that the suggestion from the Corporate Peer Challenge was that HRTC aim for a level of 4-5 months net revenue expenditure based on the size of the council.

Members noted that GR were not at a level that could be used to support the 2025/26 budget.

13099 2025/26 BUDGET AND PRECEPT

Town Council was presented with the draft budget for 2025/26 for consideration and was requested to approve a budget for 2025/26 and set a precept.

The Head of Environmental and Community Services addressed Members, highlighting some of the proposed increases that sat within their service areas. These were:

- The provision of a full-time lead youth worker, which would allow HRTC to build on its achievements so far.
- Enhance horticultural provision – to continue what had been implemented through UKSPF.
- Maintain the enhanced community events programme to standard achieved with UKSPF funding.
- Completion of highway entrance to Tithe Farm Road Recreation Ground.

The Liberal Democrat Group Leader, Cllr Jones, made a proposal:

- that the draft budget as amended by the proposals from the Liberal Democrat Group be agreed.
- that a precept of £1,660,722 be requested for 2025/26.

Members were also provided with the following commentary in support of this proposal:

"The Liberal Democrat Group have examined the possible changes to the budget suggested by the Town Clerk. Unfortunately, the deficit on the draft officer budget is £248,383, while the suggested savings total only £102,595. Furthermore, the suggested savings comprise two major amounts and several small "bits and pieces". The two major items relate to the appointment of a Senior Youth Worker and associated support (possible part-time appointment) and the provision of an amount towards the completion of the works at Tithe Farm Recreation Ground. Our feeling was that the appointment of a Senior Youth Worker should be funded in full, building on the good work already undertaken through grant funding. As for the further funding for Tithe Farm, the suggestion is not really a saving at all, since if no funding is obtained, any further liability for the S278 works will have to be met out of General Reserves, which we have been advised is not a prudent thing to do this year.

All the above means that there is very little scope for reducing the deficit by any significant amount. Accordingly, of the small bits and pieces, we have adopted four suggestions in full, and proposed different (lesser) savings in two other cases. The only other adjustment which we propose relates to a transfer from Earmarked Reserves of £1,000 for which there is no apparent justification, and which technically should be eliminated."



Cllr Jones outlined proposals for the 2025/26 budget as follows:

		Budget Figure	Suggested Figure	Difference	Budget Balance
101-1076	Precept Received	-1,431,228	-1,660,722	229,494	-18,889
102-4008	Training Courses	1,400	1,000	400	-18,489
190-4992	Tfr from EMR 330 (re Professional Fees) CAP - New	0	-8,000	8,000	-10,489
199-4805	Equipment (incl. IT) Grounds	3,000	0	3,000	-7,489
243-4037	Maintenance	6,489	6,000	489	-7,000
291-4039	Horticultural Supplies	10,000	7,500	2,500	-4,500
299-4992	Tfr from EMRs	-1,000	0	-1,000	-5,500
304-4222	Community Events	70,000	64,500	5,500	0
		-1,341,339	-1,589,722	248,383	0

In conclusion it was stated that:

"To balance the budget, an increase in the precept is required which will lead to an increase in the Band D Council Tax Charge for 2025/26 of £31.72, or 61p per week for a Band D household (less for the majority of Houghton Regis residents)."

The Labour Group Leader, Cllr C Slough, endorsed the substance of the Liberal Democrat proposals and supported the youth worker funding. It was not felt, however, that the reduction of funding for Tithe Farm was practical. The Independent Group Leader, Cllr Herber, expressed support for funding for the youth worker position, and for the deficit of £248,383 to be accommodated within the budget for the year.

The Town Clerk highlighted that the Independents supported the Officer's Draft Budget in full, which would set a precept of £1,679,611 and give a Band D charge of £232.15. With the Liberal Democrat changes, there would be a precept of £1,660,722, which would give a Band D charge of £229.54.

It was suggested that the proposal was put forward for Members to vote upon. The Liberal Democrat representative reiterated the proposal made at the outset of the discussion and Members voted in favour.

Resolved: To approve the draft budget as amended by the proposals from the Liberal Democrat Group and that a precept of £1,660,722 be requested for 2025/26.

13100 REVIEW OF EAR MARKED RESERVES

Members were invited to review the status of the Council's Ear Marked Reserves:

1. partway through the current financial year (2024/25)
2. the predicted movements in 2025/26

Resolved: To note the Schedule of Ear Marked Reserves 2024/25 and the predicted schedule of Ear Marked Reserves 2025/26.

13101 NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN IMPLEMENTATION SUB-COMMITTEE

The purpose of the report was to enable members to discuss the details surrounding the creation of the Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee.

The formation of this sub-committee had initially been proposed for the purposes of monitoring the effectiveness of the Neighbourhood Plan when reviewing planning applications. The question from the representative of the Friends of Windsor Drive at the outset of the meeting suggested that the sub-committee could also monitor the delivery of aspirations and policies within the Plan. Members proposed that the sub-committee could make recommendations to the relevant Standing Committees that certain items be considered.

The Town Clerk confirmed that the Terms of Reference had not been written from the standpoint of making the sub-committee a facilitator of work within the Neighbourhood Plan. It would, however, be possible to review the Terms of Reference to encompass this role.

It was proposed that, since the sub-committee would be meeting twice a year, draft minutes should be passed to the Planning Committee to avoid significant delays.

The Town Clerk advised that the Terms of Reference could be approved and then reviewed again at the first meeting in May.

Members voted in favour of the recommendation to incorporate the Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee into the calendar of meetings, with the Terms of Reference to be agreed at the inaugural meeting in May.

Resolved: For meetings of the Neighbourhood Plan Implementation Sub-Committee to be incorporated into the Calendar of Meetings for 2025-26, with the intention that the first meeting be held end of May / beginning of June 2025.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 7.41pm

Dated this 17th day of March 2025

Chairman

