



EAST PRESTON PARISH COUNCIL

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FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

MINUTES: of the Meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Committee held on Monday, 19th February 2024 at East Preston Infant School, Lashmar Road, East Preston at 18:00

PRESENT: Councillors John Gunston (Chairman), Elizabeth Linton, Glyn Mathias, Steve Toney

ALSO: Clerk to the Council, Simon Cross

Rob Fawcett, E J Moyle LLP (until 18:08)

ABSENT: Councillors Rick McElroy and Steven Wilkinson

The following abbreviations may appear in these Minutes:

ADC – Arun District Council;

WSSC – West Sussex County Council.

The meeting opened at 18:00. In the absence of Cllr McElroy, Cllr Gunston chaired the meeting as the Vice-Chairman of the committee.

Cllr Gunston welcomed everyone present and led a round of introductions.

152/24 APOLOGIES AND REASONS FOR ABSENCE

An apology and a reason for absence were accepted from Cllr Wilkinson (holiday).

At the time of the meeting, no apology or reason for absence had been received from Cllr McElroy.

153/24 PERSONAL AND/OR PREJUDICIAL/PECUNIARY INTERESTS

None were declared.

154/24 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No members of the public were present.

155/24 FUTURE OF THE CONSERVATIVE HALL

The committee NOTED the following report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting:

Conservative Hall Working Party

The committee is asked to consider the next steps in this project.

I have signed the council up with EJ Moyle LLP and Rob Fawcett will attend this meeting. The Trustees of the Conservative Hall have contracted with a solicitor and hopefully Rob will be able to update us on this.

As agreed at the last meeting, the Conservative Hall Working Party has been disbanded for the time being, this committee having greater authority to act in this matter than a working party.

An article was published as the lead article in the Winter 2024 Newsletter asking people to give their support, in principle, to the adoption of the Conservative Hall. A link to the survey was also included in the e-newsletter published on 8th February. At the time of writing, the results so far are:

In principle, do you agree East Preston Parish Council should adopt East Preston Conservative Hall?

Yes – 120 – 93.02%

No – 4 – 3.1%

Unsure – 5 – 3.88%

I would be cautious with these initial results. Most of these will be people who have responded via the e-newsletter link and could be assumed to be generally favourable towards the council. That said, I would not have expected support to have been this high even amongst this group. A few people have replied via email and I have submitted their responses online, and so they are included in the figures above. Our distribution company has a two-week window to deliver the newsletter across the village, so we could be confident the vast majority of the village will have received its newsletter only by 23rd February. To date, two members of the public have asked whether a final decision will be made a meeting open to the public, both being strongly in favour of the proposal to adopt the Conservative Hall.

The Trustees are keen for an early completion to this matter, but I must stress here the council is probably not in a position to adopt in the very short-term. The Personnel Committee is already aware of the fact none of the council's officers currently has any spare capacity to take on additional work. Any decision to adopt the Conservative Hall will bring with it a lot of work and will need to have a timescale attached tempered by this knowledge.

Simon Cross – **Clerk to the Council**

12th February 2024

Mr Fawcett introduced himself to the committee and explained he always liked to meet the team in situations such as this.

He explained why he had insisted the Trustees of the Conservative Hall instructed their own solicitors, as a protection for all parties involved. Mr Fawcett had requested a number of documents from the Trustees' solicitors, but had had no response to date.

In answer to a question about why were the Trustees giving the building to the council, Mr Fawcett said that might become clearer when he received the documents he had requested. Cllr Mathias said the Trustees had said all along they wanted the building to remain in use by the community rather than be sold for redevelopment. Mr Fawcett said, in that case, he expected any Deed of Gift would include a covenant to ensure the building could not be sold on without some agreement from the current owners.

Mr Fawcett said his day-to-day contact with the Clerk and council would be fairly minimal. When he was ready, he would write a report for the council's consideration and would be happy to attend another meeting in support of his report.

The Clerk said he had a plan. Immediately prior to the meeting, he had looked at the latest results to the online survey of members of the public: 194 people had responded, 180 said Yes to the council adopting (93.26%), 6 said No (3.11%) and 8 were Unsure (4.15%). The Clerk felt the percentage saying Yes was superficially high as the majority of the 194 respondents would be recipients of the e-newsletter and he supposed most recipients were generally supportive of the council. The committee AGREED unanimously with the Clerk's proposal to close the survey to the public on Thursday, 29th February, by which time delivery of the paper newsletter should be complete, weather permitting. The Clerk said he believed all councillors should be able to take part in a free and open discussion at the end of the Full Council meeting on 4th March, with press and public excluded as some councillors were less comfortable expressing their opinions in front of some members of the public. The council needed to understand fully the implications of taking on the building but also come up with a sensible project plan for the order of any works required at the hall. This would probably include the employment of a short-term, probably part-time project manager. Cllr Toney suggested two councillors could take on some of this work, which the committee accepted but felt did not remove the need for an additional member of staff. Following the meeting on 4th March, the council should be in a position to instruct Mr Fawcett further. The committee AGREED unanimously with the proposal to have a council-wide discussion at the end of the Full Council meeting on 4th March.

Mr Fawcett stressed the council would be legally liable for the building from the purchase date. He was pushing the Trustees' solicitor for answers to the Commercial Property Standard Enquiries he had submitted. Following this meeting, he would chase the solicitors for answers that could be used on the 4th March.

(Mr Fawcett left at the conclusion of this item.)

156/24 CHANGE OF ACCOUNTANCY SOFTWARE

The committee NOTED the following report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting:

Accountancy software

The committee is asked to agree a change to the council's accounting software from SAGE to Rialtas Omega.

As mentioned in Minute 1043/23 of the last meeting, the council's bookkeeper has been looking at an alternative, and cheaper, accountancy package for the council.

For many years now, the council has operated SAGE accounting software. At the time the council chose SAGE, it was the market leader, but that comes at quite a price.

Subsequently, other accounting software packages have been available, and these are also cheaper.

Once such package is Rialtas Omega, recommended by Andy Beams (as far as he can) and used by Angmering Parish Council amongst many others. Adrian has been on a familiarisation course and also spent an afternoon at Angmering seeing the product in action. The following is from Adrian himself.

Comparison of Sage accounting software and proposed Rialtas Omega

Sage

Monthly Cost	£200	current price
Annual Cost	£2,400	

Rialtas Omega Base

Year 1

Purchase of Software & Setup	1475
Online Training (up to 5 people)	1000
Annual Support & Maintenance (single user)	500
Annual Cost	<u>£2,975 exc VAT</u>

Year 2 onwards

Annual Support & Maintenance (single user)	357	price increase of 9.8% over Year 1
Annual Cost	<u>£357 excl VAT</u>	

Sage provides full accountancy functionality including sales and purchase ledgers, but reporting is complex and not tailored to parish council requirements. Essentially parish council paying for significant functionality not used. Additionally, legacy data has led to unstructured costing arrangements. Backups not on server.

Omega Base is a simpler system but tailored to parish council needs including reporting Annual Governance and Accounting Return (AGAR). Parish council has minimal sales invoicing and purchase ordering. Opportunity to clean up financial coding and work on server environment for security of data. Reporting of committee budgets more robust. Management of general and earmarked reserves is a standard function of the system.

Although the costs for Year 1 are marginally higher, the costs from Year 2 onwards represent a significant saving over SAGE.

The changeover would take place at financial year-end and is covered in the purchase and setup costs.

Simon Cross – **Clerk to the Council**

12th February 2024

The committee AGREED the proposed new software would not only produce a cost saving but would, in time, save on Adrian’s time.

The committee AGREED unanimously the council’s accountancy software should change to Rialtas Omega at the most appropriate time.

157/24 INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICES

The committee NOTED the following report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting:

Internal Audit services

The committee is asked to consider a three-year agreement for Internal Audit services.

The council currently contracts Mulberry & Co. to carry out its internal audits.

During the current financial year, the hourly rate increased to £65. Mulberry & Co. is offering its customers that as a fixed hourly rate for the audits up to and including the year-ending 31st March 2026. Mulberry & Co. has also announced its hourly rate for the coming financial year will be £70.

Other benefits of being an internal audit client of Mulberry & Co. include:

- Year-round internal audit support and advice from your assigned internal auditor

- Updates throughout the year of key changes to proper practices
 - Ongoing financial and governance support from our dedicated Local Authority team members
 - Discounted rates on the range of councillor and officer training courses (more information available via this [link](#))
 - Provision of locum support *
 - Provision of dedicated reviews of councils policies and procedures *
- * Additional costs apply*

We first used Mulberry & Co. for internal audit services in the 2019/20 financial year, so agreeing to another three years is not unimaginable, although towards the end of that period, the council may wish to look at changing its supplier.

This is referred to this committee rather than the Audit & Governance Committee because we need to confirm with Mulberry & Co. by 29th February if we are indeed taking up the three-year offer.

Simon Cross – **Clerk to the Council**

12th February 2024

The Clerk suggested stability in our Internal Auditor was sensible whilst the council was taking on the Conservative Hall, if that was the council's decision. Cllr Gunston agreed but said he would be pushing for a change of Internal Auditor towards the end of the three-year contract. The Clerk confirmed WSALC maintained a small list of suitable companies from which the council could choose.

The committee AGREED unanimously to enter into a three-year agreement with Mulberry & Co. for the provision of Internal Audit services.

158/24 COMMITTEE BUDGETS

The committee NOTED the following report, which had been circulated in advance of the meeting:

committee budgets

Committee is asked to agree all budget-holding committees have a small miscellaneous budget line.

Five of the council's committees currently control six separate budgets between them: Amenities, Audit & Governance, Admin (administered by F&GP), Community Engagement, F&GP, Major Events and the Warren Recreation Ground Trust (administered by Amenities). Neither the Personnel Committee nor the Planning & Licensing Committee have their own budgets, though that may be a discussion for another day.

Some committees do have a miscellaneous expenditure and/or income line, but I would all should have. This can be agreed now and can be built into the 2024/25 budget sheets where there are not already lines. By this time next year, we will have been able to build in a sum for the year 2025/26. This will just give each committee a little bit of extra flexibility about its finances.

Simon Cross – **Clerk to the Council**

12th February 2024

The committee AGREED unanimously it would be good to bring all committee budgets into line. The Clerk explained it would be for each committee to propose a sum to have in that budget line, if anything, when they came to set the budgets in future.

159/24 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11TH DECEMBER 2023

The draft Minutes had been circulated to all councillors on 18th December asking for suggested amendments by 21st December. None had been received.

The committee AGREED unanimously the Minutes could be signed as a true record of the meeting held on 11th December. Cllr Gunston duly signed the Minutes.

160/24 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The committee NOTED the following report, which had been circulated ahead of the meeting:

F&GP, 19th February 2024, Agenda Item 10

Updates from previous meetings

Minute 969/23 – Boom Community Bank – the deposit of £36,000 into a Boom Community Bank account was confirmed on 20th December. The council has published an article about its relationship with the bank in the Winter 2024 Newsletter. In future, we are likely to publish links to interesting Boom Community Bank information either on the council's website or on its Facebook page.

Minute 1037/23 – Greener Buildings Fund – East Preston Sports and Social Club – in response to the letter informing him of the council's decision to grant the club £10,000, Tim Teasel, Chairman, replied, "Oh wow. Thank you so much." This sum will only be paid upon the club providing evidence the work has started.

Minute 1039/23 – Ringfenced reserves – I have provided the Royal British Legion club (Kevin) an application form for the council's Defibrillator Fund.

Simon Cross – **Clerk to the Council**

13th February 2024

Nothing was added.

161/24 ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (14TH MAY)

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, 14th May at 19:00, owing to the Early May Bank Holiday. The Clerk expected there to be a presentation from East Preston Men in Sheds.

The Meeting closed at 18:41.

Chairman: *Cllr Rick McElroy* Date: **14th May 2024**

(END)