

LYME REGIS TOWN COUNCIL

STRATEGY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2023

Present

Chairman: Cllr P. May

Councillors: Cllr C. Aldridge, Cllr B. Bawden, Cllr S. Cockerell, Cllr R. Doney, Cllr M. Ellis, Cllr P. Evans, Cllr B. Larcombe, Cllr C. Reynolds, Cllr D. Ruffle, Cllr D. Sarson, Cllr G. Stammers, Cllr G. Turner

Officers: N. Cleal (finance manager), A. Mullins (support services manager), J. Wright (town clerk)

Guests: I. Fitz (engineer, Dorset Council)

23/46/SF

Public Forum

R. McLaughlin

As chairman of the Town Mill Trust, R. McLaughlin spoke in relation to agenda item 10, Town Mill Funding Request. He said the Town Mill had asked the town council for support in their efforts to secure funding from other bids. He said they would be applying for funding of up to £50k from the National Heritage Lottery Fund in the new year but in the meantime, they would be applying for other funding from charitable trusts and using their own reserves towards the cost of the improvements. He said they wanted to pursue their plans to improve what's on offer at the Town Mill site, to make it more relevant and accessible to the community and visitors and to safeguard the viability of the important Grade II listed heritage site. R. McLaughlin said the mill site consisted of dedicated volunteers who conducted tours, made flour for the shop, maintained essential machinery, used traditional methods to make the flour and maintained the garden. He said their tenants were small, local entrepreneurial artisan businesses, who paid rent which was lower than normal market rent, and they had active and forward-looking mill staff and trustees who administered the whole operation. He said the mill had always tried to be self-sustaining but they had received small grants from the town council in the past and they were very grateful for this, but the time had come where it required a much larger injection of money to continue into the future. R. McLaughlin said the improvements would raise the profile of the mill so it became an even more important part of the tourist economy and a prestigious heritage asset for the community. He said they were asking the council specifically for funding for the new entrance, which would be new metal gates connecting to the lynch. It would be a wheat themed gate and railings, designed by a local artist and metal workers, with steps into the gardens. R. McLaughlin said if the council could fund £10k, this would match fund the £10k the mill had already committed to the project. He said support from the town council would be extremely helpful, if not essential, for their bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund, so a stated commitment for grant funding over the next year would be appreciated. He said if the bid to the National Heritage Lottery Fund was unsuccessful, they would still wish to progress some of the work, especially the gates, so the council's funding would be welcomed.

G. Rabbitts

As director of the Marine Theatre, G. Rabbitts spoke in relation to agenda item 9, Marine Theatre Funding Request. She said the Marine Theatre was Lyme Regis' theatre, it provided entertainment almost every weekend to hundreds of local people, including comedy, music, theatre, screenings and now they hoped cinema. She said during a cost of living crisis and in a downturn of the economy, a reasonably priced night out would be a welcome relief to many local people. G. Rabbitts said the theatre was enjoyed by local people and had been in the town for over 130 years. Previously run by the town council, she said the trust was asked to take on the theatre over 20 years ago; a short amount of time in the theatre's history. She said the trust had continued to have the support of the council and the theatre was now financially stable. She said the council had required the theatre to build reserves and with the help of the Cultural Recovery Fund and their own funds, they had managed to do so. She said they were now in the most financial stable position they had been in for a long time, however 2023 had been an incredibly tough year throughout all theatres in the UK, but they were pleased to be reporting a strong position. G. Rabbitts said all theatres in the UK were supported by grant funding and couldn't survive without it. She said the theatres she spoke to, such as Bridport, Poole, Exeter and Bristol, were 60 to 70% funded, whereas the Marine Theatre was 92% self-funded. She said they were involved with many community projects, including the youth theatre, which had over 65 children, holiday drama club with healthy lunches for children in receipt of free school meals, technical theatre training, acting to camera courses, work experience with youngsters, and senior creatives with 60 local people every month. G. Rabbitts said all these activities would not be possible without the income they generated through their commercial programme and various grants they applied for to bring in additional funding to the town. With the loss of the Regent Cinema she was told the town council's survey had a result of over 70% of Lyme Regis residents saying what they wanted most from the council was a cinema. She said they had managed to secure funding of £70k to make this happen and with an investment from the council of £25k, local children, families, teenagers and senior citizens would be able to enjoy cinema together again in their own town. She said with dark nights and poor transport links, many older people didn't want to take buses or drive to other towns. G. Rabbitts said they could give their town their own cinema they could walk to, providing warm spaces for matinees and silver screenings. As a community programme, she said they would like to give all Gateway Card holders 10% off ticket prices. She emphasised the theatre had managed to raise £70k of the £100k needed and were asking the town council to invest £25k into the projector.

23/47/SF Apologies for Absence

Cllr R. Smith – work commitments

23/48/SF Minutes

Proposed by Cllr M. Ellis and seconded by Cllr C. Aldridge, the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2023 were **ADOPTED**.

23/49/SF Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Cllr P. May declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 10, Town Mill Funding Request as he was a Town Mill Trustee.

23/50/SF Dispensations

There were none.

23/51/SF Matters arising from the minutes of the Strategy and Finance Committee meeting held on 11 October 2023

Dog-related Public Space Protection Order

Cllr B. Bawden said she had had a response from the Dorset Council (DC) officers involved in the Dog-related Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) about the prospect of the town council working jointly with them on the review of the order.

Budget performance

Cllr B. Larcombe said expenditure on the sculpture trail was referred to within the budget performance report and he asked if this committee should know the details of this.

The town clerk confirmed there was specific reference to this in the budget report later in the agenda. He said separate conversations had also taken place with the chairman of the Tourism, Community and Publicity Committee about how to rectify some of the issues related to expenditure this year.

23/52/SF Update Report

There were no updates.

23/53/SF Sand Harvesting and Beach Replenishment

The chairman brought this item forward on the agenda and invited I. Fitz, an engineer from Dorset Council, to speak.

I. Fitz explained how next year, DC would be taking sand to replenish Front Beach from outside of the harbour and its channel, including in front of the pebble beach as far as Cobb Gate, so this would be more of a sand harvesting activity than harbour dredging. He said dredging the sand from the harbour and putting it on the beach was a much more expensive process than pushing the sediment into deeper water. The intention was to measure how much sand was harvested from the non-harbour areas; if there was not enough, DC would either have to look into bringing more sand in from elsewhere or determine if it was not financially viable and replace the sand with pebbles.

I. Fitz said DC had committed to the work this year and contributed £47k, but next year, the beach work would cost an additional £15k. Next year dredging and sand harvesting would be one operation but thereafter, they would be two separate operations. He asked if the town council would consider bridging the £15k funding gap.

Cllr B. Larcombe said DC was looking at only temporary solutions and asked if it was considering any permanent solutions because the problems had been caused by the construction of the sea defences, which had brought about a movement of sand from west to east.

Cllr B. Bawden asked if there were any plans to replenish the beach with sand which had been washed to Charmouth.

I. Fitz said there was no intention to do this as the sand was mixed in with pebbles at Charmouth so it would have to be sifted. He said sand also couldn't be taken away from the Cobb area because it was supporting the structure.

Cllr R. Doney said there appeared to be a change of emphasis from DC because when dredging first started, it was because the harbour mouth was silted up, but this appeared to no longer be the case. He asked if there was a problem DC had not been previously aware of.

I. Fitz said the original sand was imported from France, an angular grain sand which resisted movement by the waves and for years, very little work had to be done. But with tidal movement, the sand had become more rounded and more easily moved where it drew down so fast. He said DC intended to sand harvest for as long as possible to prevent bringing in more sand or changing the beach to pebbles.

Cllr M. Ellis said she didn't believe the sand currently being dredged was the original sand. She felt DC was changing the way it presented this issue to put the emphasis on the town council. She said DC was asking the town council to pay for a problem it hadn't caused.

I. Fitz said it was the original sand being dredged, as it had gotten out there somehow, but the rounding off of the grains had been caused by wave action.

Cllr C. Reynolds asked why DC was dredging the harbour, and had done so for years, if it now believed this wasn't necessary.

I. Fitz said he didn't believe the harbour needed to be dredged and next year would be the last time it was done.

Cllr P. May said DC generated an enormous amount of money from its car parks in Lyme Regis and a lot of people coming to the town came to use the beach, so he was disappointed DC hadn't made a link between the two when considering how to finance this project.

Cllr B. Bawden asked if a pebble beach would provide more protection to the hard defences than a sandy beach.

I. Fitz said the sand beach was created to provide a nice beach for families, but it would be much better if the hard defences were protected by a pebble beach.

Cllr C. Aldridge asked if DC had made a plan for the future when the work was originally done because it could have been anticipated there would be problems.

I. Fitz said DC anticipated the beach would have to be replenished in future but didn't know when, and it knew there would have to be a certain amount of maintenance, which was why the Environment Agency contributed to the project.

It was proposed by Cllr B. Larcombe and seconded by Cllr D. Ruffle that the town council contributes £5,000 towards the cost of sand harvesting and beach replenishment for one year.

This motion was not voted on.

Cllr M. Ellis asked which year's budget it would come from if a contribution was agreed.

I. Fitz said the work needed to be completed by Easter.

The town clerk said it would therefore need to come from the 2023-24 budget, which would mean there was less money to spend in 2024-25.

Proposed by Cllr B. Bawden and seconded by Cllr G. Stammers, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** that the town council makes a one-off contribution in 2023-24 of £15,000 towards the cost of sand harvesting and beach replenishment.

Cllr S. Cockerell asked if DC could look at a five-year plan for this work so it wasn't dealt with year by year.

I. Fitz said DC was looking at a five-year beach management plan.

23/54/SF Strategy and Finance Objectives

Members noted the report.

23/55/SF Marine Theatre Funding Request

The town clerk said this funding, along with the two other funding requests on the agenda, had been included in the budget as priority two objectives so they were treated equally, but this didn't mean members had to approve them; it would be easier at this stage of the budget process to take them out of the budget, rather than to include them later.

Cllr D. Sarson said residents had missed a cinema in the town and in the council's consultation last year, a cinema was one of the most commonly-raised issues. As income was likely to exceed budget in 2024-25 and the sale of the council offices would create a significant receipt for the council, he felt the council was in a position to support the request.

Cllr M. Ellis said the council had a grants' process and should only consider applications as part of that process, as the council had many projects of its own to pay for. She said the equipment the theatre would buy for the cinema would be used for other events so the council would effectively be giving money to the theatre to support other activities.

Cllr D. Ruffle said there was room for manoeuvre in the 2024-25 budget to provide funding and he felt the request should be supported as the theatre was such an asset to the community. He said the theatre's progress over the last few years had been remarkable to get to its current financial position.

Cllr C. Reynolds said she had concerns about the seating being on a level floor, which wouldn't allow for a proper cinema experience, the suggested ticket prices were too high, and a showing once a week wouldn't suit everyone. She said she didn't think this was the kind of cinema Lyme Regis wanted.

Cllr B. Larcombe said he understood the difficulties facing the theatre but in trying to set up a cinema, it was acquiring equipment that would help the theatre itself.

Cllr C. Aldridge said a cinema would appeal to a lot of people in the town and the theatre already showed films, which wasn't a problem on the level floor, although the existing projector was not good enough to show modern, digital films. She said she didn't see a problem with the theatre using the cinema equipment for its other activities, especially as a lot of it was for the community.

In response to a question from Cllr G. Turner, the town clerk confirmed the trust owned the cinema but if the theatre went bankrupt, the council would get first refusal of the building. He added this arrangement ended shortly.

Cllr P. Evans asked what would happen to the council's funding if the cinema was not successful.

The chairman invited G. Rabbitts from the Marine Theatre to speak.

G. Rabbitts said they would aim to play event cinema, so rather than one showing per week, they would perhaps do four nights in a row for a blockbuster film and could choose which ones to show and at what points. She said as long as the cinema was breaking even, they would support it for as long as possible.

Cllr M. Ellis asked for clarification on the council's grants' policy as she understood an organisation couldn't apply for a grant if it was already in receipt of a term grant from the council. She also asked if there would be a business plan provided to the council if the funding was approved.

The town clerk said if an organisation was in receipt of a term grant, it couldn't apply for a community grant, but there was nothing to prevent an organisation from applying through other mechanisms. He said there was an outline business plan provided by the theatre to the Tourism, Community and Publicity Committee as part of the original request. He added officers and the member representative met with the trust every six months to review the term grant so a review of the cinema venture could be built into that process.

Cllr M. Ellis asked for recorded votes on the following motions:

It was proposed by Cllr M. Ellis and seconded by Cllr B. Larcombe to refuse the request from the Marine Theatre for a grant of £25,000 to support a project to operate a cinema.

Voted for – Cllr P. Evans, Cllr B. Larcombe, Cllr M. Ellis, Cllr C. Reynolds

Voted against – Cllr P. May, Cllr D. Ruffle, Cllr G. Stammers, Cllr D. Sarson, Cllr C. Aldridge, Cllr B. Bawden, Cllr R. Doney, Cllr S. Cockerell

Abstentions – Cllr G. Turner

This motion was not carried.

Proposed by Cllr D. Sarson and seconded by Cllr D. Ruffle, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to approve the request from the Marine Theatre

for a grant of £25,000 to support a project to operate a cinema, to be funded from the 2024-25 budget.

Voted for – Cllr P. May, Cllr D. Ruffle, Cllr G. Stammers, Cllr D. Sarson, Cllr C. Aldridge, Cllr B. Bawden, Cllr R. Doney, Cllr S. Cockerell

Voted against – Cllr C. Reynolds, Cllr M. Ellis, Cllr P. Evans, Cllr G. Turner

Abstentions – Cllr B. Larcombe

Cllr R. Doney suggested the council reviewed its grants' policy to determine how it would deal with ad hoc funding requests and amounts that were greater than community but less than term grants.

The town clerk said the council would be reviewing all its grants early in the new council administration, in around September/October 2024, so that would be the time to review its grant funding structure.

23/56/SF Town Mill Funding Request

Cllr P. Evans said as the Marine Theatre's funding request had been approved, he didn't think the council could refuse the Town Mill's request as it was also a community asset.

Cllr M. Ellis said the council shouldn't be discussing this request because it was not part of the grants' process, but a precedent had just been set in approving the Marine Theatre's request and she was concerned the council would now be inundated with requests from organisations who believed they were community assets. She said the Town Mill was also a business so the rent from the tenants should go towards the regeneration.

The town clerk said if an organisation wrote to him with a funding request, he was obliged to bring it to the council. However, he could write back to them and say until the council reviewed its grants' policy in autumn 2024, it would not consider any further applications. He said the council tried to spend its income to the best of its ability within the community and if it couldn't afford it, he would make this clear to members.

Cllr B. Bawden said funding applications were not always going to fit in with the council's grants' process, especially as term grants were agreed several years' ago. She said having the town council's support for this project was more than just the value of the funding, it would give the Town Mill's other funding applications a greater chance of success because it showed local support.

Cllr B. Larcombe said the grants' process was a competitive process so in considering requests like this, the organisation didn't have to compete. He said if a funding application came outside of the normal process, it should be for something that was urgent, broken or beyond repair and that this application seemed more like a term grant.

Cllr M. Ellis requested a recorded vote on the following motion:

Proposed by Cllr B. Bawden and seconded by Cllr C. Aldridge, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to approve the request from the Town Mill Trust contribution of £10,000 towards the Town Mill Regeneration Project, to be funded from the 2024-25 budget.

Voted for – Cllr C. Aldridge, Cllr D. Sarson, Cllr G. Stammers, Cllr R. Ruffle, Cllr S. Cockerell, Cllr G. Turner, Cllr B. Bawden

Voted against – Cllr P. Evans, Cllr C. Reynolds, Cllr M. Ellis

Abstentions – Cllr B. Larcombe, Cllr R. Doney, Cllr P. May

23/57/SF Lyme Regis Baptist Church Funding Request

Cllr G. Stammers said the Baptist church was central to Lyme Regis, providing community facilities and not just for religious purposes. As the council had given a £40k grant to St Michael's Parish Church in 2019 for repairs, she felt this was an acceptable request.

Cllr B. Larcombe said the amount the church was required to raise was substantial compared to the amount requested from the council. He its level of activity was known so the council's funding would be at less risk.

Cllr M. Ellis said although the Baptist church did a lot for the community, she couldn't support the request because it was outside of the grants' process.

Cllr P. Evans asked if the council had also given grants to the Roman Catholic church in the town.

The support services manager said the council had awarded two community grants of £1,000 each.

Cllr M. Ellis requested a recorded vote on the following motion:

Proposed by Cllr B. Larcombe and seconded by Cllr D. Ruffle, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to approve the request from Lyme Regis Baptist Church for a contribution of £10,000 towards the restoration of the old chapel, to be funded from the 2024-25 budget.

Voted for – Cllr C. Aldridge, Cllr D. Sarson, Cllr G. Stammers, Cllr D. Ruffle, Cllr B. Larcombe, Cllr B. Bawden, Cllr S. Cockerell, Cllr G. Turner, Cllr P. May

Voted against – Cllr R. Reynolds, Cllr M. Ellis

Abstentions – Cllr R. Evans, Cllr R. Doney

The meeting adjourned for a break at 8.40pm.

The meeting resumed at 8.46pm.

23/58/SF Budget and Precept 2024-25 and Five-Year Financial Plan 2024-29

Cllr B. Larcombe felt the reserve should be maintained at the current level, if not higher, to address unforeseen issues and any potential back-up plan for office accommodation. He said the budget was tight, even if the numbers suggested it was comfortable, because of the unknowns.

Cllr R. Doney said the five-year financial plan presented to the previous meeting showed the surplus reducing to low levels over the years but it was now flat, and asked if this was due to increases in fees and charges.

The finance manager confirmed this was the case as the agreed increases would generate an additional c.£200k income.

Cllr P. Evans asked what the employee benefits would entail and whether all employees would be entitled to them.

The support services manager said it would be a package of benefits, which would be decided by members, and they would be available to all employees.

Cllr B. Larcombe was concerned members had not had an opportunity to debate some of the proposed projects they were being asked to approve a budget for.

The town clerk said there had been plenty of opportunities for members to discuss objectives and a priority one and two list of projects had been put together as a result of those discussions. He said members had the opportunity to change the list at this point, but as £15k had been approved for sand harvesting and beach replenishment earlier in the meeting, the budget gap had increased from £93k to £108k; this meant the council couldn't afford to carry out every project on the list.

However, the town clerk said the council could bridge that funding gap; officers were anticipating the year-end surplus would be higher than forecast so the council could agree the priority two objectives on the proviso this was reviewed in March 2024 when there was a better idea of the year-end position.

Cllr B. Larcombe asked if it would be prudent to put all priority two objectives on hold until the priority one projects were completed.

The town clerk said there were some priority two objectives the council needed to commit to at this point, including the three funding requests to the Marine Theatre, the Town Mill Trust and Lyme Regis Baptist Church, the Fossil Festival, and the residents' event as there needed to be a commitment to fund these before March 2024 for planning purposes.

Cllr M. Ellis was concerned only £100k had been put in the budget for office accommodation as more might be required if the council found another building it wanted to buy.

The town clerk said a figure had to be put in the budget or it wouldn't be able to move forward. He said the council would get a capital receipt for the current building so this could go towards the purchase of another property or a new build, but any purchase was unlikely until 2025-26. He said officers were working on the assumption the office would move to St Michael's Business Centre, which would require investment of around £100k.

Cllr B. Larcombe asked where the multi-use games area and Strawberry Fields options' appraisal was in the list of projects.

The town clerk said these projects were funded in the current financial year, even if they were not completed in 2023-24. All projects which had been agreed for 2023-24 were going ahead and had been taken into account in this year's expenditure.

It was proposed by Cllr M. Ellis to approve the proposed budget for 2024-25, to approve the proposed 2024-25 objectives, to approve a precept of £132,779 for 2024-25, and approve the five-year financial plan 2024-29.

The town clerk emphasised that unless the council made some other decisions, it couldn't approve all the proposed priority two objectives. He said the council could agree the priority two objectives he previously suggested and review the remaining priority two objectives in March 2024. If there was an improvement in the council's surplus, some or all of the unapproved priority two objectives could be released.

Cllr M. Ellis withdrew her proposal.

Proposed by Cllr P. May and seconded by Cllr S. Cockerell, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to approve the proposed budget for 2024-25; to approve the proposed 2024-25 priority one objectives; to approve the Marine Theatre grant, Town Mill Trust grant, Lyme Regis Baptist Church grant, Fossil Festival funding and residents' event funding from the proposed 2024-25 priority two objectives; to agree any additional surplus beyond £229k in 2023-24 will go towards additional priority two objectives; to approve a precept of £132,779 for 2024-25; and approve the five-year financial plan 2024-29.

Proposed by Cllr B. Larcombe and seconded by Cllr R. Doney, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to maintain the reserve at £1million for 2024-25.

23/59/SF Mary Anning Scholarship Legacy Fund

Cllr R. Doney said the council had tried hard with the Woodroffe School to encourage them to put forward a proposal and getting young women and girls into science was critically important, so he supported the proposal.

Cllr C. Aldridge asked how the council would get feedback on how the funding was spent.

The town clerk said the school could be asked to carry out an evaluation process.

Proposed by Cllr R. Doney and seconded by Cllr B. Larcombe, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to allocate the Mary Anning Scholarship Legacy Fund budget of £5,000 to the Woodroffe School for a project linking with local primary schools and promoting women in science.

23/60/SF List of Payments

Cllr M. Ellis said there always seemed to be a lot of refunds for beach huts and asked under what circumstances a refund was given.

The support services manager said refunds were only given if there was a high degree of certainty the hut could be re-booked, for example if the huts were fully booked for that date or there was a waiting list, or the hirer had a genuine emergency which meant they could no longer use the hut, although this was considered on a case-by-case basis.

Cllr B. Larcombe asked if officers could indicate if there were fluctuations in charges, particularly utilities, as he was losing track of these costs.

The finance manager said this would be commented on as part of the budget progress reports. However, as the council was tied into fixes, she wouldn't imagine there being anything out of the ordinary.

Proposed by Cllr G. Stammers and seconded by Cllr B. Larcombe, members agreed to **RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL** to approve the schedule of payments in October 2023 for the sum of £161,737.79.

23/61/SF Investments and Cash Holdings

Members noted the report.

23/62/SF Debtors

Proposed by Cllr B. Larcombe and seconded by Cllr P. May, members **RESOLVED** that under Section 1, Paragraph 2 of The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for this item of business as it included confidential matters relating to relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person within the meaning of paragraphs 1 and 8 of schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (see Section 1 and Part 1 of Schedule 1 to the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985), as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

23/63/SF Exempt Business

a) Debtors

Members noted the report.

The meeting closed at 9.42pm.