

**Middlewich Town Council
Victoria Building
Lewin Street
Middlewich
CW10 9AT**

Minutes of the Five Hundred and Fifteenth Meeting of Middlewich Town Council, held in the Victoria Hall, Civic Way, Middlewich on Monday 16th December 2019, commencing at 7.15 pm

Part One

Present

Councillor Gareth Williams (in the Chair) and Councillors Sean Boyle, Carol Bulman, Pauline Hickey, Chris Jones, Graham Orme, Vicky Perez and Helen Watkinson

Council Officers:

Denise French, Deputy Town Clerk and Nicola Antoney, Administrative Assistant

1. To receive and approve apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received and approved from Councillors Mike Hunter (family reasons), David Latham, Jonathan Parry and Russell Watkinson (illness)

Feedback and Reports

2. To receive any announcements to be made by the Chairman

Councillor Williams referred to the statement prepared by the Chairman, Councillor Russell Watkinson, in advance of the meeting. The statement covered a number of items contained in the report of the Internal Auditor. It had been circulated to Members and is attached.

3. To note any declarations of Members' Interests on any agenda item

None

4. Open Forum

The Chairman explained that the item on the agenda had been withdrawn.

A number of items were raised on the night:

(a) Draft budget – a comment was made that residents had not been involved in the budget. The resident had asked to receive the draft budget but it had not been sent to her. There was also concern that the current draft budget would see an increase in the precept. In response, Members advised that the budget was still in draft form at this stage and would not be approved till early in the New Year.

.....

(b) Reference was made to issues raised in the Audited Accounts in 2017 and why these had not been addressed.

(c) A further question was raised about why the Accounts for 2018-19 had been signed off in June 2019 by the Chairman despite the Council having authorised another Internal Audit.

The Chairman agreed to respond to points (b) and (c) in writing.

(d) A resident asked why Cheshire East Council had not been brought in to investigate the Town Council. Councillor H Watkinson as Chairman of Internal Committee responded that an Internal Auditor had been brought in to re-do the Internal Audit.

(e) A resident asked whether the Town Council could rule out fraud or criminal activity. The Chairman advised that at this stage nothing could be ruled in or out. Councillor Bulman confirmed that officers present at the meeting were exonerated and had no role or responsibility for the issues raised in the Internal Audit.

5. To receive and adopt the Minutes of the Five Hundred and Fourteenth Meeting of Middlewich Town Council held on Monday 18th November and the Special Meetings held on 26th November and 5th December 2019

Resolved 8278

That the Minutes of the Meetings held on 18th November, 26th November and 5th December 2019 be approved as correct records.

6. To receive the minutes of Meetings of the External Committee held on 28th November and 5th December 2019

Resolved 8279

That the minutes of the Meetings of the External Committee held on 28th November and 5th December 2019 be received.

7. To consider any Members' Items previously submitted in writing

None

8. To receive verbal reports from Members of Cheshire East Council (CEC)

Councillor Carol Bulman updated: a lot of focus over the past month had been on the bus campaign. A Bus Users Group had been established. It was hoped that progress could be made to introduce a community bus. A request had been made to re-instate the no 42 service at least once a week.

There was on-going work to review and finalise the CEC budget.

She had dealt with residents' queries including parking fines and disability equipment.

.....

Resolved 8280

That the verbal updates from the Member of Cheshire East Council be received and noted.

Finance

9. General Reserves

Resolved 8281 That

- (a) the Council adopts a policy that there will be 50% of the precept kept in the General Reserve; and
- (b) a Reserves Policy be drafted in the New Year.

10. Draft Budget 2020-21

The Deputy Town Clerk explained that the draft budget was presented in more detail than previous years and enabled comparisons to be made with the previous and current years. There was more detail around income and expenditure for FAB. The sum of £4,000 had been added in for youth projects as agreed at the previous meeting.

Members had discussed sourcing increased sponsorship for events and the Christmas lights. The Deputy Clerk noted that the budget included a sum of £10,000 for grant funding into the Council.

Members discussed changing the heading of Community Pride to Pride in Middlewich. The sum for this initiative was £16,000 which included a contribution towards tree works on The Avenues.

Members discussed the need to include a sum for repaying VAT.

The Chairman noted that there were some outstanding issues with wage increases and the need to put right various issues.

Members agreed that their intention was that the precept would not be raised if at all possible.

Resolved 8282 That:

- (a) the heading 'Community Pride' be changed to 'Pride of Middlewich'
- (b) the sum of £10,000 be moved from the Pride of Middlewich budget heading to earmarked reserves towards tree works on The Avenues; and
- (c) the stated intention of the council is that the precept for 2020 – 21 will not be raised if at all possible.

(Note: Councillor P Hickey declared an interest in the budget item related to tree works at The Avenues under the budget heading of Pride in Middlewich and took no part in the discussion).

11. Internal Audit 2018-19

The Council went through the Internal Audit Report and each recommendation in turn.

The Deputy Clerk reported that a number of recommendations had been actioned:

Recommendation 1 – income and expenditure transactions were being recorded in the RBS ledger;

Recommendation 2 – the latest National Association of Local Councils model regulations had been adopted on 18th November 2019;

Recommendation 3 – contracts were being procured in accordance with Financial Regulations – the IT contract was a recent example;

Recommendation 6 – Fidelity Cover had been increased;

Recommendation 9 – more detail was in the budget in relation to the FAB Festival;

Recommendation 11 – earmarked reserves would be included in the budget for 2020 – 21;

Recommendations 12 and 13 – contact had been made with a VAT specialist who would assist the Council.

Resolved 8283

That all recommendations in the Internal Audit report as submitted be accepted and progressed.

12. Financial Reports

The Deputy Clerk reported that it had not been possible to produce the Financial Reports due to staffing shortages.

Highways

None

Planning

None

Environment

None

PART 2

Resolved 8284: That the meeting be moved into Part 2 session and the Public and Press be excluded on the basis that the items to be discussed involved staffing matters and financial details of third parties.

13. New Arrangements for the Victoria Hall Bar

Resolved 8285

The proposals regarding the Bar in the report submitted be approved and adopted.

14. Appointment of VAT Specialist

Resolved 8286

That the update on the appointment of Parkinson Partnership to assist with VAT issues be noted.

15. Internal Audit 2018 – 19

Resolved 8287 that:

- (a) Recommendations 7 and 21 be progressed; and
- (b) Councillor H Watkinson as Chairman of Internal Committee prepare a response to the recommendations regarding the Community Mayor and provide a first draft to be circulated to all members.

16. Staffing

Resolved 8288 that:

- (a) a Recruitment Sub-Committee be set up comprising Councillors C Bulman, G Orme and H Watkinson with delegated powers to deal with all matters relating to the recruitment process;
- (b) the Sub Committee be delegated spending powers up to a maximum of £10,000 to support the interim staffing arrangements and the recruitment process; and
- (c) the Deputy Clerk be authorised to contact Cheshire Association of Local Councils to recommend an interim Responsible Financial Officer.

The meeting concluded at 9.45pm.