

Debenham Parish Council

Minutes of a meeting of the Debenham Parish Council held on Monday, 5th of February 2024, at 7:30 pm, Dove Cottage, High Street, Debenham.

Present: Cllrs F Winrow-Giffin (Chair), K Barlow (Vice-chair), J Baldwin, A Finnissy, L Robbins, J Sweet, Ian Collins, Mrs. D Bedwell (Parish Clerk), and District Cllr T Davis.

DPC/24/15: To consider apologies for absence: Apologies had been received from Cllrs L Cockerton, K Grimshaw and G Helm.

DPC/24/16: Declarations of interest with regard to items on the agenda: Cllr F Winrow-Giffin declared a pecuniary interest on grass cutting contract matters. The Clerk advised members that should any enquiries arise on matters pertaining to the grass-cutting contract, Cllr K Barlow would be requested to Chair the meeting.

DPC/24/17: Public participation section: District Councillor T Davis (who was attending as a District Councillor and also as a Parishioner) spoke briefly about the Resilience Grant and deadline for return of applications.

DPC/24/18: Finance and Administration

- a) To approve the accounts for the second and third quarters of 2023/2024: The accounts for the second and third quarters of 2023/2024 were approved by members.
- b) To consider and approve the budget for 2024/2025: Following due consideration and a full review of the reports circulated by the Clerk, it was resolved to approve the budget for 2023/2024. Further considerations included:
 - An increase of the proposed Emergency Plan Earmarked Reserve.
 - To check prices with different providers once Dove Cottage's WI-FI Connection was up for renewal.
 - Closed Churchyard grass cutting - It was established that the responsibility for the closed Churchyard had been passed on to the Parish Council a number of years ago instead of the District Council (which would have been the normal route).
 - The tree surgery costs for the Willow on one of the greens (the cost was expected to be incurred in the current financial year, hence why it had not been included in the budget for 2024/2025).
 - The apparently high cost of energy for the Telephone Box (as it was listed, solar options would not be permitted).
- c) To consider and approve the precept for 2024/2025: The Clerk had provided comprehensive reports which indicated how the previous year's reliance on general reserves and lack of significant precept increases in recent years, combined with grant funding that had been considerably over budget and investment in capital projects had affected the current position and was likely to result in general reserves below their minimum level.

In order to establish a safer, more stable, financial position, it would be necessary for the Council to review its Earmarked Reserves and consider either reducing them or transferring part to the General Reserves. The Clerk had prepared a paper with the proposed changes.

It would also be crucial for the Parish Council to succeed in its recent CIL bid for the Recreation Ground Play project, otherwise it would rely on the remaining Parish Council CIL Reserve of £65,566.44, as well as other restricted funds. The feedback received from Mid Suffolk District Council had been positive, but it would be wise to exercise prudence.

The 4% increase in tax base was fortunate in that it allowed for a precept increase without affecting the electorate. However, the additional funds it provided would not be significant enough to help build up the General Reserves or for the Council to consider future investment opportunities. The Council would also reach a point where it would have to significantly increase the precept just to meet its current demands, and that increase would be much more marked unless introduced in smaller increments, on a yearly basis.

The costs of goods and services had risen significantly in recent years and the precept had remained stable, so there was a risk that the Parish Council would face a deficit in its finances unless it moved in line with inflation.

Members were aware of the financial pressures felt by residents and were faced with a difficult decision. However, to continue being able to provide current services, fund local organisations and meet emerging needs, it was unanimously resolved to increase the precept for 2024/2025 to £88,770, which would represent a 4.99% increase. This would equate to a Band D property paying £101.71 per year towards the parish precept, a small increase of £4.83p (the precept represented 4.7% of a parishioner's overall tax bill).

Other points raised during the meeting for further debate/action included:

- Cllr F Winrow-Giffin - To finalise the review of the allotment documents (the only matter pending being tenants' ability to have bees and, if so, any conditions that may apply).
- Cllr L Cockerton - To change the title given to the Parish Clock on the accounts system.

DPC/24/19: Employment Committee: To consider and approve recommendations for the adoption of Employment related policies: It was resolved to approve Employment Policies, as recommended by a review carried out by members of the Employment Committee, as follows: Employment Committee Terms of Reference, Whistleblowing, Anti-harassment and Bullying, Appraisal, Data Protection (staff), Disciplinary, Grievance, Homeworking, and Sickness Absence. The format for the Appraisal form would be approved at a later date.

DPC/24/20: Date of the next meeting: 19th February 2024: Noted.

With no further matters to be transacted, the meeting ended at 8:45 PM.

Signed:_____ Date:_____