



**MINUTES OF THE FINANCE & GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING ON
TUESDAY 14th JANUARY 2025 AT THE OFFICES OF BIGGLESWADE TOWN
COUNCIL, THE OLD COURT HOUSE, 4 SAFFRON ROAD, BIGGLESWADE
COMMENCING AT 7.00PM**

PRESENT:

Cllr D Strachan (Chairman)
Cllr I Agnew (Deputy Chairman)
Cllr D Albone
Cllr G Barrett (Ex-officio member)
Cllr M Foster (Ex-officio member)
Cllr M Knight
Cllr M Russell

Mr P Tarrant – Town Clerk & Chief Executive
Mr K Hosseini – Head of Governance & Strategic Partnerships
Mr E Bour – Head of Finance & Deputy RFO
Mx K Chambers – Committee Clerk

Members of the Public – 1.

Meeting Formalities:

Following a reminder to meeting attendees, both panel and public, that this is a formal meeting, the Chairman advised that members of the public will be given an opportunity to speak during public open session but not at other times. The meeting is being filmed and by being present attendees are deemed to have agreed be filmed and to the use of those images and sound recordings. The Chairman advised that attendees should not disclose any personal information of individuals as this would infringe the Data Protection Rights of the individual. The Chairman asked everyone to mute their microphones when not speaking.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

- a. Cllr North, Cllr Sajid, Cllr Thomas

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairman noted that all Committee Members have a dispensation to participate and vote in relation to the 2025/26 Budget & Precept.

- a. **Disclosable Pecuniary interests in any agenda item:**

None.

- b. **Non-Pecuniary interests in any agenda item:**

None.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman had no announcements.

4. PUBLIC OPEN SESSION

- a. **Cllr Grant Fage, Ward Councillor for Biggleswade East**

Cllr Fage raised concerns over increases to Council Tax and its impact on Biggleswade residents. He also noted that, in January 2022, the Town Council set a 7.5% increase but Members also resolved to ensure Officers find additional savings in the budget.

He noted that Officers had adhered to the budgeting process agreed at Council particular to the 25/26 financial year however, scrutiny by Standing Committees should ideally be held in public session. Cllr Fage asked Members to note his comments during the upcoming discussion.

5. INVITED SPEAKER

6. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

7. MINUTES AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF MEETINGS

The Minutes were **APPROVED** as an accurate record of the Finance & General Purposes Committee held on **Tuesday 3rd December 2024** and that the Chairman should sign the same.

8. MATTERS ARISING

a. Item 9a: 2025/2026 Budget and Precept

Cllr Knight noted that a summary of cost reductions had not been shared with Members. The Town Clerk & Chief Executive provided physical copies to all Members in the session and confirmed that he would share this electronically after the meeting.

9. ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

a. 2025/2026 Budget and Precept

Cllr Russell gave a detailed account around the justification for a 13% increase in precept, highlighting such issues as financial drivers outside of the Council's control, the thorough process that has been adhered to in its calculation, localised benchmarking, general reserve requirements, PWLB potential borrowing, and the need to invest in a capital reserve.

She further explained the reasoning behind the need to recruit two further Public Realm Operatives and presented the wider financial climate including the difficulties that Central Bedfordshire Council was experiencing.

The external drivers such as employer's national insurance combined with Members decision to invest in the Council's football pitches and defending a planning enquiry would require an increase of 8.5% without factoring in any further commitments.

Members went on to discuss the impact of Option 3 and what this would mean for the Council. Cllr Knight raised concerns about the impact the increase may have on Biggleswade residents and that the weekly figures provided were not representative of how Council Tax is paid by residents.

Cllr Knight requested that his opposition to the recommendations be noted.

Cllr Knight also requested that a full recorded vote be minuted.

Members **RESOLVED** to recommend to Council:

- That their preferred level of budget for the year 2025/26 is total income £2,129,818, and total expenditure of £2,129,818, as presented in Option 3 of the Officers' report.
- That their preferred level of precept for the 2025/26 year is Option 3 (£1,838,460.08), a £26.68 increase for the whole year, 51 pence per week, or 13% increase for the whole year for a Band D property.
- To support the Officer recommendation around the minimum level of General Reserve for the 2025/26 financial year, notably a sum not lower than £526,119, consistent with good accounting practice and statute. The amount is equivalent to 3 months' gross expenditure.
- To support Officers making an application to the Public Works Loan Board for an amount up to £79,528. The loan is particular to essential upgrades to the remaining play areas for a term of 15 years. Prior to making such an application the Council will conduct a formal consultation exercise with the community and Bedfordshire Association of Town and Parish Councils (BATPC) will need to assess the submission.
- That the Town Council invest £25,000 in each of the next 4 years which will create a 'ringfenced capital fund' of £100,000. This will act to negate any future PWLB borrowing costs and/or impact upon a depleted Capital Reserve.

The recorded vote was as follows for the five part resolution:

- In favour: Cllr M. Russell, Cllr D. Albone, Cllr G. Barrett, Cllr M. Foster, Cllr I. Agnew, Cllr D. Strachan.
- Against: Cllr M. Knight.

Report to Council and Precept communication to CBC

The resolution of F & GP will be presented in a report to Council on 21st January 2025 for budget and precept final determination prior to officially sharing with Central Bedfordshire Councils Financial Planning Team on 22nd January 2025.

10. ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

a. Quarterly Bank Reconciliation

Members **NOTED** the report.

11. PUBLIC OPEN SESSION

a. Cllr Grant Fage, Ward Councillor for Biggleswade East

Cllr Fage reiterated that financial information should be shared freely with residents to scrutinise and that there should be more public meetings in the next financial year. He also echoed his concerns that this might have a negative impact on residents and that the Council needs to give "due regard for those who ... are unable to make ends meet".

The Chairman thanked Cllr Fage for his comments and noted that those who are disadvantaged may be entitled to Council Tax benefits and support.

12. **EXEMPT**

The Chairman closed the meeting at **7:46pm**.