

ST STEPHEN PARISH COUNCIL

In the District of St.Albans, County of Hertfordshire



**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COUNCIL
HELD AT THE PARISH CENTRE, STATION ROAD
BRICKET WOOD, ST ALBANS, HERTS
ON 22 JANUARY 2015 AT 7.30 pm**

Present: Mick Freeman (Chairman), Dorothy Kerry (Vice Chairman)
Jadwiga Baillie, John Bell, Wendy Berriman, David Brannen,
Ian Getley, Karen Hurford, Oonah Jones, Bill Pryce, Nicholas Tyndale
and Eileen Whittaker

In attendance: Three Members of public, District Cllrs Featherstone and Yates

Officers in attendance: Mrs J Pienaar (Clerk)

1. APOLOGIES

All Members were present.

2. TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS

There were none.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 20 NOVEMBER 2014

RESOLVED: *Proposed: Cllr Pryce* *Seconded: Cllr Getley* **Motion Carried**
That the minutes be approved as a true record.
Votes in favour: unanimous

4. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

There were none.

5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Chairman accepted the request and closed the meeting to allow Mr Parry to speak. He said that he had concerns regarding the parish council's efficient spending and hoped that it was achieving value for money. The District, County and Police authorities would be retaining their rates demand at 0% and suggested that the Parish look at what it does as the only authority without statutory obligations. He produced a comparison of staffing costs over the last four years. Whilst noting that Parish Councils had varying arrangements for in-house and contract work, it showed a larger increase for St Stephen than the councils selected. He asked that the Council look closely at its staff costs.

6. TO CONSIDER THE 2014/15 PRECEPT

A Member read out the judges comment from the Green Flag award for Greenwood Park, '*The Council, staff and the community should feel a real sense of pride and achievement for what it has accomplished at this park. It provides real value for money ...*'

The Clerk had looked at the staff salary costs dating back to 2009/10. The increase in staff costs was due to several factors. Salary increases had only been applied in line with that agreed by the National Joint Council and there had been none from 2009. Following an Independent Staff Review in 2010 changes were applied to spinal bands in 2013. In 2009/10 the salaries had been lower than normal due to a vacancy in the Grounds team which was filled the following year. In 2011 the Council took on an in-house Maintenance Man which did not increase expenditure overall but meant that the cost of the contractor had been transferred into salaries. This post had enabled the Council to make in-house improvements at a reduced cost.

The Clerk said that in comparison to other parish councils, St Stephen punched well above its weight. It maintained a large public park attracting visitors from well beyond the parish boundary. As the largest parish council in St Albans, excepting Harpenden Town Council, St Stephen had the sixth lowest band D charge. It was very difficult to compare Parish Councils as they were diverse in their activities and service provisions.

A Member said that residents had commented that the Parish Council offered value for money and it had received many compliments on the facilities provided.

There was a suggestion that Members hold a pre-meeting before the precept meeting and it was made very clear by Members present that such a meeting should be open to all Members. The Chairman said that the Clerk was available to clarify any queries pertaining to the draft budget. It was noted that it would be advantageous to have the document a little earlier. The Chair of HAPTC reminded Members about the excellent annual Basic Finance training available to Members organised by HAPTC. The Clerk explained that the Precept Review document became a working document for the year ahead and that any queries could be clarified during the course of that period. The Clerk was thanked for preparing the Precept Review document.

The Clerk presented the precept review document and explained that each budget heading had been analysed, comparing current spend against previous expenditure and anticipated expenditure. The draft 2015/16 budget took into account Council decisions and any known factors, such as the anticipated increased expenditure on the ageing car park floodlights and forklift truck, as well as savings for repair as a result of having new vehicles. Budgeted expenditure had been shaved back where possible and budgeted income was conservatively optimistic. The allocation of the Local Council Tax Scheme grant had resulted in the Council having to find an extra £2531 compared to the previous year. It was likely that the allocation method applied would result in fluctuating amounts in future years.

The Clerk suggested that the gap in the Revenue budget of £19864 could be met from the funds earmarked within the Working Balance for '*shortfalls arising from the LCTS/precept*' whilst maintaining the Working Balance at the required minimum amount. It was expected that the agreed Rolling Replacement programmes budget of £25240 would be met by the forecast figures for the year end, with income yields being hopefully higher than anticipated and expenditure being slightly lower. There remained the Council's desire to fund both the proposed Rolling Replacement Programme for the sports hall and play equipment of £22500, and its proposed #1 priority projects of £30442, which included converting the atrium at the Community Centre into useable space for the kitchen. The Clerk suggested that an amount of £11500 could be re-allocated toward these identified projects from within Earmarked Reserves, drawing from the budgets allocated toward the 'Neighbourhood Plan/future projects' and the 'Cherry Hill footpath'. However, there still remained insufficient funds to progress all desired projects.

The Chairman felt that investment was needed in the council's play equipment.

A Member pointed out that the Council had suffered as a result of the 0% precept increase in the previous year. Whilst residents might feel a small increase they may appreciate the benefits. The staff complement was right. The ageing play equipment was in need of urgent replacement. Greenwood Park was already minus one item of equipment where an item had been removed and not replaced. Grants were increasingly difficult to come by. He therefore advocated an 2% increase.

Having listened to what had been discussed another Member said that she would support a 2% increment on the understanding that emphasis remained on making savings where possible across the board; the Council continued to rigorously look at its finances through its committees and that the Working Party energetically looked at increasing income.

A Member replied that focussing on percentages could be misleading as a 2% increase was in fact an increase of 2.5 pence per week. Even a 5% increase was only an increase of 6 pence per week. The government was advocating moderation and in future parish councils' precepts may be capped. He suggested that a reasonable increase of 3.5% (4 pence per week) would allow the Council to progress its Leisure and Buildings projects.

The Vice-Chairman thanked the Clerk for preparing the draft budget and confirmed that, in conjunction with the Chair, she had gone through the budget in detail with the Clerk. The logic behind it was absolutely fine and the expenditure levels for staff was justifiable, taking into account the services and facilities provided together with the increasing pressure from developers. She suggested that the precept be kept at 0%; funds be released as suggested and that the Council review its proposed Rolling Replacement Programme and #1 Priorities.

Another Member said that focus should be on the cost per household, not percentages.

PROPOSED: *Proposed: Cllr Kerry* *Seconded: Cllr Baillie* **Motion unsuccessful**
That the precept be increased by 0% (0 pence per week per Band D household)
Votes in favour: 2 *Votes against: 10* *Abstentions: 0*

COUNTER-PROPOSED: *Proposed: Cllr Bell* **Motion unsuccessful**
That the precept be increased by 3.5% (4 pence per week per Band D household)

RESOLVED: *Proposed: Cllr Pryce* *Seconded: Cllr Whittaker* **Motion Carried**
That the precept be increased by 2% (2.5 pence per week per Band D household)
Votes in favour: 10 *Votes against: 2* *Abstentions: 0*

A Member commented that Council should encourage residents to use the facilities provided which in turn would help keep the precept down. Another pointed out that the Parish newsletter was read by everyone and attempts had been made through that medium to stimulate hire. The Leader of the Income Generating Working Party said that feedback from hirers was excellent and that the Working Party recommended endorsements be used in promotional material. The Member working on the production of the Parish Newsletter pointed out that the Centre Manager had been actively promoting the Centre in the last few issues. The Member currently working with staff on the new website said that the newsletter was an excellent 'tree' to promote the facilities and that whilst the website was currently a 'shrub' it would soon become a 'tree' as well. There would also be the opportunity to explore other electronic channels. He pointed out that the work of the Income Generating Working Party would take some time but the Council could call on its local politicians to shout about the parish council facilities.

The Clerk added that most people were unaware that the District and County Councils received a government grant which enabled those authorities to freeze their precept whilst Parish Councils did not.

The Chairman declared the meeting closed at 8.45 pm.

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