

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF ABERTILLERY AND LLANHILLETH COMMUNITY COUNCIL  
(ALCC) HELD ON 17 SEPTEMBER 2020 at 7.06pm using Microsoft Teams video  
conferencing**

**NB** the Council meeting started at 7.06pm. Members and officers logged in to Microsoft Teams from 6.30pm to ensure everyone could do so and to deal with any technical support issues. No members used the EE Group Call (telephone conferencing) option.

**PRESENT: Councillors:**

Vanessa Bartlett, Keri Bidgood, Gill Clark (Chair), Roger Clark, Tracey Dyson, Mark Lewis and Beverley Lucas

**Officers:** Steve Edwards, Deputy Clerk and Richard Gwinnell, Town Clerk

**Others:** None

**ABSENT:** Councillors Peter Adamson, Michaela Assiratti, Julie Holt, Perry Morgan, Gary Oakley, Rob Phillips, Allen Rees, Nick Simmons, Glyn Smith, Bernard Wall and Graham White

**245. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND WELCOMES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michaela Assiratti, Julie Holt, Rob Phillips, Allen Rees and Bernard Wall.

Welcomes were extended to everyone present. Protocols for the meeting (e.g. the need to mute microphones when not speaking and raise your hand to show a wish to speak) were discussed. The Chair explained that if someone wished to vote against or abstain, they must say so out loud, as voting by exception would be the norm. As only 7 members were present, everyone could be seen on screen at the same time.

**246. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The Chair reminded members of the need to declare any personal interests.

No members declared any personal interests.

**247. MINUTES: COUNCIL – 12 AUGUST 2020**

**Council RESOLVED:** that the minutes of the Council meeting held on 12 August 2020 be confirmed as a correct record, for signature by the Chair.

NB Councillor Roger Clark abstained, as he had not been present at the August meeting.

**248. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

There were no public questions for this meeting.

## **249. BUDGET 2019/20: QUARTER 4 OUT-TURN REPORT**

The Council considered a report of the Clerk/RFO and the Deputy Clerk, which the Deputy Clerk outlined. In answer to questions and comments from members, the Deputy Clerk explained that:

- the end of year surplus for 2019/20 was approximately £49k
- the Council could choose if it wished, when it set its next budget in January 2021, to reduce the precept for 2021/22, recognising recent underspends
- national guidance was that the Council should have a minimum (not maximum) of 25% of its annual budget in unallocated reserves; it currently had just under 25%
- between 25% and 75% (of annual spend) was considered acceptable in reserves
- the Council ultimately needed to decide what to do with its surplus and what it wished to do longer term with its reserves
- the projected 2020/21 underspend would be discussed later and was due largely to the impact of Covid-19.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) that the end of year position be noted
- (2) that £35,000 be moved from the current account to the reserve account
- (3) that the old "gratuity account" (containing £4.85) be closed and those funds be moved to the current account.

## **250. BUDGET 2020/21: QUARTER 1 REPORT**

The Council considered a report of the Clerk/RFO and the Deputy Clerk, which the Deputy Clerk outlined briefly. The Deputy Clerk explained that:

- the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures prevented many areas of spending this year, e.g. Party in the Park had not happened, detached youth services were not being delivered on-street and there were no plans yet for Town in Bloom
- some areas of spending carried on as normal, e.g. staffing costs, Christmas lights and other "fixed costs" such as IT, utilities and printing
- the forecast at the end of quarter 1 was for an underspend this year of approx. £100k although this had to be viewed with caution, as only three months' spending had taken place when quarter 1 ended
- the Council could in theory choose to spend its funds on other things
- most spending took place in quarters 3 and 4 in any normal year.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) that the current position be noted
- (2) that, if the Council decides at its annual meeting not to pay the members allowances listed in the report in 2020/21, then £4,500 is transferred into the reserve account, to be used to offset this liability for future years
- (3) that Council urgently revisits its spending plans for 2020/21 and makes changes to either avoid a huge underspend or ringfence money to be used to reduce the 2021/22 precept request.

## **251. FINANCE ORDER**

The Deputy Clerk outlined the Finance Order briefly. He stated that cheque numbers 7737, 7738, 7739, 7740 and 7741 were all shown twice in table 2 (this was a transposition error). The current account balance at the end of the period (after all the spending shown in the finance order) would be £49,229.36.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) that the payments shown in tables 1 and 2 of the finance order (subject to the changes reported by the Deputy Clerk) be noted
- (2) that the payments shown in table 3 of the finance order be authorised and
- (3) that the financial position on the current and reserve accounts (subject to the changes reported by the Deputy Clerk) be noted.

## **252. BUDGET 2020/21: PRIORITIES**

The Council discussed its approach for the remainder of the current financial year, in light of the fact that Covid-19 had impacted on events, on the delivery of services and on the ability of the Council to spend the current year budget as originally intended. The following main points arose in the debate:

- in principle, the underspend should be used to reduce the precept next year
- there were only seven members in attendance at this meeting, so the budget should be revisited at a later meeting, when more spending information was available and more members were present
- many people had lost their jobs and their businesses due to the pandemic
- there would be uproar if the Council spent public money unwisely, for the sake of spending it or without proper justification
- the Council had already received a warning from its Internal Auditor, about failing to plan properly and “frittering away” public money.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): that, in principle, recognising the impact of Covid-19 and the severe effect on people’s jobs, incomes etc, the Council commits to spending its budget as wisely as possible and, if there is still a significant surplus in January, then the Council will use that surplus to reduce the precept for 2021/22.

## **253. MOTION FROM COUNCILLOR OAKLEY**

Councillor Oakley was absent, so could not move the motion he had submitted.

His motion was therefore DEFERRED to a future meeting.

## **254. MOTION FROM COUNCILLOR REES**

The motion had been WITHDRAWN by Councillor Rees.

## **255. PROGRESS REPORTS / RECOMMENDATIONS FROM WORKING GROUPS**

### **(a) Christmas Lights Working Group**

Council considered the report issued with the agenda papers.

Councillor Lewis referred to the snowflake decorations removed from Somerset Street last year. He had asked Councillor Phillips (Chair of the working group) if the group could consider their relocation at Somerset Street next year.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) To note: (a) that the pit at the front of St Michael's Church was of insufficient depth and was unsafe; (b) that the working group had considered having a new pit for a large tree installed in Jubilee Square, as a centre-point for the switch-on event; and (c) that it was very unlikely that a switch-on event would be possible this year
- (2) to dispense with a tree at St Michael's Church this year and look at providing a tree in Jubilee Square next year after consulting with the church and Blaenau Gwent
- (3) that the amount of lights in the tree at Cwmtillery is doubled
- (4) with regard to the lights in the tree outside Bournville Community Hall: (a) that the decisions made in October 2019 be rescinded; (b) that this location be removed from the contract; (c) that the Council grants £800 to Bournville Community Hall to provide their own display and (d) that the lights still in that tree be removed by the Council's contractor.

### **(b) Leisure and Tourism Working Group**

No report back was given.

### **(c) Shop Local Working Group**

#### **Artificial floral hanging baskets**

Councillor Lewis (Chair of the working group) outlined the recommendations of the group attached to the agenda and answered questions. He stated (main points):

- Abertillery was one of very few towns which did not have real flower beds
- replacement hanging baskets with artificial flowers could be purchased pending the Town in Bloom project, which would not go ahead this year
- the hanging baskets could be given away when real flowers were installed
- replacing the current damaged artificial hanging baskets would cost £1,280 for 8
- purchasing the proposed artificial floral hanging baskets would cost £600 for 30
- the flower shop in town was unable to provide flowers for hanging baskets due to problems with a supplier
- replacing the broken baskets with new artificial floral baskets could be a "stop gap" short term solution.

The Deputy Clerk displayed images of the hanging baskets proposed by the working group, using the internet link provided by Councillor Lewis.

Discussion ensued on the working group's proposal (main points):

- the proposed baskets looked cheap
- the county borough council were opposed to the current artificial hanging baskets and wanted them removed
- purchasing from a national company went against the drive to "shop local"
- allotment groups might be able to help with providing and maintaining flower beds
- real flowers would need watering throughout the year
- a contractor would therefore need to be engaged, to maintain real flower beds
- allotments would not be producing flowers at this time of year
- most people grew vegetables on allotments, not flowers
- someone would need to put any new baskets up
- the proposed hanging baskets were only 10 inches across
- shopkeepers must be consulted before 30 baskets were ordered
- locations for new hanging baskets would need to be decided upon
- perhaps 2 of the proposed baskets should be purchased and people should see them, before another 28 were purchased.

Councillor Lewis (Chair of the working group) stated that:

- shopkeepers were in favour of replacing the current baskets
- he would consult shopkeepers on the baskets proposed (although he could not go to every shop)
- he was happy to consult the shops where hooks for hanging baskets were already located
- he was happy to put the new hanging baskets up, with help from other members of the working group
- there were already 30 locations, stretching from the war memorial to Tillery Street
- the brackets were already in place.

## Flags

Comments were made that (main points):

- flags thanking the NHS were too late; others had done this months ago and this was no longer needed
- the public would view this as a waste of public money
- a banner or banners may be a better option
- people in other areas might see this as another "Abertillery-only" initiative
- people could not simply put flags up at the war memorial
- buying flags was just the start; they would have to be erected and maintained, with ropes, pulleys and other equipment, plus someone to lower and raise them.

Councillor Lewis (Chair of the working group) responded (main points):

- flags could be put up at the war memorial, at the tri-services station and outside the ALCC offices
- it was important to thank the NHS and there may be a second wave of Covid-19
- banners were more likely to be vandalised than flags

- he would liaise with the church, find out more details and costs and report back.

## **Replacing gazebos**

Comments were made that (main points):

- five gazebos had been damaged beyond repair at the last Party in the Park
- replacing them was not in the budget, so this would be new spending
- ALCC had already paid to replace the gazebos borrowed from Ffrindiau Tyleri which were broken at Party in the Park
- ALCC could borrow gazebos again from Ffrindiau Tyleri; it did not need to buy more at this stage, especially as Covid-19 meant there were no events taking place
- ALCC could lend its existing gazebos (which were stored at the unit in Cwmtillery) to groups or market traders if needed
- staff were working at home due to Covid-19 and could not be expected to come to the office every Thursday to put up and take down gazebos; how would it work?
- loaning out gazebos would need to be done with great care; they could be broken or people could fail to return them
- people could be asked to pay a deposit, to ensure they were returned safely
- market traders usually had their own gazebos; if not, they could write and ask ALCC if ALCC could loan out their stock
- this proposal should be shelved, given Covid-19 and the lack of events.

## **DJ and disco equipment for Abertillery Youth Centre**

Comments were made that (main points):

- this proposal should also be shelved, given Covid-19 and the lack of events
- second hand DJ equipment was available cheaply (a councillor currently had such equipment for sale)
- only six people were currently allowed to gather, from two households, so no discos could take place for the foreseeable future
- if the Youth Centre wanted to buy this equipment, and wanted help with funding, they should apply for a grant, in the same way that other organisations had to apply for grants
- ALCC should be wary of buying equipment and loaning it or giving it to others
- this would involve ALCC being liable if anything went wrong.

## **Council RESOLVED:**

- (5) that officers be delegated authority to purchase two of the proposed artificial floral hanging baskets at this stage
- (6) that Councillor Lewis' offer to consult and show the baskets to shopkeepers be accepted and Councillor Lewis report back with their feedback before any further baskets are ordered
- (7) that Councillor Lewis' offer to put up the baskets, using existing brackets, be accepted
- (8) that Councillor Lewis report back with further details of the costs and other logistics involved in the proposed flags before any further decisions are made
- (9) that no action is taken on replacing gazebos

(10) that no action is taken on purchasing disco equipment for the youth centre.

#### **(d) Solar Farm Grants Working Group**

Councillor Gill Clark (Chair of the working group) stated that there had been no meeting of the group to report back from. Councillor Adamson had recently resigned. The Council would deal with working group memberships at its annual meeting.

#### **(e) Well-being Working Group**

No report back was given. The Chair of the working group was absent.

#### **(f) Youth Engagement Working Group**

No report back was given. The Chair of the working group was absent.

### **256. GRANT APPLICATIONS**

The Clerk informed Council that the Finance and Grants Committee (which met on 10 March 2020) had recommended grants of £300 for MENASH, £300 FOR 275 Squadron and £229 for Abertillery Bowls Club.

After discussion, **Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) **MENASH:** to refuse this application and encourage MENASH to apply again next year, when Covid-19 has passed and activities such as day trips and craft groups may hopefully be able to return to normal
- (2) **275 (Nantyglo and Blaina) Squadron RAF Cadets:** to refuse this application and encourage the applicant to apply to Nantyglo and Blaina Town Council instead, as 275 Squadron is based in Blaina and their main focus of activity is in Blaina (as shown when they were unable to attend past Remembrance events and the World War 1 Centenary event in Abertillery, because they were busy in Blaina) and the Squadron's activities are halted due to Covid-19
- (3) **Abertillery Bowls Club Ltd:** to approve a grant of £600, in light of the fact that Bowls is one of the few activities that is still allowed under the Covid-19 restrictions, and that Abertillery Bowls Club continues to provide an essential community service, tackling social exclusion and mental health issues, and the Council therefore agrees that there are exceptional circumstances to justify exceeding the normal £500 grants "limit".

### **257. COUNCIL GRANTS CRITERIA**

The Clerk informed Council of the recommendation of the Finance and Grants Committee with regard to removing the £500 "limit" from the criteria published on the Council website.

After discussion, **Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): to retain the existing criteria including criterion 10 and continue to publish them on the Council's website, as many groups do not apply for £500; it is important to have a published limit (which allows for exceptional circumstances) so that the Council and applicants know what the normal expectations and criteria are; and time and effort are not wasted (e.g. on increased numbers of queries or abortive applications).

## 258. WARD GRANTS LOGS 2019/20 AND 2020/21

The Clerk explained that several grants logs had been prepared this year, to help the Council monitor better what grants had been given and improve financial management, as well as to help track grant allocation history when considering future applications. These logs (and other grants logs later on the agenda) were for the Council's information.

Members asked:

- how had one councillor been able to overspend his annual ward grants allowance?
- what systems were in place to prevent overspending?
- what the deadline was for spending ward grants?
- what the public would think of such an overspend?

The Clerk explained that he had prepared the ward grants log and sent it to all members on 11 February 2020, so all members knew what had been spent to date and how much was left. Logging grants was the system to prevent overspending. In previous years, there was no published log, but queries from individual members (e.g. as to what had been spent to date and what was left) were answered on a case by case basis. The Finance and Grants Committee was to meet on 10 March to consider ward grants (in time to make sure ward grants were issued before the end of the financial year) so a deadline of 2 March was set (and announced in the email dated 11 February), to ensure any remaining applications were submitted in time to go to that Committee meeting. Ward grants were allocated for a financial year, so early March was the normal deadline.

Members commented that (main points):

- Councillor Simmons had attended the Finance and Grants Committee on 10 March
- he had taken an application to that meeting (not submitted it in advance)
- the committee approved the application; it had "slipped through the net"
- Councillor Simmons had chaired that meeting, as the normal Chair was away
- members who were on the Finance and Grants Committee should be expected to comply with deadlines and make sure overspending did not take place
- corrective action needed to be taken, as (if it was not), all other members would be able to overspend in a similar way and the budget would be exceeded
- some people may see an overspend as an abuse of power
- the councillor in question should have his overspend (£175) taken off his ward grant allowance for the current financial year; this would leave him £25 for 2020/21
- the minimum ward grant was £50; the maximum was £200 per annum

Debate ensued on what amount should be deducted this year from the ward grants allowance in question. The Deputy Clerk explained that, if the Council wished to reduce a councillor's ward grants allowance by £175 this year, the Council could also decide to agree an exception to the normal minimum amount for this year - only for the councillor involved - to ensure the remaining allowance of £25 was not lost.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

(1) to note the ward grants logs

- (2) that the annual ward grant allowance of £200 for Councillor Simmons be reduced in 2020/21 to £25, in recognition of his £175 overspend in 2019/20
- (3) that an exception to the normal £50 minimum amount be made this year – for Councillor Simmons only – to enable him to allocate the remaining £25 in this financial year.

**259. SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDER 3(x)**

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): to suspend standing order 3(x) to enable the meeting to continue beyond the normal two-hour limit.

**260. COUNCIL GRANTS LOG FROM 2018**

**Council RESOLVED:** to note the grants log.

**261. SOLAR FARM GRANT 2018**

The Clerk outlined the schedule attached to the agenda, explaining that significant progress had been made on the Cwmtillery project, which the Council had funded (using the 2018 grant from the solar farm company) in early 2019. Almost every aspect of the Cwmtillery project had been completed. The café was not yet open, but this was due to the restrictions on social gathering introduced nationally as a result of Covid-19. £763 was as yet unspent (of the £35,000 original grant). The solar farm company had recently agreed that this could be spent as requested by the project partners, to provide internet access at the café, enabling an electronic payment system, a website and free wifi use for the community.

The Chair welcomed the “brilliant” progress made and the way in which the project had helped bring the various groups together, working for the benefit of all local communities.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): to note the progress made.

**262. SOLAR FARM GRANT 2019**

The Clerk outlined the schedule attached to the agenda, explaining progress made by the groups funded (using the 2019 grant from the solar farm company) in early 2020. The groups had until 31 March 2021 to spend the funds on the projects agreed. Good progress had been made by some groups (e.g. Tyleryan Belles Sports Association) whilst others had made less progress. Most of the delays were due to the lockdown and other restrictions introduced nationally to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. There were some doubts about the timing of future spending as (for example) the luncheon club had been closed since March and AYDMS was moving its music festival to 2021. Progress with the projects and spending of the grants would continue to be monitored in the months ahead.

Members commented that some groups were delayed because they were only awarded £5,000 (despite having applied for much more). In the case of AYDMS and Friends of Six Bells Park, they needed to raise more money, to complete their projects, and they could not raise money through fund raising events, whilst public gatherings were not allowed. They may yet apply however for council grants, to help them complete their projects.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): to note the progress made.

## 263. SOLAR FARM GRANTS 2020 – CRITERIA AND PROCESS

The Clerk informed the Council and responded to questions:

- the solar farm company wanted the allocation of the grant for this year decided by Christmas, in line with the normal annual timescale
- the company had confirmed that the criteria set out in paragraph 5 of the existing criteria document (i.e. what they wanted the money spent on) was still relevant, but that projects did not necessarily need to be environmental in nature
- the Council had adopted a 5-year rule in 2019 and backdated the start date to 2017
- the start date of the 5-year period should be shown in the criteria, so that groups knew what to expect if they wanted to apply
- the application form should also be changed, to enable groups to explain if they had any “exceptional circumstances” and to require groups to specify exactly what the grant requested would be spent on
- before the Council invited applications for this year, the criteria, application form and process should be amended as Council wished, and they should be published
- the Council awarded seven groups a grant of £5,000 each in 2019
- the Council may therefore wish to review the currently quoted minimum grant of £10,000
- £35,000 was divisible equally by £5,000 or £7,000 if the Council preferred
- groups should be given a reasonable time to apply and the applications should be considered as soon as possible after that
- groups should send applications directly to the Council (not to councillors)
- councillors should encourage applications from local groups and could help groups with the process of applying, with a view to maximising applications
- assuming publication on 21 September, 12 October would be a reasonable deadline (within working hours)
- applications would be sent to members a week before the meeting as usual
- all applications would have to go to the full Council for a final decision to be made
- due to Covid-19 it was not going to be possible for a physical meeting to take place; rather the applications would be considered at a remote (on screen) meeting
- applicants’ representatives would not be able to come and make representations in person this year (as they had in previous years) for this reason.

Members questioned and debated the criteria, process and application form and how they needed to be changed this year. Members considered that all applications should go directly to the full Council this year, as meeting opportunities were reduced due to Covid-19, applicants could not attend in person to make representations and the Solar Farm Grant Working Group would be an additional step which might delay the process (as it had last year). They also agreed to reduce the minimum grant to £5,000, to promote consistency across years. They also considered that the involvement of members last year had led to a reduction in the number of applications (not an increase) and that this needed to change.

The Clerk displayed and read out possible changes to the existing criteria, process and application form to reflect the changes discussed and agreed by the Council (including the changes to dates, to the 5-year rule, to the application form (e.g. to build in an “exceptional circumstances” section) and to the process (removing the working group from the process).

The amended wording of the criteria, application form and process were agreed by all members present, with further minor changes to be made by the Clerk after this meeting, to simplify the exceptional circumstances section and make it clearer to readers.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously):

- (1) to amend the criteria, process and application form as discussed in this meeting (as summarised above) and described by the Clerk
- (2) that all applications will go directly to the full Council (at the October Council meeting) this year and not to the Solar Farm Grant Working Group
- (3) that the Clerk publicise the opportunity for groups to apply, ideally on 21 September, with a deadline of 12 October at 12.00 noon (three weeks).

**264. VACANCY FOR A GOVERNOR**

Due to the time, this item was DEFERRED to a future meeting.

A member commented that a vacancy also existed on Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg.

**265. VACANCY FOR A COUNCILLOR**

The Clerk explained that a vacancy existed, following the recent resignation of Councillor Postlethwaite. Normally the vacancy would be advertised immediately after it occurred, enabling ten members of the public to “petition” for an election to the vacant seat. As advised by One Voice Wales, elections could not take place until at least May 2021, but councils could decide if they wished to advertise earlier, so that, if no petition for an election was received, the council could get on with co-opting a member into the vacancy. He asked Council to decide, when it wished to advertise.

**Council RESOLVED** (unanimously): to wait until March 2021 to advertise the vacancy.

**266. ADOPTING BT TELEPHONE BOXES**

Due to the time, this item was DEFERRED to a future meeting.

**267. CHAIR’S ANNOUNCEMENTS, RELEVANT CORRESPONDENCE AND CELEBRATING SUCCESS**

No announcements were made.

**268. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

**Council RESOLVED:** That the next meeting be held on Wednesday 21 October 2020 at 7.00pm.

The meeting ended at 9.30pm.

Signed as a correct record by the Chair .....

*NB these minutes are a summary of the proceedings and record of the decisions taken. They are not intended to be a verbatim record.*

*Minutes produced by Richard Gwinnell, Town Clerk*