

**MEETING OF THE FULL COUNCIL OF ABERTILLERY AND LLANHILLETH
COMMUNITY COUNCIL (ALCC) HELD ON 28 June 2023 AT 7.00pm
in the Council Chamber at Council Offices, Mitre Street, Abertillery.**

PRESENT

Councillors: Tracey Dyson (Chair); Josh Rawcliffe (Vice Chair); Peter Adamson; Michaela Assiratti; Steve Bard; Chris Hill; Mark Lewis; Ben Owen-Jones; Barrie Page; Rob Phillips; Deb Pitt; Nick Simmons; Bernard Wall and Graham White

Officers: David Cartwright (Clerk); Steve Edwards (Deputy Clerk)

Apologies: Allen Rees and Glyn Smith.

Absent: Mariola Walters

The meeting was preceded by a minute's silence to mark the passing of Mr Graham Bartlett, Clerk to the Council from 1989 to 2014, whose death was announced earlier in the month.

16. APOLOGIES AND WELCOMES

Apologies were received from Allen Rees and Glyn Smith. The Chair welcomed Mark Lewis back to the Council.

17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST OR DISPENSATIONS

Chris Hill declared a personal interest in Item 27 as he was currently Chairman of Six Bells Tennis Club.

Deb Pitt declared a personal interest in Item 23 as she was currently Senior Practitioner of Off The Streets. However, she noted that this appointment would end before the Council-funded Summer cinema events took place.

18. MINUTES – ANNUAL MEETING 25 MAY 2023

The Council **RESOLVED** that the minutes were a true and correct record.

19. 2022-23 ACCOUNTS AND ANNUAL RETURN

As Responsible Financial Officer, the Clerk presented the accounts to the Council. He reminded Members that their votes in respect of the annual accounts were, in effect, public statements. A Member abstaining from agreeing the accounting statements would be making a public declaration that they didn't understand what the Council's financial position was on 31 March 2023. This could be because they believed that there is something significant in the accounts that has not been explained sufficiently. A Member voting against agreeing the accounting statements would be making a public declaration that they have evidence that the accounts have been falsified or that the real financial position has been deliberately obscured. They would be expected to spell out that evidence to other Members in the meeting before the vote was taken and to then report that evidence to the authorities.

The Clerk noted that, as the Council now reported its accounts on an income and expenditure basis, the 'Balances carried forward' sections of the Annual Return presented an accurate picture of the Council's financial position from year-to-year. When the 2021-22 accounts had been published, the Council had recognised that it was carrying more public money than it had planned and much more than it should have. The Clerk noted that the 'Balances carried forward' sections of the Annual Return for 2022-23

indicated that the excess public money being carried by the Council had “ballooned” still further during the financial year. The Clerk noted that the Council’s internal auditor had yet to submit his report on the 2022-23 accounts. When that report was completed, it would be submitted to the next Full Council meeting. The Clerk had taken advice from Audit Wales who had advised that the Council’s Annual Return should not be submitted to the external auditor until Full Council had considered the internal auditor’s report.

Mark Lewis questioned why more than one payment had been made during the year in respect of insurance. The Clerk stated that the Council had increased its insurance cover during the year to take account of a professional valuation of the War Memorial statue, which necessitated a second payment in respect of the increased insurance premium.

Peter Adamson questioned why total expenditure on allotments had nearly trebled compared with the previous financial year. The Deputy Clerk explained that there had been significant costs associated with the reopening of the Gelli Crug allotments. In addition, there had been an increase in the lease fee that the Council paid in respect of the Adam Street allotments.

- a) The Council **RESOLVED** to agree that the accounting statements shown in the report fairly present the financial position of the Council for the year ending 31 March 2023.

The Clerk noted that Graham White had voted against agreeing the accounts. He reminded Cllr White that, if he had evidence of a material falsehood or concealment of facts in the accounts for 2022-23, he had a duty to make that evidence known to the meeting. Cllr White asked for the minutes to note that he was passing several pages of documents to the Chair. The Clerk stated that it was wholly insufficient to pass written material to the Chair – Cllr White had a duty to share any evidence that the accounts did not represent the Council’s true financial position with the meeting. Cllr White said that he objected to the fact that the two previous years’ accounts had not been subject to an internal audit and that Audit Wales had not yet published its audit opinions on the accounts for those years. The Clerk stated that Audit Wales was working its way through a backlog of external audits for hundreds of community councils. He noted that the documents passed to the Chair by Cllr White referred exclusively to the financial year 2020-21, they had nothing to do with the accounts for 2022-23 that were before the Council and that Cllr White had not provided the meeting with a shred of evidence of any falsehood or concealment of facts in the accounts for 2022-23.

Ben Owen-Jones questioned why any matters regarding internal or external audits of accounts for previous years had not been raised with the Finance Committee. The Chair asked Cllr White why, as a member of the Finance Committee until May 2023, he had not asked the Chair of the committee to call a meeting to discuss any concerns Cllr White had regarding the audit of accounts in previous years. Cllr White claimed that he had done so and he understood that the Chair of the committee had asked the Clerk to call a meeting of the committee, but the Clerk had not arranged one. The Chair replied that she could not believe that to be the case as she had asked officers on a regular basis to convene committee meetings and they had always done so immediately.

Steve Bard proposed that authorisation to sign and submit the Annual Return should only be given subject to the internal auditor’s report confirming that the accounting statements were prepared on the correct accounting basis.

- b) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise the Chair of the Council to complete and sign the Annual Return on the basis of the 2022-23 accounts, subject to approval by a future meeting of the Full Council of the internal auditor’s report on the accounts.

- c) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise the Responsible Financial Officer to submit the Annual Return, including the Annual Governance Statement, for the year ended 31 March 2023 and all relevant associated documents to Audit Wales as required, subject to approval by a future meeting of the Full Council of the internal auditor's report on the accounts.

20. BUDGET AND EXPENDITURE 2022-23

The Clerk drew Members' attention to the Council's expenditure for the year to date. He gave his opinion that the Council would be financially secure if it had finished 2022-23 with total accounting balances of around £135,000. The Council's actual total balances at the end of 2022-23 were nearly £290,000. For the last five years, the Council had aimed to deliver more for the local community than they had paid for through their Council Tax. In the event, the Council had done the complete opposite – it had spent less than it had taken from the public.

The focus of the majority of Members was on funding more-and-more projects and initiatives that aimed to improve the quality of life in the community council area, but the Council's financial position so far in 2023-24 suggested that it was, again, not on course to deliver its planned expenditure. The Council needed to take action to deliver on its promises but it was unrealistic to expect Members to invest even more time in their Council duties and officers were already working substantial unpaid overtime.

The Clerk pointed out that the Council would have a turnover of more than £350,000 in 2023-24 and that this could rise to more than half-a-million pounds a year in the near future, yet it employed only two part-time staff. He suggested that Members needed to take action to investigate the viability of various options – whether that involved increasing the hours of current staff, recruiting additional officers or out-sourcing the delivery of some of its projects and initiatives. It also needed to start work now on setting a realistic, workable budget for 2024-25 that stopped the cycle of repeatedly taking more money off the public through the Council Tax and then not delivering what the Council had promised to deliver.

Steve Bard stated that oversight of the delivery of the Council's budget lay firmly with the Finance Committee. They should be talking to budget-holding committees and seeking answers regarding obvious underspends, yet the committee had not met since December. In his opinion, the committee should also have gone through the 2022-23 accounts before they were presented to Full Council and it should consider the report from the internal auditor as soon as it was delivered. He believed that the Finance Committee should meet as a matter of urgency.

Deb Pitt left the chamber at 8.05 pm and returned at 8.09 pm.

The Council noted expenditure for the year to date and agreed that meetings of the Finance Committee and HR Committee should be convened as soon as possible.

21. CHANGE OF BANKING ARRANGEMENTS

- a) The Council noted the report from the Deputy Clerk, which considered alternative banking arrangements that would be a better fit for a community council of the size of Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council, following the advice of the Council's internal auditor.

Michaela Assiratti left the chamber at 8.12 pm and returned at 8.15 pm.

- b) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers to take the necessary actions to close Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council's gratuity account and to transfer the balance to the Council's reserve account.

- c) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers to take the necessary actions to transfer the Council's current and reserve accounts from Nat West to Unity Trust Bank.

22. INSURANCE

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969, the Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Authorities (Indemnities for Members and Officers) (Wales) Order 2006) to renew the Council's insurance policy with Zurich Municipal as per the company's renewal quote.

23. OFF THE STREETS

Deb Pitt had declared a personal interest regarding this item but remained in the chamber to answer questions.

Cllr Pitt noted that Off The Streets intended to fund extensive sessions in the community across the days when Council-funded Summer cinema events took place. The initiative's involvement would, therefore, extend beyond the chaperoning of children and young people, for which it was seeking funding.

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 145 of the Local Government Act 1972) to pay Off The Streets £1,020 to facilitate the supervision and engagement of children and young people attending Council-funded Summer cinema events.

The Chair added that, as well as children and young people from the southern half of the community council area, the Summer cinema events would include sessions for children from the northern half of the area, arranged with the Blaenau Gwent Youth Team, and special sessions for families affected by autism.

24. GRANT APPLICATIONS

- a) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 40 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015) to pay a Council Grant of £500 to Chillax, Abertillery Learning Community.
- b) Graham White said that the Council should stop giving money to the same, limited number of organisations, such as Abertillery BG RFC. He asserted that events staged at the club were arranged by the Council and yet it was the club that profited by making a lot of money through the bar. The Chair and Steve Bard replied that Aber Rocks and the recent Slugfest event had nothing to do with the Council. The rugby club should be supported to stage independent events that benefited the local community.

The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976) to pay a Council Grant of £1,000 to Abertillery BG RFC.

- c) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976) to pay a Council Grant of £505 to Clwb Llan.
- d) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976) to pay a Ward Grant of £200 to Six Bells Over-50s Club.
- e) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 40 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015) to pay a Ward Grant of £100 to the Pauline Park Child Group.

- f) The Council **RESOLVED** to authorise officers (under Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976) to pay a Ward Grant of £200 to the Ebbw Fach Community Group.

25. COMMITTEES

The Council considered a motion from Mark Lewis that he should be appointed as a member of the People and Communities Committee; the Planning, Commerce and Environment Committee; and the Finance Committee. The Clerk advised that this should be considered as three separate motions. The Vice Chair pointed out that the item offered an ideal opportunity for Members to propose amendments nominating themselves or others to any remaining vacancies on Council committees.

The Chair proposed an amendment that Michaela Assiratti should also be appointed to the People and Communities Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Mark Lewis as a member of the People and Communities Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Michaela Assiratti as a member of the People and Communities Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Mark Lewis as a member of the Planning, Commerce and Environment Committee.

The Chair reminded Council that members of the Finance Committee were mandated to complete the *Local Government Finance* training module within six months of their appointment to the Committee.

The Council **RESOLVED** to appoint Mark Lewis as a member of the Finance Committee.

26. INFORMATION FROM BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Council considered a motion from Mark Lewis that officers be instructed to collate the following information:

- The population breakdown in percentage terms for each individual ward in the Abertillery and Llanhilleth Community Council area;
- How many households there are within each ward area paying Community Council Tax plus the total amount of Community Council Tax that is paid by all these households;
- How many of these Community Tax-paying households have registered voters living in them.

Graham White interjected to complain that Council had not voted on a motion from the Vice Chair that all previous members of committees should be re-appointed for 2023-24. The Vice Chair stated that he had proposed nothing of the sort. He had merely suggested during discussion on the previous item that any Members who wished to be appointed to vacancies on any committee should propose amendments to that effect. Cllr White said that he had wanted to be appointed to a committee at the Annual Meeting in May but could not be because he did not attend that meeting. The Chair said that Cllr White had had ample time during the previous item to propose an amendment nominating himself to be appointed to vacancies on any committee but had not done so. The meeting had now moved to the next item on the agenda.

Nick Simmons and the Chair stated that Cllr Lewis could simply contact Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council as a member of the public and ask for the information he required. It was unnecessary to burden officers with the task. Cllr Lewis asserted that the

Deputy Clerk had provided the information for the Town in Bloom working group in the past. Nick Simmons responded that *he* had sourced that information by contacting the borough council himself. Deb Pitt added that the required information was freely available to anyone via the Welsh Government's StatsWales Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation website.

Cllr Lewis withdrew the motion.

27. SIX BELLS PARK TOILETS

The Council considered a motion from Chris Hill to provide an annual grant to Six Bells Tennis Club for the running costs of providing public toilet facilities at Six Bells Park. Cllr Hill had declared a personal interest regarding this item but remained in the chamber to answer questions.

Rob Phillips left the chamber at 8.49 pm.

Ben Owen-Jones said that, as a wheelchair-user, he was acutely aware that the availability of good public toilet facilities with disabled access often made the difference between being able to get out-and-about and being forced to stay at home.

Chris Hill left the chamber at 8.49 pm.

Rob Phillips returned to the chamber at 8.49 pm.

The Chair reminded Members that the motion proposed that a grant be made annually.

The Council **RESOLVED** (under the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976) to authorise officers to pay an annual grant of £1740 to the Six Bells Tennis Club, being the running costs of providing public toilet facilities at Six Bells Park.

Chris Hill returned to the chamber at 8.51 pm.

Barrie Page left the chamber at 8.51 pm.

28. PARTY IN THE PARK

The Chair reported on the 2023 event. She noted that the Clerk had undertaken considerable work on the day to assess the number of people attending the event and his report to members of the People and Communities Committee had concluded that it had been very successful, not only in attracting the target audience, but also, as a social event, in bringing the community together. Bernard Wall noted that, after the event had closed, many attendees remained in Abertillery long into the evening.

Barrie Page returned to the chamber at 8.52 pm.

Deb Pitt asked the Clerk to share his report with all Members of the Council. Steve Bard noted that, together with Aberfest and Slugfest, Party in the Park had helped to energise Abertillery in recent weeks. The positivity from local residents on social media was very apparent and increased local community involvement in activities such as floral planting and litter picking was noticeable.

Deb Pitt suggested that the Council should consider holding an additional, similar event in the southern half of the community council area in the future.

Peter Adamson left the meeting at 8.57 pm.

The Council **RESOLVED** to suspend Standing Order 3x to enable the meeting to continue beyond two hours.

Ben Owen-Jones left the chamber at 8.58 pm.

29. RESOLUTION TO EXCLUDE THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Council **RESOLVED** that, by virtue of The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, the press and public would be excluded from discussions on the following item on the basis that disclosure thereof would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

Ben Owen-Jones returned to the chamber at 8.59 pm.

30. CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

As Chair of the People and Communities Committee, the Chair reported that the committee had received presentations from three contractors. The committee recommended that the Council should appoint Blachere to a five-year contract. Steve Bard added that the company's bid did away with aluminium frames – which are energy-intensive to manufacture – used recycled materials and made use of LED lights that consumed only ten percent of the electricity of traditional bulbs. Graham White questioned why the contractor had quoted a substantial price for remedial work. Rob Phillips, who had advised the committee on the technical aspects of the bids, replied that a previous contractor had left a lot of redundant infrastructure and wiring that need to be removed. Sockets on columns needed to be replaced and catenary wires were corroded. In addition, the infrastructure needed to be checked and tested. He considered the quoted price for such extensive remedial works to be reasonable. Mark Lewis suggested that better Christmas lights displays should be provided in the north of the community council area and asked whether additions could be made to the contract. Barrie Page said that the proposed contract deliberately contained flexibility to enable changes or additions. Graham White asked for the contact details of the successful bidder as they may be of interest to Aberbeeg Tenants and Residents Association, which organises its own Christmas lights with funding from the Council.

- a) The Council **RESOLVED** to agree the appointment of Blachere as the contractor for the Council's central Christmas Lights contract, as per the recommendation of the People and Communities Committee.
- b) The Council **RESOLVED** (under Section 144 of the Local Government Act 1972) to authorise officers to take the necessary action to put the contract into effect and to make all subsequent contractual payments as required.

31. NEXT MEETING

19 July 2023

The meeting ended at 9.07 pm.