

Full Town Council

Present: Cllrs Simonis (Chair), Banks, Chapman, Cooper-Marsh, Crompton, Dundas-Todorov, Dunford, Goodman, Hitchin, Macnab-Grieve, Maslen, Pitt, and Terry

Absent: Cllrs Bolanz, Collins, Kumar, Mascarenhas, Johnson, Slade, J Smith and S Smith

In attendance: Town Clerk, Deputy Town Clerk, Project Delivery Manager

Minutes of the meeting of St Neots Town Council held on **Tuesday 17th December 2024 at 7.15pm** in the Eaton's Centre, The Maltings, St Neots, PE19 8ES.

Public Participation

There were four members of the public present.

A Member of the public addressed the Council in relation to the Council's Community Emergency Plan and Flood Leaflets. The resident, who is Chair of St Neots Flood Liaison Action Group (FLAG) expressed frustration that a flood leaflet was issued without liaising with FLAG and that there was no direct involvement with FLAG on developing the Community Emergency Plan. The FLAG are volunteers and any actions by the FLAG or use of volunteer roles must be dictated by the FLAG and not by the Council. For example, there are no flood wardens on duty as included in the Plan. A polite request was made that the FLAG is consulted on the development and publication of the Plan.

The Chair of the Emergency and Environment Committee apologised and confirmed that the Council wanted to embrace to knowledge and expertise of FLAG, working with it for the benefit of St Neots. The Clerk advised a meeting would be set up between the Chair of FLAG and officers to progress the matter.

A Member of the public addressed the Council on a Councillor motion that the Town Council fund Councillor travel to council meetings at the Eatons Community Centre through the St Neots Car Share Scheme. The resident expressed concerns about the proposal, highlighting the role of a town or parish councillor is a volunteer role and claiming of expenses for travel within the parish boundary could set a precedent for the Council. The resident commented that the cost estimated in the supporting documentation is incorrect as any member of the council could claim use of the car share scheme to attend meetings, meaning overall costs of the policy could be more.

ACTIONS

167 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received and noted from Cllrs Bolanz, Collins, Johnon, Kumar, Slade and S Smith.

Admin



168 Declarations of Interest

Cllrs Banks, Chapman, Pitt and Terry declared an interest in agenda items 13 and 17 as Members of Huntingdonshire District Council, but that they were not decision makers at the District Council and would take part in debate and voting.

169 Council Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the meeting of 26th November 2024 as a true and accurate record.

170 County and District Councillor Reports

Cllr Jennings reported that;

Civil Injunction Order: A civil injunction order is in place until November 2026, granting police enhanced powers to address anti-social behaviour, with penalties including fines or imprisonment. Any concerns or incidents should be reported to 999 or 101.

Devolution of Government: Updates have been provided on the government's white paper on devolution. At this stage this is high-level and more information is expected in due course.

Licensing Committee: Approval was granted for the Former Bulls Head site to sell alcohol as a new convenience store. The outcome of planning permission to convert the pub into a convenience store is still awaited.

Cllr Ferguson reported that;

Council Tax Support Scheme: A new scheme has significantly increased the number of residents receiving 100% council tax support, rising from 1,300 to 4,000 in 2024, with an additional 708 households benefiting. Processing times for payments have decreased from 9 days to 3.4 days. The scheme has positively impacted mental health and overall well-being by reducing debt-related stress. Plans are underway to extend the scheme next year.

Empty Properties: Highlighted the national issue of 1.6 million vacant properties, including 1.35 million completely vacant. New legislation reduces the vacancy period for higher council tax charges from two years to one. A council tax premium for second homes will also be introduced in April 2026. These measures aim to mitigate negative impacts on local communities.

Little Paxton Bridge: Discussion at a highways transportation meeting about investing £250,000 in a feasibility study for improvements to Little Paxton Bridge. Funding is challenging, and community support is essential. Councillors were asked to consider sending a representative to advocate on behalf of the Council and residents.



Cllr Chapman reported that;

Allotments: A motion to identify land for growing vegetables was not approved. Members were encouraged to explore opportunities to apply for licenses to provide additional allotments in St Neots.

Committee Minutes

- 171 i) Members received and noted minutes of the Personnel Committee held on 26th November 2024.
- 172 ii) Members received and noted minutes of the Planning Committee held on 3rd December 2024.
- 173 iii) Members received and noted minutes of the Operations & Amenities Committee held on 3rd December 2024.
- 174 iv) Members received and noted minutes of the Grants Sub-Committee held on 10th December 2024.
- 175 v) Members received and noted minutes of the Finance & Governance Committee held on 10th December 2024.

RESOLVED that the Council approve expenditure of up to £3,000.00 (incl. contingency) in funding from the earmarked reserve for Community Buildings to complete the replacement of the following lighting at St Neots Museum:

- 10no 4-foot fluorescent light fittings with LED strip lights
- 18no 600x600 recessed tile light fittings with LED panel lights (ceiling height is about 3m or more)
- 14no bulkhead light fittings with LED bulk heads
- 4no track lights with 6-foot LED strip lights (two in the area of ceilings well over 3m height)
- 3no 5-foot fluorescent light fittings with LED strip lights (one in the area of ceilings well over 3m height)

- 176 **RESOLVED** that the Council approve expenditure of £9,571.00 from the General Reserve to install slot drainage in the area around the Jubilee Mosaic, to remove stones around the perimeter of the mosaic and areas of loose gravel in the garden and replace with resin.

- 177 **RESOLVED** that the Council approve expenditure of £791.20 from the Flood Prevention earmarked reserves for the delivery of a further 5420 flood prevention/awareness leaflets to households in St Neots.

Amendment proposed that the Council approve the release of funding subject working with FLAG.



- 178 **RESOLVED** that the Council approve expenditure of £3,860 from General Reserves for the installation of a monitored alarm and CCTV system at the Steve van de Kerkhove Community Centre.
- 179 **RESOLVED** that the Council approve the proposed changes to the Financial Regulations on credit card users.
- 180 **RESOLVED** that the Council adopt the Credit Card policy.

181 Councillor Motion

Members received and considered a motion from Cllr Macnab-Grieve that the Town Council allows Councillors to claim expenses for use of the St Neots Car Share Scheme to attend meetings of the Town Council and its committees at the Eatons Centre. It was explained that the purpose of the motion was to ensure all councillors were able to attend meetings of the Council at its temporary meeting venue while the Priory Centre is redeveloped. The new location and the lack of available public transport has presented a challenge for some Members in partaking in the Council meeting process.

It was noted that the Council's current Councillor Travel and Expenses policy did not allow for expenses to be claimed for travel within the parish boundary and if resolved the motion would be in contrary to the policy which would need amending. The Town Clerk provided Members with details of legislation that permitted the Town Council to provide expenses for Councillors travel, including with the parish boundary to attend meetings of the Council.

It was highlighted the proposal was specific and limited to use of the St Neots Car Share Scheme and was intended for the attendance at meetings of the Council at the Eatons Community Centre.

The Clerk explained that if such a policy is introduced it would be available to all Councillors. The Council's Councillor Travel and Expenses Policy would need to be amended and adopted by the Council prior to an expense being paid.

The motion was seconded.

A Member commented that setting a precedent that this would be an ongoing policy was a concern, but limiting the policy to the relocation of council meetings would help ensure all members could attend meetings. If there are obstacles to Members taking part in meetings the Council should look to remove those where possible. The policy and cost associated with it should be monitored and reported back to the Council.

RESOLVED that the Town Council temporarily funds the cost of Councillor travel to meetings at the new council meeting venue via the St Neots Car Share Scheme for any Member.

RESOLVED that the Council allocates funding from the Members training, Travel and Subsistence budget for the cost of using the St Neots Car Share Scheme for Members to attend Council meetings at the temporary venue.

The Clerk confirmed they would bring forward an amended Councillor Travel and Expenses policy for consideration by the Council.

182 Huntingdonshire District Council Local Plan

Members received and considered recommended sites to be submitted to Huntingdonshire District Council's Local Plan Call for Sites as designated green spaces.

The Town Clerk briefed members on the Working Group's recommendations and the call for sites process. The Clerk emphasised the tight timeline for officers to submit applications for all 29 identified sites.

The recommendation was for the Council to accept the proposed sites and proceed with their submission to be designated as green spaces.

It was proposed to accept the sites recommended for submission, with the Working Group assisting in prioritising the list. The proposal was seconded.

RESOLVED that the Council approves the Working Groups list of sites to be put forward for consideration as allocations for Green Open Spaces in the Local Plan Update's call for sites. That officers submit a call for sites application for each site ahead of the 31st December deadline and work with the Working Group to prioritise sites if not all can be submitted.

183 Enabling Remote Attendance and Proxy Voting Consultation

Members received and considered recommendations from a Working Group on the Council's response to consultation on enabling remote meeting attendance and proxy voting for Town and Parish Councils.

RESOLVED to submit responses to the governments enabling remote attendance consultation as recommended by the Working Group, indicating that the Council would support the introduction of powers to meeting remotely subject to recommended limitations and controls as set out in the consultation response.

Members debated the consultation on allowing proxy voting for town and parish Councils. Members expressed concerns about the implications of proxy voting and how it would work in practice. Members did not feel the consultation documents gave enough details on what might be proposed and risked being undemocratic. Members also queried how proxy voting would be managed in terms of pre-determination.

RESOLVED that the Council respond to the governments consultation on allowing proxy voting for town and parish councils stating that St Neots Town Council would not be in favour of proxy voting.

184 2025-26 Budget

Members received, considered and approved the 2025-26 budget and precept as recommended from the Finance and Governance Committee.

Cllr Chapman, who had Chaired the Finance and Governance Committee meeting introduced the budget. It was explained the budget had been reviewed by committees three times, as well as ongoing review by officers. The Finance and Governance Committee believe it to be a budget the delivers a good level of services, ensures the Council can operate and is a lower increase than many other Councils.

It was proposed and seconded that the Council approve the 2025-26 budget as presented to the Council.

Members and officers were thanked for their work on during the budget setting process.

A recorded vote was called.

RESOLVED that the Council approves the budget and precept for the financial year 2025-26 and confirm a precept of £2,088,330 and a Band D rate of £178.58 per household.

For: Cllrs Simonis, Banks, Chapman, Cooper-Marsh, Crompton, Dundas-Todorov, Dunford, Goodman, Hitchin, Macnab-Grieve, Maslen, Pitt, and Terry

Against: None

Abstained: None

A Member highlighted that the November and December meetings of the Finance and Governance Committee were important in the budget setting process and it would be useful for all committee Chairpersons to attend as part of the budget review and discussion.

185 Reports from Outside Bodies

Members received verbal reports from Members who act as Council representatives on outside bodies.

Cllr Goodman reported that the Huntingdonshire Volunteer Centre (HVC) was looking for a new trustee and would be keen to have a Councillor act in that role. Any interested Councillor should let Cllr Goodman or the HVC know.

Cllrs Maslen and Chapman reported that the ESCA carol service had gone well and that the association had a new Chair appointed.

Cllr Chapman reported that the Clerk and himself were assisting trustees of the Jubilee Hall in adopting a new constitution and that the Council would need to



appoint two representatives to the management body. This would be brought to a future Council meeting.

Cllr Goodman left the meeting at 20:34

186 Project Status Summary

Cllr Goodman rejoined the meeting 20:36

Members received and noted a project status report from the Project Delivery Manager. A Member raised a query on the development of the new website and testing that will be undertaken. It was confirmed that officers are working with a contractor, and the target is to share visuals and designs with the Promotion and Events Committee at its next meeting. The Project Deliver Manager outlined how testing will work, and that Members can be involved in that process, elements around design and colour schemes that could be part of that testing. Testing is to include user testing.

Members noted the report.

187 Oast Building, St Neots

Members received and noted a report from the Project Delivery Manager on the purchase of the Oast building, St Neots and proposed process. The report put forward a recommendation on how the Council progresses to the next stages of a project to redevelop the building, recommended that the two main areas of potential use are feasibility checked to assist in engagement and discussions with residents on the future of the building.

Members noted the process would comprise of;

- Architect layout studies.
- Market demand evaluation.
- Financial analysis.
- Financial feasibility study.

Until these steps are completed and feedback from the LA is obtained, a feasibility study with practical models is essential. The process will help inform business cases and ensure options are feasible.

Members noted the two areas of focus will be on a destination economy, such as a micro-brewery and a flexible community venue. Any approach will need to include heritage and community use.

Members highlighted the importance of robust business cases for informed decision-making to avoid unnecessary cost increases. A Member advocated for parallel approaches, particularly for the brewery concept, and emphasised early public involvement to align plans with community interests. Public engagement was seen as key.

RESOLVED that the Council approves the Action Plan 'Next Steps for Oast House Redevelopment' and delegates Project Delivery Manager to prepare the Project Plan.

RESOLVED that the Council approves the final shortlist of creative ideas as stated in the report and resolves two general options to be investigated by further detailed feasibility studies and modelling as recommended. These are an experience focused venue that considers a micro-brewery, heritage, and adaptable cultural space, and a wider flexible community space that can incorporate a number of uses.

A Member commented that they were keen that interested members of the community get involved in working with Town Council around setting up community interest group if this became an appropriate route within the uses of the building.

The Project Delivery Officer confirmed they would report back to the Council with quotes, timescales and a project plan.

188 Priory Centre Redevelopment

Members received and considered a report from the Town Clerk on the commitment of Town Council funding towards the Priory Centre redevelopment project. Members noted that the Council had been asked to defer its decision on committing funding to the Priory Centre redevelopment scheme while further detailed information was brought forward on costs, what is included in delivery and areas that sit outside of the budget the Council will need to consider, including operator costs.

189 Mayoral Engagements

Members received and noted a list of upcoming Mayoral engagements to be attended by the Mayor and/or Deputy Mayor.

190 Date of Next Meeting

Members received and noted that the date of the next Full Council meeting would be 28th January 2025 at 7:15pm.

191 Private Session

RESOLVED In terms of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, the following items will be likely to disclose exempt information relating to establishment or contractual matters and it is, therefore, **RESOLVED** that pursuant to the provisions of the Public Bodies (admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 the public and press be excluded.

192 Priory Centre Lease

Members received and considered a document provided by a professional valuer and negotiator on the Priory Centre and Town Council Office leases, along with a value for



the draft Heads of Terms proposed by Huntingdonshire District Council for a new single Priory Centre ease for the redeveloped building.

Members discussed the lease and valuation at length, along with the importance of protecting the Council, value of the leases, taxpayer and the facility by ensuring any new lease was acceptable to the Council.

It was noted that the most recent version had incorporated changes from the original version viewed by the Council in November. Working with the appointed valuer/negotiator will help develop a clear vision and 'red lines' for the Council. It was felt that the Council needs to feed into the process, establish a document/Heads of Terms setting out what it wants, negotiate it with HDC and have an agreed position come back to the Council.

It was proposed that the meeting is suspended and reconvened on 7th January 2025. The proposal was not seconded. A counter proposal was made that Members provide feedback on the document and the lease to the Town Clerk to allow for progress to continue and the Council to further review and consider options on Heads of Terms and advice from the professional valuer in January.

The meeting was closed.

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