

Full Town Council

Present: Cllrs Slade (Chair), Banks, Bolanz, Chapman, Collins, Cooper-Marsh, Dundas-Todorov, Dunford, Goodman, Hitchin, Johnson, Macnab-Grieve, Mascarenhas, Pitt, Simonis, J Smith and S Smith.

Absent: Cllrs Crompton, Kumar, Maslen, Terry

In attendance: Town Clerk, Deputy Town Clerk and RFO

Minutes of the meeting of St Neots Town Council held on **Tuesday 25th June 2024** at **7.15pm** in the Priory Centre, Priory Lane, St Neots, PE19 2BH.

Public Participation

There were 24 members of the public present. Four members of the public addressed the Council on agenda item 5 the proposed St Neots Splash Park and a funding request to the Council. All four residents spoke in favour of the splash park and while acknowledging the mixed response to the proposal across the community they felt there was wide support from the target demographic. As well as highlighting positives they saw with a splash park, the speakers encouraged the Council to make a decision on the granting of funding, stating that the matter had been going on for a considerable number of years.

ACTIONS

037 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received and noted from Cllrs Kumar, Maslen and Terry.

Admin

038 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Dundas-Todorov declared an interest in agenda item 5 Splash Park Funding request as a Councillor appointed trustee of the CIO.

039 Council Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the meeting of 28th May 2024 as a true and accurate record subject to amending that Cllr Maslen had not been proposed and seconded as nomination for Chairperson of the Promotions and Events Committee.

The Chairperson brought agenda item 5 forward on the agenda as a number of residents were present in relation to that matter.

040 Funding Request – Splash Park

Cllr Simonis, Deputy Chairperson of the Council introduced the item as it had last come to the Council during his term as Chairperson. Cllr Simonis explained that the Council had a duty to act responsibly and with due diligence when committing funding

of any level to a project, including external funding for which the Council must be satisfied the use of public funds is appropriate and will provide long term benefits for residents. The Council must be satisfied that;

- The project is wanted/needed and has public support
- There is a clear understanding on the costs of the project and what this will deliver
- The project offers good value
- The project is sustainable with a long-term viability that ensures protection of Council funds
- The project has a strong commercial basis
- Members needed to consider the application for funding in the same way it did other applications, including risks and assurances

The meeting was also advised there had been a number of legal matters relating to the site that had been investigated and addressed as part of due diligence arising from advice taken by both the Council and the CIO.

The Town Clerk advised the meeting that there was a misconception that the Council was at risk of losing CIL reserves due to 'spend by' time limits associated with contributions received. The Council was not at risk of losing any of its current CIL reserve and funding had already been allocated to projects which addressed any upcoming deadlines over the next year.

Cllr Dundas-Todorov addressed the Council in the capacity of a Council appointed trustee to the St Neots Aquatic and Leisure CIO (SNAL). Cllr Dundas-Todorov spoke on the history of the CIO and its set up in relation to the Council. It was highlighted that there is currently a lot of investment and positive activity in St Neots and the splash park project could play a key part in making St Neots a thriving and active town. The CIO and Council could take this opportunity to work together to find a way of delivering such an asset. A personal thank you was expressed to the CIO trustees for their work over the years.

Cllr Dundas-Todorov withdrew from the Council meeting at 19:44 and did not take part in the debate.

The Chairperson of St Neots Aquatic and Leisure (SNAL) CIO was invited to address the Council and take Councillors question's.

Cllr J Smith left the meeting at 19:55 for personal reasons.

Members raised a number of points in relation to the proposed splash park and the Heads of Terms provided, highlighting the need for detail and agreement on key areas members felt were necessary to the sustainability of the project, including;

- Opening and operational hours and days, particularly minimum requirements that will be placed on the operator



- Costs of entry and the management and limitations of those costs
- How a council funded facility will be kept accessible to all, including entry costs
- Concessions and the freedom of users to take in food and drink
- Clarity on the provision of a toilet block and where this fits in the planned phased delivery of the site
- Permissions on car park usage and assurances that these permissions will continue should operator arrangements change – this was seen as key to the sustainability of the project but was not within the Heads of Terms. With out guaranteed long-term car parking assurances the project is not workable.
- The basis of the lease between the CIO and Eat n Bowl and whether this would be a repairing lease, which was not indicated in the Heads of Terms
- The agreed approach and commitments to maintenance and repair of the site and the responsibility of different parties

Councillors pointed out that a number of key points that needed to be agreed to deliver a sustainable project were missing from the Heads of Terms, particularly assurances on opening hours, car parking and staffing. The Chairperson of the CIO commented that it appeared the Heads of Terms the CIO had provided to the Council may not be the most up to date version. However, as far as the CIO were concerned there was a full-fledged plan which will come forward as a legal agreement which will address and agree the Council's terms.

Members queried running and staffing costs for the facility as set out in the business plan, highlighting what they saw as discrepancies in the figures and seeking clarity on what the predicted running costs would be. Members explained understanding this was key in making sure any funding provided would result in a sustainable facility.

A Member queried whether there were cost differences in the proposed delivery of the site that were different to when the matter was last considered. The Chairperson of the CIO commented that the funding request is based on a fixed price contract from the splash park contractor, but there were increasing project costs which could be managed through an agreement with a contractor temporarily occupying the site to undertake free landscape work. The CIO was working with the company to help lower costs across the project, including through income generated through rent.

The Chairperson acknowledged that there was a discrepancy in the opening hours proposed, with the business plan not matching the planning conditions. It was recognised the Plan needed to be amended to reflect the condition. Members referred to a number of other areas of the Plan which needed updating.

A Member expressed concern at statements made by the Chairperson of the CIO in radio interviews that all information the Council had requested had been provided and that Councillors were not able to understand it. A Councillor commented that they did not recognise this to be the situation, particularly given the Council had requested sight of draft agreements addressing the points and concerns it had previously raised with the CIO which had not been provided.

Members reiterated the risks to the council and public funds, particularly should an agreement on operating the facility provide unworkable in the long term and the facility cease to function.

Members sought assurances that should funding be provided the CIO would draw up and enter into contracts and agreements to satisfy the Council's concerns and meet conditions relating to them, including accepting a grant agreement drawn up by the Council. The Chairperson of the CIO confirmed the CIO would and that legal contracts would be drawn up, including an operating agreement to formally agree actions and terms set out to be signed off by the Council before any money could be drawn down. The CIO had not drawn up agreements to date because it did not want to invest funds in legal costs if there was no support for the project from the Town Council. It was stated the legal costs for the CIO to have agreements drawn up was estimated at £12,000.

A Member commented that the Council could agree to pay for the cost of the CIO's legal work to remove risk to the CIO in spending funds without a confirmation on grant funding.

Proposed that the Town Council defer making a decision on the awarding of any grant funding on the understanding that the Council agrees to pay the legal costs to prepare documentation between the relevant parties at a cost of up to £12,000.

The proposal was not seconded. A Member commented that the Council could reserve funds pending the completion of the documentation asked for and negotiation of conditions.

Proposed, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the Town Council allocates £650,000 of funding from its CIL reserve to the St Neots Splash Park project with release of any funding subject to the negotiation and approval by Council of a grant agreement and CIO meeting conditions set out within that agreement, along with a formal operational agreement between the CIO and operator, approval by the Charity Commission that permits the building of a splash park on the site and the updating of the business plan.

For	Against	Abstain
Cllr Banks	Cllr Pitt	Cllr Bolanz
Cllr Chapman	Cllr Dunford	
Cllr Goodman		
Cllr Mascarenhas		
Cllr Johnson		
Cllr Collins		
Cllr Cooper-Marsh		
Cllr Macnab-Grieve		
Cllr Slade		
Cllr Simonis		
Cllr S Smith		
Cllr Hitchin		

A Member clarified that this means the CIO will need to come back to the Council and conditions will need to be agreed and met before any funding could be given to the project.

It was agreed to work towards a December date for formal approval of documents and meeting of conditions.

Cllr Dundas-Todorov re-joined the meeting.

Committee Minutes

- 041 i) Members received and noted minutes of the Promotion & Events Committee held on 4th June 2024.
- 042 ii) Members received and noted minutes of the Planning Committee held on 11th June 2024.
- 043 iii) Members received and noted minutes of the Operations and Amenities Committee held on 11th June 2024.
- 044 iv) Members received and noted minutes of the Extraordinary Environment and Emergency Committee held on 12nd June 2024.

Members considered and resolved the following recommendation from the Environment and Emergency Committee;

- 045 **RESOLVED** that the Town Council adopt the Climate Action Plan proposed by the Environment and Emergency Committee.

A Member recommended that all councillors review the priority matrix in the document, which was a good summary of the actions set out within the plan.

- 046 v) Members received and noted minutes of the Grants Sub-Committee held on 18th June 2024.

Members considered and resolved the following recommendations from the Grants Sub-Committee;

- 047 **RESOLVED** to award £10,000 to Money Advice St Neots towards the provision of drop-in services every Thursday in St Neots and that the Town Council confirm whether funding comes from the 2024-25 Grant Aid budget or the Council's General Reserves
- 048 **RESOLVED** to award £7,400 to Huntingdon Volunteer Centre towards the delivery and progression of the St Neots Car Scheme and associated support services.

- 049 vi) Members received and noted minutes of the Finance and Governance Committee held on 18th June 2024.

Members considered and resolved the following recommendations from the Finance and Governance Committee;

- 050 **RESOLVED** that a budget of £4,000 be allocated to the redesign of the Town Council website. That £1,247 in earmarked reserves for website programming be allocated to the project, along with £2,753 from the General Reserves.

- 051 **RESOLVED** to allocate £2,626 from the AFD earmarked reserves towards the increased health and safety cost of running the 2024 event and noting a resulting overspend of £1,244 which would come from the Council's General Reserve.

- 052 vii) Members received and noted minutes of the Planning Committee held on 25th June 2024.

Cllr Bolanz left the meeting at 21:26

053 **Annual Governance and Accountability Return 2023-2024**
Annual Internal Audit Report

The Council received and noted the completed Annual Internal Audit Report 2023-2024 of the Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) Part 3 and the final internal audit report for the year which had been carried out.

The Council noted that the report had been considered by the Finance and Governance Committee and contains no areas of concern or recommended actions.

054 **Annual Governance and Accountability Return 2023-2024**
Section 1 – Annual Governance Statement

The Council considered and approved the statements on the Annual Governance Statement (Section 1) of the 2023-2024 Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) Part 3.

RESOLVED to approve the Annual Governance Statement for the 2023-24 Financial Year and that the Town Clerk and the Chairperson of the Council are authorised to sign the statement.

055 **Annual Governance and Accountability Return 2023-2024**
Section 2 – Annual Governance Statement

The Council considered and approved the Accounting Statement (Section 2) of the 2023-2024 Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) Part 3. Members noted and agreed that the Responsible Financial Officer had signed to certify that the

Accounting Statement has been prepared following guidance in Governance & Accountability for smaller Authorities.

RESOLVED to approve the Accounting Statement (Section 2) of the 2023-2024 Annual Governance & Accountability Return (AGAR) Part 3 and that the Chairperson of the Council is authorised to sign the statement.

Members noted that the Notice of Public Rights and Publication of Unaudited Annual Governance & Accountability Return will be from 1st July 2024 to 9th August 2024.

056 Reports from Outside Bodies

A Member advised the Council that St Neots Museum had acquired an Anglo Saxon brooch from British museum. This is an exciting and important part of the museum collection which will be going on display in the near future.

A Member advised that the Huntingdonshire Volunteer Centre were exploring holding regular online calls for Councillor representatives every quarter as a way of improving accessibility.

057 Date of Next Meeting

Members received and noted that the date of the next Full Council meeting would be 23rd July 2024 at 7:15pm.

058 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.

059 Priory Centre Temporary Closure

The Council received and considered a report and recommendation from the Town Clerk and Priory and Eatons Centre General Manager on entering a short-term lease for a town centre property to facilitate the ongoing operation of hireable community space that will be lost during the Priory Centre temporary closure. Members discussed the proposal, the benefits, opportunities and challenges.

Members noted that officers had investigated several options on where to relocate the Priory Centre and Council teams to during the temporary closure of the building, along with how to support users and the community due to the pressure that the closure will put on hireable community space. The proposal presented was felt to be a sensible approach that allowed the Council to continue to operate a reduced Priory

Centre offering while supporting its users and ensuring that valuable community groups and activities continue to operate in St Neots.

The Council recognised the importance of hireable space for groups and the social, cultural and health benefits they offer the community. It was agreed that the move will ensure a flexible town centre based hireable community space, remains available for the community during the redevelopment period when pressure on such space will be increased.

RESOLVED that the Council enter an 18-month lease at the rent set out in the recommendation for a town centre property for the purposes of offering an alternative community venue during the temporary closure of the Priory Centre.

RESOLVED that the Council make an offer as set out in the recommendation for the purchase of assets within the building to allow the Council to transition to and operate from the premises as quickly as is practicable.