# Droitwich Spa Town Council

# TOWN MEETING 11TH MARCH 2024

**Report of the Resources Committee**

The principle role of the Resources Committee is to consider all matters that affect the assets, finances and resources of the Town Council. As Chairman working alongside Vice Chairman Councillor Matt Brook, I confirm that Droitwich Spa Town Council continues to follow a prudent approach to economies & finance and maintain high standards of governance.

The Town Council owns and maintains St Richard’s House comprising the Heritage Centre and Museum, the Community Hall, two parks (Spring Meadow/Door Step Green and Copcut Park), 4 Allotment Sites comprising over 100 individual plots, together with various bus shelters, infrastructure and street furniture in the town. Contractors are engaged to provide and maintain year round Municipal Planting and the Annual Festive Lighting at Christmas. It also contributes to the upkeep of St Mary de Witton Churchyard and makes additional grants through the Resources Committee (to the Citizens’ Advice Bureau and the Council for Voluntary Services). Community grants and sponsorship are invited and considered in association with the Community & Amenities Committee throughout the year

Budgets, Precept & Reserve Positions

Budget provision is split between the Community & Amenities and the Resources Committees for different cost responsibilities. The Town Council has very limited resources to carry out its functions, responsibilities and services as well as maintenance of land holdings, buildings and public equipment within its ownership. Town and Parish Councils, (which are not principal Councils under the Local Government Act 1972), do not receive any grant from the Government. The Town Council relies for its income upon the Precept (share of council tax,) and the Precept Support Grant from Wychavon District Council, together with an element of supplementary revenue derived from office tenancies, Community Hall room hire, retail sales and fees & charges. For the past four Municipal periods the precept requirement has been maintained at £400,140 (+ £36,119 for the static support grant element). This has meant that the combined total operational budget of £436,259 has also been maintained for the same periods (2021/22, 2022/23 2023/24 & set for 2024/25). This in turn has meant only a very marginal Council Tax variance for the Electorate which is attributed entirely to the tax base calculation. This calculation is not within the Town Council remit of influence. The Band D property Council Tax element value for the Town Council for the period 2024/25 is £46.29 which is considerably less than the National Average and many Peer Councils. The tax base variance has resulted in only £ 0.27 pence decrease for the year with no additional precept request submitted to WDC. Two years of operational disruption attributed to the Pandemic from March 2020 and the more recent energy sector and general economic uncertainty are being very effectively managed, thanks to the work of our Town Clerk and supporting staff. A prevailing balanced, best value and frugal approach during these difficult times, has ensured no detrimental impact on the Town Council’s strong financial position. There has been no requirement to draw on reserve balances and these are maintained above the recommended threshold level. The economic situation has recently improved potential return rates for investment due to base rate increases. This is an important consideration to be taken forward by the Town Council to start the new period 2024/2025 by investing some reserve funds and in doing so increase supplementary income by interest earned. For the main part residual rises in service and operational costs incurred by the Town Council are being absorbed within the budgeted provision and supplementary income generated with no current shortfalls. This includes rises within the utility and energy costs so far. These approaches accord with similar considerations and measures being taken forward by Worcestershire County Council and Wychavon District Council.

Grant Awards Scheme (within the remit of the Community & Amenities Committee).

The Town Council continues to review the way in which it sponsors the many events and festivals taking place within the Town each year, including ways to deal with the increasing pressure to support both existing and new projects. Last year financial assistance by way of a £5000 grant fund, through the Community & Amenities Committee, was given towards local groups and projects. The same value fund is allocated for consideration of applications in the period 2024/25. Details are available on the Town Council’s website and we look forward to many more varied and interesting applications from within our town. The first Grants Appraisal Committee meeting of the new Municipal Year takes place on 3 April 2024 (cut off for applications being considered is 25.03.2024). Business purposes are not eligible for consideration for the Community Grant Scheme awards unless the applicant is a designated Community Interest Company (CIC) or has Registered Charity Status.

Project Delivery, Scope and External Sources of Funding

Significant projects delivered to plan and within budget during 2023 included the Kings Charles III Coronation celebrations in May and the West Midlands Mayors Community Celebration – Picnic in the Park in September.

A key Strategic Project for the Town Council proceeding from resurrection in July 2022 is the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). The focused and informed approach now being taken has already secured Locality (Government) grant funding to cover professional Consultant costs and additional Technical Support work streams provided by the Government Contractor – AECOM. Close collaboration with Wychavon District Council Planning and WCC is enabling a balanced & economic approach to be taken for the project, including support in kind, transferable content material and some additional externally sourced funding contributions. This represents considerable value in that the current position is virtually cost neutral, aside from staff resourcing provision. The initial resident surveys have produced a good response and I was not surprised to note in the Planning Consultant’s comments that the people of Droitwich have a strong “sense of place” and a strong interest in seeing our Brine Baths restored as an economic boost to our town. This is reflected in the view of the Town Council to support the work of SOBBs. Momentum is on track to achieve the NDP within the anticipated timescale of 18 months and to fully align with the Local Plan currently under review and being set to 2041– the South Worcestershire Development Plan.

External funding has been acquired with the support of County Council Elected Members from Divisional Fund allocations. These funds have been used towards various public realm and improvement projects for the community. The Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner has successfully been approached to apply for and secure grant awards to purchase and match fund Solar Vehicle Activated signs (VAS), as part of the local community speed watch campaign. For 2024/2025 exciting options in course include a Stage 2 Community Legacy application with Wychavon District Council for planned improvements to the Heritage Centre & Museum and a funding application to the Natural Networks Scheme. The latter proposes bio diversity, habitat and hardscaping improvements to the public realm environments at Spring Meadow and Copcut Park. Both of these projects and the connected funding opportunities are likely to be finalised by early summer and will represent significant initiatives likely to span an estimated 18 months for completion.

A collaborative strategic project likely to progress this coming year is the centric business hub conversion of the second floor at St Richards House. This is currently moving to the next stage working with stakeholders – Wychavon District Council, WDC Place Board and Worcestershire County Council.

Governance & Risk Management

The Committee has reviewed all relevant polices such as Financial Risk Management, Financial Regulations & Standing Orders and Internal Controls and we continue to use the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) recommended regulations as our principal guidelines in doing this. The Internal Auditor has undertaken interim and financial year end reviews of controls and procedures and I am pleased to report that, at this time, standards remain high with robust controls in place. I am especially grateful to Mrs Jane Greenfield and our Deputy Town Clerk for their hard work and diligence which are instrumental in maintaining these high standards year on year to ensure that we are in a robust financial position to enable many good things to do done for Droitwich.

Risk Management and Due Diligence extends further with responsibilities for tenancies, lettable office space, public realm land, two public buildings and the arrangements for organising numerous Town Events and occasions. A full review of Health and Safety and inspection regimes takes place in August every year. Event arrangements are all subject to preparation of risk assessments, method statements and confirmation of suitable public liability insurance cover. These responsibilities often involve strong collaboration with Peer Councils and other Agencies including the emergency services, Regulatory & Licencing and Health Care providers. The Town Council has good working relationships with the Internal and External Auditors which provide guidance and the standards to maintain good governance in the Local Government Sector. These standards are comprehensive and include operations, banking & finance, employer’s responsibilities, all risk’s mitigation and VAT reconciliation. During the past year the procurement process has been followed for the renewal options for Christmas Lights arrangements which were scheduled for review in early 2023.

Local Government finances always face many challenges which become even more important considerations when faced with the pandemic, global conflict, and an uncertain road to economic recovery. The very positive public response to our Christmas lights and our Civic Planting arrangements confirm that this work is greatly appreciated as an appropriate use of our funds.

Staffing

Mrs Rebecca Butler re-joined the Heritage Manager Team in June 2022 and has been planning an exciting major update and improvements to our museum. The Accredited status for the Museum was successfully renewed following Becky’s appointment, working with Catherine. Katy joined the team in late October 2022, bringing the staffing allocation up to full strength. Katy has played a major part in introducing the live-streaming and on-line recordings of our various council and committee meetings. I would also like to thank the member of our volunteers who kindly provided IT support for this project. Our proceedings continue to be open and transparent and are now even more accessible to everyone through the links on our website.

Projects and Strategic Priorities

I am pleased to report that despite financial pressures on the Town Council, we have been able to maintain out outward-facing function at St Richard’s House where our knowledgeable staff are able to assist callers with local issues, either directly, or by signposting them to the relevant council or other organisations.

Disappointingly we have seen an increase in graffiti in the town which has meant additional expenditure on expensive anti-graffiti coatings. Even though these improve the level of protection, the graffiti still must be manually cleaned off by our Lengthsman. I would ask all residents to be vigilant and report any anti-social activity to the Police.

The WDC Place Board is taking many new ideas and initiatives forward and Councillor AM Sinton represents on behalf of the Town Council. I am pleased to report that the recommendations to Wychavon District Council include provision for a new Brine Baths as part of the upgrades to the Lido and Lido Park.

Many work streams and projects continue to progress following the disruption of the pandemic period. These are summarised as part of the report on budgets & finance produced in January to support consideration for the precept. Key initiatives which the Town Council expects to move further forward this year with projects including:

1. The refurbishment and improved offerings for the Heritage Centre and Museum.
2. Business hub and additional lettable Office space facilities for the second floor at St Richards House.
3. Further resident-consultation with the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) working to the Consultants outlined schedule.
4. Consideration for land use and asset disposal options for the Kidderminster Road land holding.

The recording and filming of all Town Council and Committee Meetings at St Richards House began in November 2022. The live stream option is now available for all meetings through the council’s You Tube channel. Recordings of meetings can also be accessed via the Council’s website.

Savings and efficiencies are continually monitored including energy options. An application was registered and confirmed in late 2021 for the “Zero Carbon Ready Worcestershire Decarbonisation Review” through the Public Sector Energy Efficiency Programme (PEEP). This work covered both owned and maintained buildings – the Community Hall and St Richards House. LED upgrades were finalised in May 2023. The 45 year old gas boiler in St Richards House was replaced with a modern, more efficient unit. This is already providing significant benefits, in terms of cost savings, reduced energy consumption and reduced carbon emissions.

The Committee continues to review and identify ways in which short, medium and long term repairs and maintenance are to be financed and a schedule of maintenance and improvement works continues. This covers all Town Council assets including premises, land holdings, fixtures and fittings.

A replacement main server and upgraded remote back up system for IT was acquired within budget scope in August 2023. For the new period 2024/2025 it is anticipated to migrate the phones and wire based broad band connections to an integrated cloud based system. This is to make forward provision for the expected digitalisation of phone systems and maximise efficiencies. The cloud options researched indicate a cost saving over existing arrangements.

The Town Council maintains two long standing lease hold arrangements with valued tenants for office space and facilities at St Richards House on the first floor.

Closing Remarks

This has been a further difficult time for everyone with the continued knock-on impact of the pandemic, global conflict and prevailing economic challenges. Despite these factors I am pleased to report that the Town Council’s finances and business operations remain robust and in a healthy condition.

I am confident that the Town Council is exercising and maintaining good standards of due diligence & governance and will continue to rise to all challenges and provide best value benefitting the Town, its residents and visitors.

My thanks go to Councillor Matt Brook - Vice Chairman and all members of the Resources Committee and fellow Councillors for supporting me in my role as Chairman. I would like to thank the Council’s Officers - Katy, Jane & Mark for their work in maintaining and monitoring the Council’s resources and for their personal support provided to me in my role as Chairman.

Councillor G R Brookes

Chairman of Resources Committee.

March 2024.