

Droitwich Spa Town Council

REPORT TO COMMUNITY & AMENITIES COMMITTEE – 13 JANUARY 2025 AND TO RESOURCES COMMITTEE – 13 JANUARY 2025

DRAFT ESTIMATES, BUDGETS & RECOMMENDED PRECEPT FOR 2025/2026 (INCLUDES ANNUAL REVIEW OF FEES AND CHARGES)

Review of Fees and Charges

1. As part of the preparation for the 2025/2026 Estimates, the Community & Amenities Committee is invited to review its budgets (shown in blue on the attached financial analysis) within the Estimates overall, together with the fees and charges made for Council services.
2. Any revision to the Fees and Charges will be presented to Resources Committee meeting which follows and then to Council on 20 January 2025 for final consideration.
3. Currently the Fees and Charges are as follows and were last amended in January 2022. No further changes are recommended for 2025/2026.

<u>ALLOTMENT RENTAL</u>	
£5 Reduction maintained for senior citizens & registered disabled Allotment Plot tenants	
<u>Chawson Lane</u>	£40
<u>Copcut Park</u>	£40
<u>Westwood Lodge</u>	£40
£27.50 for half-plot with full discount applicable	
<u>Vines Lane</u>	£30 (Nb no water)

<u>COMMUNITY HALL HIRE OF ROOM</u>		
20% Discount maintained for Registered Charities		
Main Hall	£22 per hour	£180 full day (inc evening)
John Corbett Room	£17.50 per hour	£120 full day (inc evening)
Small Meeting Room	£12 per hour	£75 full day (inc evening)
<u>ADDITIONAL SERVICE CHARGES</u>		
General Photo Copying requests = 50 pence per copy		
Official Document / Identity Verification, & Signature requests = £10.00 per request		
Event Equipment handling charge = £25 per request		

Glossary

4. Precept: this is the demand of Council Tax income that councils need to provide their services. The amounts for all local authorities providing services in an area appear on one Council Tax bill, which comes from the billing authority who maintains the collection funds, in this case Wychavon District Council.

5. Precepting Authority: this is an Authority that sets a precept to be collected by Billing Authorities through the Council Tax bill. County Councils, Police Authorities, the Greater London Authority and joint Fire Authorities are known as major Precepting Authorities. Town/Parish Councils are known as Local Precepting Authorities.
6. Tax Base: the total number of properties within the local authority area expressed in terms of B and D equivalents, incorporating single person discounts and deductions for unoccupied dwellings and dwellings where only exempt persons live, and the disabled person's reduction.
7. Net Tax Base: the Tax Base further adjusted, by District Councils, for expected losses on collection, losses on valuation appeals, growth, etc.

Introduction to the estimates and budgeting 2025/2026

8. Members will be aware that the recent economic situation has seen dramatic with ongoing budget cuts throughout Local Government. Wychavon District Council and Worcestershire County Council have also made extensive reductions in budgets. This is before the pandemic situation developed from March 2020 onwards.
9. The introduction in 2012/2013 of the "Localising Council Tax Support" scheme altered local government financing arrangements. The Government provided a grant to principal councils and other major precepting bodies to compensate them for the reduction in the tax base. This was at a rate of 90% of current scheme costs. No such grant is paid to local town and parish councils (as these are not 'principal councils' - Local Government Act 1972) and instead their share is included in the grant paid to the billing authority. Effectively, this means that a proportion of the Town Council's income is now determined by Wychavon District Council.
10. The Town Council relies for its income upon the Precept and the Precept Support Grant from Wychavon District Council. There is also an element from sales revenue, fees & charges, sponsorship and tenancies. Central Government had announced the Local Council Tax Support Grant element of the total Revenue Support Grant was due to cease in 2018, meaning the Town Council would then suffer the complete loss of grant. Alternative funding to replace this has not yet been identified so it is understood that the present arrangements are to continue. Despite receiving no revenue support grant from the Government, Wychavon District Council intend to maintain the amount of grant support which is passed at the same level as that paid in 2024/2025.
11. Droitwich Spa Town Council's Precept and Grant Requirement for 2024/2025 amounted to £436,259 of which the grant element was £36,119 and the precept was £400,140. The grant being paid by Wychavon District Council (the billing authority) is voluntary. Wychavon has confirmed that the grant will remain the same at £36,119 for 2025/2026. This was confirmed at a meeting of the Wychavon Executive Board on 20 November 2024.
12. The uncertainty in relation to the referendum regime has been clarified for the present, no referendum principles are to be applied to English Parishes. This has been the case for several years. Council tax referendum principles for Town and Parish councils during the past few years remain as follows.

The Government seeing clear evidence of restraint in the increases set by the sector.

Members may be aware that previously if relevant Local Authorities were to set Council Tax increase above a fixed ceiling that is approved by Parliament each year - that would have triggered an automatic referendum for all registered electors in the area. On this basis, the Government proposed to continue with no referendum principles for Town and Parish councils in 2025/2026 but will keep this matter under active review for future years.

13. The full Draft Estimates have been reviewed by the Leader of the Town Council, the Chairman of the Resources Committee and the Chairman of the Community & Amenities Committee and are now presented on the attached appendix for consideration. **If anyone has any questions on these please contact the Town Clerk and/or Office in advance of full consideration of the estimates.**
14. The Committee is requested to produce estimates of the Council's Income and Expenditure for the financial year 2025/2026, sufficient to formulate a recommendation to the Town Council meeting to be held on Monday 20 January 2025, as to the amount to be precepted from Wychavon District Council.
15. **Wychavon District Council (the Billing Authority) is due to confirm the estimated net Tax Base for 2025/26 at a meeting of its Executive Board on 8 January 2025. For Droitwich Spa the Tax Base of 8685.30 has been proposed. An Increase of 1.99% results in a request of £410,000.00, with a Band D property increase from an annual council tax of £46.29 to £47.21, an amount of £0.92 pence per annum. With the precept support grant element of £36,119.00 included this represents the total budget requirement from WDC of £446,119. This follows four successive years with no increases.**

Precept 2024/25	Tax Base 2024/25	Band A 6/9	Band B 7/9	Band C 8/9	Band D 9/9	Band E 11/9	Band F 13/9	Band G 15/9
400,140	8644.35	30.86	36	41.15	46.29	56.58	66.86	77.15
Precept ESTIMATE	Tax Base 2025/26 provisional	Band A 6/9	Band B 7/9	Band C 8/9	Band D 9/9	Band E 11/9	Band F 13/9	Band G 15/9
410,000	8685.30	31.47	36.72	41.96	47.21	57.70	68.19	78.68

an increase of	1.99%
results in a precept of	£410,000

Community Grant	£36,119	Next year	£47.21
Precept	<u>£410,000</u>	Current yr	<u>-£46.29</u>
	<u>£446,119</u>		<u>£0.92</u>

Considerations for inclusion with the estimates and budget setting

16. Alongside the statutory functions carried out by the Town Council, it also owns (inter alia) two parks, four allotment sites, and two buildings – the Community Hall and St Richard's House. St Richard's House is home to the Tourist Information Centre, the Salt Museum and the Radio Room, the Town Council Offices and two tenants. In common with many other Town and Parish Councils Droitwich Spa Town Council has limited resources. Members should note that a staffing review was undertaken ten years ago and several staff redundancies ensued.

- 17. Reserves Position - The Auditor recommendations are for the maintenance of reserves at no less than 50% of the preceptual income value, which has now been achieved over several years of careful management. The Annual estimates for the next period 2025/2026 start with the budgeting and review of the Reserve Position. A capital spend element of £38,916.00 has been allocated in the past year for the foot path improvements at Copcut Park. This is aligned with the Natural Networks project which secured an additional £15,000.00 funding towards the planting aspects. In addition some Reserve expenditure has been absorbed in professional fees for the Heritage project to start in 2025/26 and replacement infrastructure (bus shelters incorporating some CIL due for expiry) . The projection to spend an estimated £92K in 2025/26 for the Museum building costs is a key factor. This represents an overall forecast shortfall in 2025/26 of £58,981. This is effectively a reduction of**

balances and supports the outlook to expend some of the accumulated reserves. Alternatively the non-expenditure for the building costs would result in a calculation forecast of an addition to balances of £33,019 at the end of the 2025/26 period.

18. More specifically The Practitioners Guide is the set of rules which covers Parish & Town Councils. This is endorsed by Calc/ Nalc and the Internal and External Auditors. Within the latest 2024 edition the guide sets out that general reserves should be somewhere between 3 and 12 months to cover operations. These **do not** include earmarked reserves which are ring fenced amounts to be used for specific projects. Reference is

Governance and Accountability for Local Councils – a Practitioners Guide.

<https://www.nalc.gov.uk/library/our-work/ipag/3859-practitioners-guide-2023>

Calc recommend the following considerations with regards to projects - which should be something for the Community but also something that can continue to be serviced through the Council for the longer term. For example, it is not advised to take on projects such as flooding abatement works alone, as this is the primary responsibility of the Environment Agency or County Council, as there are too many nuances for Local Councils to maintain. The key aim is to work with and include the Community and external agencies, so that the Council acts as the valuable conduit for all concerned.

19. The Internal Auditor has acknowledged during 2023/2024 & 2024/2025 that the Town Council Reserve position is positive but complicated for the reason that it comprises elements of CIL, Restricted and General Reserves all of which have different principles for consideration. Fiscal performance to plan has been reviewed in September 2024 and budgeting estimates and forecasted outcomes made from the December 2024 Bank Reconciliations. The Internal Auditor's observations and professional opinion from the last reported Interim Review in November 2023 contained in his report are –

- From paragraph 5.33 and 5.34 of the latest 2023 Edition of the Practitioners Guide that “ *any authority with income and expenditure in excess of £200,000 per annum should plan towards 3 months equivalent in general reserve*”.
- The Total expenditure of the Council for the period 2022/2023 was £512,304, which would represent a general reserve holding of £128,076 on this calculation. The Total Reserve as at 31. March 2023 was approximately £637,000 - which is £509,000 above the levels implied by the Practitioners Guide – **before** any consideration for the CIL and Restricted Reserves elements.
- Land Sales - Proceeds money was received for land adjacent 74 Cockshute Hill, Droitwich Spa in January 2019. This amount is the revised purchase price of £180,000.00 less the agents' commission and solicitor's conveyance costs. The proceeds are designated as “**restricted capital reserves**” for consideration towards possible future projects. Such reserves should be “first call” when evaluating eligible projects
- Investment return options should also be considered where applicable to accord with the Internal and External Auditors advice (Sept & Nov 2023). It is recommended to consider investing a fixed amount on a relatively short rolling renewal option (e.g suggestion of £100K over 6 months) to maintain some reasonable accessibility of General Reserve in a savings fund to derive additional supplementary income from interest. The Calc recommendation as presented to the Resources Committee throughout 2023 & 2024 is as follows-

Investment Policy Review and Options – To coincide with the new Administration from May 2023 and to align with the ongoing strategic priorities outlined within the Financial Report produced to support the estimates, budget setting and precept calculations in January 2024, it is important to review investment and reserve position options. The following linked information has been recommended for consideration of suitable safe investment options by Worcestershire CALC in February 2023. Recent progressive Bank Base Rate increases have marginally improved savings rate potential which is now relevant and representative by the outlined example yield rates as follows. **Due to the progress made with Strategic Projects – notably the Heritage Centre and the Natural Networks through 2024 no investment has been allocated yet for the reason of the projected and ongoing capital spend elements from overall Reserves and the requirement for funds access.**

Latest yield

Class 3	As at 2 Jan 2025	4.7403%	(4.8447% AEY)
Class 4	As at 2 Jan 2025	4.7403%	(4.8447% AEY)

- **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)** – Payments of this restricted reserve element have accumulated in 2024/ 2025 and been reported through the Resources Committee as outlined.

The reserves holding of accumulated CIL monies held was reviewed in April 2024. Minute reference 423-2023/2024 refers for noting. In line with regulations monies received must be spent or returned to the District Council within 5 years of receipt. The monies must be used to support development by funding:

- The provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure or
- Anything else concerned with addressing the demands that development places on an area.

The Town Council currently maintains Total Neighbourhood Fund Receipts of £20,575.80, comprising four separate CIL payment components as follows *[for information]*.

- £1939.47 Cockshute Hill Development – received October 2019.
- £7614.76 Woodland Way Development- received October 2021.
- £10,434.74 Site Demolition and development of Food Store & Car Parking, George Baylis Road - received April 2024.
- £586.83 plot 5 of 9 self -build dwellings – Oakley Gardens , Newland Lane – received September 2024

Total = £20,575.80

The position further reviewed in October 2024 through the Resources Committee allocated the two historic CIL receipts within the 5 year time allowance - totalling £9,554.47 towards replacement bus shelters on Celvestune Way (total cost £13,719). **This takes the CIL Element remaining to £11,021.57 which comprises the two receipts paid over in 2024/2025.** . Further small CIL receipts are anticipated in 2025/2026. The Town Council has an obligation to publish the CIL balances held as part of the financial reporting each year.

20. **Strategic Projects and Other External Funding Opportunities**

Currently the Town Council has mandates to proceed and active work in progress for the following Strategic Initiatives all of which have connected potential for outside funding. This has been considered when reviewing and setting various cost centre budgets as part of the overall estimates for 2024/2025 and 2025/2026. To the effect that each project will necessitate some capital investment and increased ongoing budget allocation, but the levels will also be affected by the outcome of the associated funding applications.

- **Museum and Heritage Centre Development and Improvement for St Richards House.**
- Design and Grant-** Resolved in December 2023 to submit prepared Community Legacy application for Scheme to Wychavon District Council in January 2024. The Bid outcome notified in July 2024 was successful allocating a granted value of £130,000 for the Design and outfitting aspects. The Design has been subject to procurement with contract terms set for final ratification in January 2025. The successful bidder projects £124,145 inclusive of 5% contingencies for delivery. An undertaking is held from WDC which permits any remaining balance from the grant to be used towards the building costs.
 - Building and Permissions** - A lot of work has been achieved in 2024/2025 including full building surveying, architectural drawings, planning application, Conservation reports , permissions granted and the progressing discharge of the two conditional factors. These statutory aspects have all been largely funded within the scope of budgets. The building costs aspect is to be capital expenditure from reserves and is conditional for the CLG funding. **As at January 2025 the forecast building costs are £ 95K from reserves. This is calculated from estimates of £88K + contingency and will be subject to full procurement through February /March, with work anticipated in July and August. Building costs and materials are subject to variation and**

contingency setting will need to be a key consideration for further review. This is significant because the schedule of building work will commence after the sector price fluctuations in April which requires careful estimates with attention to supply chains and delivery timescales.

Design fitting will follow in early autumn with a project completion expected towards November 2025. It is important to note that there will be some business interruption associated with the project from June to November 2025 affecting the TIC operation and use of the Council Chamber /Community Hall for meetings. This will have some limited impact on supplementary income streams through the TIC and Community Hall hire revenue. Business interruption and contingency planning will be updated in due course as 2025 starts through the Community & Amenities Committee.

- Second Floor Business Hub, Lettable Office Space and improvements for Access, Entrance Way and Stairwell for St Richards House (Council Chamber/ 22 Victoria Square aspect). There is an existing mandate to proceed in principle for this initiative and design concept has already been completed. The next stage is to formally instruct architects and progress collaboration & overall funding opportunities with stakeholder partners –indicatively Wychavon District Council, WDC Place Board, Worcestershire County Council and the Worcestershire Growth Hub. This project would help determine regular additional supplementary rental income for the Town Council once completed. The change of use proposal for the second floor has many associated benefits including business and commerce support in the centric location for the community and reduction in carbon footprint for users. Surveying element completed during 2024 as economy of scale with Museum project pre-work.
- Solar PV- Projected options referred to LPA for feasibility of options and consideration of planning permission viability- September 2024. Awaiting response from LPA.
- Natural Networks – Project completed December 2024 to plan. Maximum £15K grant funding secured for project. Capital spend element of £38,716 for contribution on associated footpath works.
- Neighbourhood Plan – NDP (see separate section under point 24) – Objective to maintain progress towards NDP and complete delivery of project within projected timeframe from July 2022. Draft NDP submitted to LPA October 2024 before anticipated Regulation 14 Consultation. This is expected to be over six weeks towards April /May 2025. It is important to consider that the NDP and SWDPR (currently under final review stage) align to the forecast timeframe of 2041 for continuity until next reviews. To date the NDP has been self- supported through Locality Funding grants secured for Professional fees – and workload absorbed with in Town Council operations. Some small budgetary allocation and WCC Divisional Fund contribution will be required to deliver the public consultation costs in 2025/2026.
- St Richards House Heating System – During the past three years the outdated heating system at St Richards House has been improved by the fitting of a new heat distribution pump, isolation valves for ease of maintenance and two new gas boilers. These improvements have for the main part been funded from general budget provision and there is no expectation for additional capital investment at this stage. The boilers are expected to provide a cost saving and efficiencies for gas consumption and have sufficient additional capacity for the proposed change of use for the second floor of the premises.
- A442 Land- Kidderminster Road- This is a redundant land holding owned by the Town Council and is in a location of strategic gap between Droitwich Spa and Hampton Lovett. There is an existing mandate to proceed in place with considering options for land use or sale. The site is significant in area and has benefits of proximity to the A442, A38 & M5 main roads network, as well as the adjacent Berry Hill Industrial Estate. Various options and offers have been considered in the past with mixed interest and no tangible progress made. Restrictive factors have included the off grid location, an existing access covenant, brown field site status and market price fluctuations. The recommendation is to now commission to undertake a separate piece of work to complete a full land use feasibility study and report. This would enable informed consideration of the best future potential and value for the site/asset. Approaches to Peer Councils and other professional organisations such as Educational & Manufacturing sectors.
- Land adjacent Victoria Square, St Andrews Road- There is an existing transfer of title in course for this parcel of land without cost, from Wychavon District Council to DSTC. This follows an offer received in late 2022 and was instructed by the MHDC Legal Team to the Land Registry in January 2023. Timescales can be

lengthy and the transfer was confirmed as still being in course as at Sept 2024. The land is in a strategic position adjacent the former Lloyds Bank building and opposite the former Raven Hotel .Consideration remains to formalise the arrangement when the transfer of title is accepted and confirmed. Matters to be decided will include return of the land to accessible public realm space, fixtures & planting options and due diligence for insurance liabilities. This project will require capital investment once the change in title has been achieved and the level will be determined by the preferred scope and design. Further relevant factors are the ongoing position with the Raven site development and closure for the Lloyds Bank branch effective from November 2024.

21. Additional Budgeting Factors

Over recent years there has been pressure to assist financially with many events and festivals taking place within the Town. Various funding options have been explored and it was proposed that the budget for the Grants Appraisal Panel be increased to £15,000 during 2018/2019 from its original level of £7,500 and for all requests for sponsorship of Events and Festivals to be applied for and scrutinised by the Panel together with any other requests for financial assistance. The threshold for the allocation of grants was also raised. At present the Committee can recommend maximum awards of £500 with £1,000 awarded only in exceptional circumstances. For 2019/2020 it was resolved to revert back to the original Grant fund of £7,500 for two years and simultaneously allocate the combined £15,000 reserve saving towards the Late Queens Platinum Jubilee Celebrations in 2022. This was important to match fund the Wychavon contribution for the event over a two year provision and an Arts Council bid submitted, as well as to maintain reasonable grant funding support for other community groups and events. The pandemic from 2020 impacted over the past four years and the grants provision was reduced to £5000 with a caveat to increase to £7500 should demand be registered. Interest in the Community Grants scheme has diminished over the past 4 years with current allocation standing at a level to meet demand. Press statements have been necessary to encourage interest and submissions from applicants. The likely main cause of the reduction in applications are factors associated with the Pandemic and restrictions to activities as well as the shortage of Volunteers for many Community Groups.

EVENT	DATE(S) for 2025
St Richard's Festival	Friday 2 May – Monday 5 th May 2025
Sunday Band Concerts – Lido Park	Provisionally scheduled for 20 weeks beginning Sunday 4 th May until Sunday 6 th September 2025. To note that this arrangement replicates the extension from 16 to 20 weeks in 2024 from 2023.
VE Day 80 Anniversary Event	Thursday 8 th May 2025
Salt Fest Town Community Festival – Greek Culture	Friday, Saturday & Sunday 23 rd , 24 th and 25 th May 2025.
Rik Mayall Comedy Festival	Saturday 31 st May - Saturday 7 th June 2025
Food & Drink Festival	<i>Last Notified as cancelled in Sept 2024 due to Licencing.</i>
Salt Fest	<i>To be confirmed</i>
Remembrance Sunday	Sunday 9 th November 2025.
Christmas Lights Switch On	Saturday 22 nd November 2025.
Edward Winslow Day	Friday 28 th November 2025

22. Within the Estimates there is a sum of £1,000 for events general organised by the Town Council. Please note that as nationally there is no longer Police marshalling of Remembrance Sunday parades this responsibility falls to the Town Council. The Town Council runs its own event for the Christmas Lights Switch-On which is a family based community event.

23. A rolling programme of replacement event equipment has been supported by the Communities and Amenities Committee since 2018/2019, with the purchase, maintenance and storage of various items, including commercial-strength gazebos. This equipment resource is well received and utilised by many Local Groups, Associations, Schools and Event Organisers through the year as a Community shared

amenity. This service enables wider use of the equipment in the community whereby expensive commercial hire arrangements are cost prohibitive to many groups. A small handling charge is in place to cover the liabilities & staffing costs for the arrangements, distribution and returns.

24. Markets - The Friday Weekly Charter Market was resurrected in April 2023 working with Bluebell Events .This arrangement is working well and brings valuable regular foot flow, business and commerce to the Town Centre each week. A Working Group of Elected Members is in place to support the operation and review arrangements on a six monthly basis. This is next scheduled for March 2025. The standing arrangements maintained with the Worcestershire Farmers Market Group over many years for a Farmers Market on the first Saturday monthly (and additional events) ceased in September 2024 due to retirements . The Charter Market permissions are maintained to enable these operations and are renewed in April. Consideration will be made for 2025/2026 whether to extend the scope of the Charter Market. This follows some success in December 2024 for a Festive Market on Saturdays despite inclement weather. Due to challenges in the sector and the overall economic position, no revenue is derived from either of the Market operations apart from coverage of statutory licence permissions and electricity costs. A key factor for the Charter Market is the positive & sustainable working arrangement, collaborating with the Town Council including power supply provision, equipment storage options and publicity.

25. The Town Council currently has responsibilities both statutory and otherwise which necessitate precept consideration for operations and business continuity and growth. The proposals for budget , estimates and precept include due consideration for any inflation impact on standing arrangements

RECOMMENDATION

- 1. That the Grants Budget (\$137 Grants and Sponsorship) be set at £5,000.00 as detailed in the Estimates to enable reasonable financial assistance for Community Groups, Festivals and Events to be referred to the Grants Appraisal Panel for scrutiny and consideration, with onward recommendation to Community & Amenities Committee.**
- 2. That no change is made to Charges, Fees and Commissions for the period 2025/2026.**

26. Resources Committee Grant Funding

For many years the Resources Committee has supported the following Community functions through the payment of separate grants in July, - The Parish Churches towards cemetery upkeep, the Droitwich Council for Voluntary Services and South Worcestershire Citizens Advice Bureau. Provision has been made in the draft budget for 2025/2026. Any consideration for increase in the amounts awarded should be consistently applied to all three beneficiary organisations in the interests of fairness and consistency.

27. St Richards House Office Tenancy Arrangements

The Town Council has two valued and long standing tenants who maintain arrangements for office space, facilities and car parking. This is an important source of supplementary income. During the pandemic both tenants have maintained their rental payments despite reduced office working. Additional support has been provided throughout the Pandemic period from the Town Council including reduction in service charges, some grant funding and some internal redecoration. Both tenants look set to renew their commitment to maintain the rental space moving forward in 2025/26. One tenant had notified a reduction of their requirement for office space which for the main part has been successfully adjusted and allocated to the other existing tenancy arrangement effective from 1st January 2024. Due to the static period throughout the pandemic and the ongoing energy sector price fluctuations it is recommended to consider a further review of Service Charge levy for the tenancies - linking to the Retail Price to be effective from April 2025. Any increase will require notification to the tenants who are both aware of the necessity for the annual review

Scope exists with a mandate to proceed (see strategic projects outline section 21) to create additional lettable office space on the second floor of St Richards House. Provisional design options have been produced in 2022. The initiative could be similar to the existing Wychavon Pillar facility at the Civic Centre in Pershore and is supported in principle by WDC and WCC for shared professional advice and some possible funding consideration, subject to full feasibility and design. There would be many associated benefits and economies of scale linked to the existing Town Council, Heritage Centre and established tenants operations in the building. Expansion options for rentable office facilities supports the local economy, the working local/ from home- hybrid approach and helps towards a reduction of carbon footprint with reduced commutes.

28. Town Council Assets

Buildings

Essential & regular maintenance, progressive improvements and investment have all continued for both the Community Hall and St Richards House premises throughout 2024/2025.. Some internal redecoration has been carried out at the Community Hall and St Richards House. There is still an urgent need to undertake some work on the external window frames of both premises. All Health and Safety aspects were fully reviewed and updated in August 2024 with the assigned professional consultant. The provision will continue to be monitored especially for fire protection arrangements due to the ever changing regulations and the requirement to maintain all aspects to standards for public buildings. Suitable provision is included within the draft budgets. Outstanding measures for improved external signage & lighting, sound suppression and projection equipment (both John Corbett Room) are being coordinated for consideration at the Community Hall. These enhancements together with some essential repairs (for example window frame rendering and internal decor) are likely to need capital expenditure. The Community Hall continues to be well used and is a key source of supplementary income. Performance to budgeted plan in 2024/2025 has exceeded targets and reservations held for 2025/2026 appear very positive.

Energy Sector for Premises

Whilst energy consumption and expenditure remains within the set budget parameters all efficiencies continue to be monitored. Consumption and payments for electricity, gas and water utilities are all tracked on line with the Service Provider and rates are fixed for the best available tariff and not standard variable. The ongoing sector price instability and uncertainty beginning in 2022 necessitated monthly payments to be increased for gas and electricity. An accumulated debtor balance for electricity at St Richards House has been absorbed within business contingencies and partly offset with an - underspend credit balance for the Community Hall during 2022. Thereafter consumption has been aligned within budgeted plan. The compelling increased cost impact from 2022 was gas consumption for the St Richards House premises. This will continue to be monitored closely and is anticipated to benefit positively for savings and reduced emissions from the efficiencies of new boilers fitted in November 2023, going forwards. All energy consumption tariffs are regularly reviewed for best value.

Full Peep Surveys have been undertaken during the period from October 2021 to September 2022. Resultant recommendations for consideration towards Solar PV and full LED Conversion have been investigated further. This included scoping, forecasted return values and funding opportunities through WCC. The investment works to both buildings central heating systems includes new heat distribution pumps, valve gear and digital time switches. These features represent significant improvements linked to more responsible energy use and monitoring. The feasibility regarding Solar PV for SRH currently awaits a response from the LPA.

Electrical, IT & Technology

There has been continuing investment and upgrade for various systems during 2024/2025 including – Environmental monitoring for the museum artefacts and collections, automated stock control for the TIC/Museum retail sales items, card payment facilities for retail sales and IT work stations for the Heritage

Team. For the main Office operations the Scribe system has been enhanced to include online bookings for the Community Hall and automated invoicing for rooms bookings and allotment tenancies. These additional Scribe processes have enabled work placed savings and an increase in revenue for supplementary income – especially for the Community Hall room hire.

Arboreal, Parks & Street Infrastructure

The Town Council owns and maintains approximately 30 bus shelters, signage, numerous benches, planting infrastructure, 12 VAS for speed awareness and 5 town centre noticeboards throughout the area. Essential maintenance, cleaning and vandalism repairs are an integral provision in the draft budget each year. In addition a rolling programme of refurbishment is maintained and at least one bus shelter has been fully renovated within the scope of the budget every year for the last seven periods. Graffiti and vandalism is a constant issue and there has been a marked increase over the past year. Inspections, repairs and graffiti removal are proactively taken forward on a regular basis and this is becoming a real concern in some areas.

The materials, resources, management and time expended in this area of work are significant and ever increasing. For context by examples the specialist anti- graf coating paint necessary to target harden vulnerable locations against graffiti, such as bus shelters and signs costs several hundred pounds for a 5 litre drum. In addition in 2024/2025 one bus shelter has been written off due to a traffic collision and two solar VAS have been vandalised beyond economic repair (replacement value quoted as approximately £2.5K net of VAT per unit). Replacement VAS have now been secured through OPCC matched funding.

The five year professional arboreal survey covering all of the Town Council land holdings (2 Parks and 3 of the 4 allotment sites) was completed in June 2022 and again in November 2024. This derived the usual programmes of ranked priority and categorised arboreal maintenance work. All high risk (category two) work recommended is instructed awaiting professional attention from the latest survey. Fiscal provision is within the land holdings and parks cost centre budgeting. The frequency of arboreal surveys has been increased to meet insurance recommendations and in consideration of the aged mature tree stock at Copcut Park.

The dredging for drainage flow of the large pond at Copcut Park has continued in spring 2023 including measures to improve the inflow channel. The work is an expensive and substantial undertaking. This is significant as the free flowing of the pond and efficient outfall of Copcut Stream into the River Salwarpe has important environmental responsibilities and liabilities attached for the Town Council. It is likely that the pond will require similar dredging attention in 2025/2026. In the interim it is recommended that professional engineering advice is taken to look at whether the current necessity for dredging can be improved. Options to prevent/reduce the silting of the pond from the downward flow of the Copcut Stream through the area may create a more cost effective proposition for years to come.

Allotments

All four allotment sites have managed maintenance work coordinated and planned. Tasks include tree work, fencing and irrigation system repairs, access road maintenance, clearance of overgrowth, pest control, removal of fly tipping and security aspects. Three sites have had new main gates fitted during the past 18 months. Considerable time has been expended in 2023/24/25 dealing with security, thefts and trespass issues at Westwood site and a working partnership has proactively been taken forward with the Police Rural Crimes Officers in order to help introduce measures to reduce incidents. By the nature of the isolated positions and square areas both Westwood and Chawson sites are vulnerable and there are challenges maintaining a secure perimeter fence line. Some renewal of fencing sections is necessary for both locations given the issues encountered and wear age of existing arrangements. There is an ongoing liability challenge made to the Local Allotment Association regarding the unsafe condition and their use of a communal shed structure at Westwood Site. This matter should be resolved imminently through demolition of the structure and replacement of the plot with additional half plots. The allotment tenancy cost tariff is regularly match sampled against neighbouring and peer facilities- and continues to be

competitively priced offering good value for this Community Amenity. All sites are fully tenanted and a fluid waiting list is maintained and managed with turnover each year.

Heritage Centre & Staffing

Staff turnover within the job share arrangement for the Heritage Manager position has stabilised in 2024. This has helped with expansion of recruiting volunteer staff, together with running many school activities, holiday projects and special exhibitions. An active forward plan is in place for 2025 which also takes account of the forthcoming building project and linked business contingencies.

All Staff Salaries and Structure have been reviewed in 2012 and most recently in July 2022 by Full Council. Salary scales all align with the Nalc recommended scales. WDC is the appointed Payroll Agent and DSTC is itself fully registered with HMRC.

Banking and External Sources of Funding

Banking arrangements are maintained with Lloyds Bank. The closure of the Town Branch was announced in late 2023 for November 2024. This has not caused operational issues but measures continue to mitigate any impact – for example the increasing automation for card payments, digital options and less reliance on cash/cheque systems. Day to day banking is currently transacted through the Post Office. Working with the Place Board and MP, the Town Council continues to consider options towards a Community Banking Hub facility.

One Bad Debt remains outstanding for the Roundabout signage sponsorship Service Provider for revenue share. The scheme has been temporarily suspended pending recovery of the monies owed. This value of £4500.00 was passed to a local recovery agency in April 2024 and remains subject to their processes. Any updates are tracked through an online portal and a further progress report has been requested at New Year.

External Funding opportunities and sources are proactively explored by the Town Council at all times to provide additional financial scope. The previous WDC New Homes Bonus & Community Legacy Schemes have been successfully used over the past few years to support many Community projects financially through the Town Council as the Statutory Applicant Body. This outlook is set to continue. Notable other successful sector applications in 2024/2025 included,

- WCC Divisional Monies – Community projects including NDP.
- Locality Funding for the NDP project work – second tranche successfully applied for and awarded August 2023. Third and final tranche granted summer 2024 set to deliver on the project for the main professional fees.
- Peep – Public Sector Energy Process conformity and funding eligibility to support Smart LED throughout both premises – May 2023.
- OPCC (Police Commissioner) funding for Vehicle Activated Signs (VAS). Replacement match funding secured Feb 2024 due to ASB damaged signs.
- Natural Networks Scheme eligibility applied for and confirmed October 2023. Bid granted and project completed on plan as at December 2024.

Contractual Arrangements

The Town Council has the following two existing contractual obligations which are subject to the procurement threshold.

- Christmas Lighting – The renewal options for the five year arrangement was due in January 2023. The full procurement process was completed by June 2023 for a further five years and improved lighting layout, effective from November 2023. Assistance was provided to the WDC Place Board to help

coordinate and achieve benefits of scale for their High Street and Tower Hill Lighting projects, Municipal Planting- The last three year contract expired in autumn 2022 and the procurement process has been followed for a renewal decision for the existing Service Provider, set for a further three year period, commencing January 2023. This was Resolved through Community & Amenities Committee – November 2022.

- Other lesser financial value contractual arrangements which are not subject to procurement include the existing Heritage / Tourism website www.visitdroitwichspa.com and the Town Council website www.droitwichspa.gov.uk . Both websites are progressively being improved with enhanced and additional features within the existing budget provision made each year and are considered to be good value. The Town Council website has had a full review and addition of the sections and a digital survey function to support the Neighbourhood Plan project (and any other public consultation requirements).
- Two additional procurement arrangements will be in place for the Heritage refurbishment – Design and Building aspects.

Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP)

Overall this is an encouraging position given the project momentum and progress achieved. The Issues and Options Study undertaken with Peers in 2021 and early 2022 showed that similar NDP projects had required considerably more financial and timescale outlays – one local example being over £100K and an elapsed timeframe of 3 to 5 years for full delivery. Calc have endorsed that the approach taken by DSTC for the NDP from July 2022 represents good value for such projects in the Local Government Sector.

29. Insurance – The Town Council professionally revalued both public buildings in January 2024. This has had a positive impact helping to absorb index linking price fluctuations for the 2025 year renewal. Insurance arrangements continue to be reviewed annually with the Service Provider. A claim originating from an alleged fall incident in November 2023 has been presented in August 2024. This is being handled by the Service Provider on behalf of the Town Council.
30. The recommendations upon the Fees & Charges and Options for Inclusion are by both the Community & Amenities Committee and the Resources Committee on 13 January 2025. The Estimates will be presented to Council on 20 January 2025. Wychavon require the final return for Precept **no later than 24 January 2025.**
31. Members are reminded that the Town Council (the precepting authority) cannot issue supplementary precepts. Wychavon District Council require a full breakdown of the Town Council’s expenditure over the services it provides, to enable them in turn to provide information to Council Tax Payers.
32. Contingency Provision – For 2022/2023 the general contingency allocation was increased from £12,000 to £20,000 for the reason of the pandemic and uncertainty for delivery of strategic projects within the allocated provision – these being the Platinum Jubilee arrangements and Heritage Centre. Both initiatives were completed within scope and did not require any contingency allocations. The operational contingency reverted to £12,000 for 2023/2024 & 2024/2025 and the recommendation for 2025/2026 is the same. The Local Elections payments are made on the fourth year with provision of £6k allocated per annum within the budgets. A bye election in September 2024 for Chawson Ward has been covered from the allocated budget expending £4,221.34.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1. That the attached estimates be recommended to Council for 2025/2026 subject to any amendments as now agreed.**
- 2. That the Budget Requirement submission to Wychavon District Council includes the outlined precept and tax base calculation that is a Band D property level of £47.21 for 2025/26 representing a percentage increase of 1.99% (increase of 0.92 pence for the year)**

3. That no changes be made to the Fees and Charges for 2025/2026.
4. That the Grants Budget (S137 Grants and Sponsorship) be set at £5,000 in line with prior year and as detailed in the Estimates to enable financial assistance for Festivals and Events to be referred to the Grants Appraisal Panel for scrutiny and consideration, with onward recommendation to Community & Amenities Committee.
5. That there be no maximum threshold of grant allocation applicable to the Grants Appraisal Panel recommendations. Guideline of recommendations from £500 to £1K is maintained.
6. That the Resources Committee makes a recommendation to Council to request a requirement of £446,119 comprising £410,000.00 in precept and a precept support grant element of £36,119.