

72. CLERK'S REPORT

The Town Clerk advised that the keypad on the alarm system (well over 20 years old) is very unreliable with digits not working. He has obtained a quotation from Chubb to replace the system and to provide separate alarms for other areas. The company has been very reliable and he would wish to continue to use them. He has authority to spend up to £2,000 on such items but the quote exceeds this amount by £79. Members were happy to authorise the Town Clerk to proceed.

The Town Clerk said that quotes for the replacement intercom system are also being sought.

RESOLVED That the information be received and noted.

73. ESTIMATES SUB-COMMITTEE

(a) Minutes

The Minutes of the Estimates Sub-Committee Meeting held 8th January 2018 were received.

RESOLVED That the Minutes be received and noted.

(b) Committee Plans and Outcomes

Councillor M.C.M. Lager as Chairman of the Estimates Sub-Committee spoke about the current economic conditions and relaxation of the austerity regime. He said that Essex County Council would be increasing its precept by 4.99% to cover increasing social care costs and Braintree District Council would increase by £4.95 at Band D, the ceiling permitted by the Government. Likewise the Police and Fire Authority would increase by £12 the maximum allowed.

He said that there are high demands on services and with an ever-rising public expectation this is causing huge problems. It is difficult to reduce costs and still provide the service that residents expect.

He hoped that now the Town Council had spent £40,000 to update the CCTV system into state of the art technology, it would be possible to link-up with other systems in the town. It had been hoped to commission work locally for the clearing of vegetation and the repair and cleaning of road signs. The Town Plan has been updated and will shortly be produced. He referred to the need for a River Walk Strategy, work on which will shortly commence, and the disappointing response from Braintree District and Essex County Councils, and the North Essex Parking Partnership with regard to the Parking Strategy. Essex County Council had prevaricated over HGV traffic signage. The Witham in Bloom transition had been completed and the Town Council would continue to provide quality floral displays in the town centre. World War I Centenary Commemorations continued and good progress had been made with regard to Section 106 agreement on Maltings Lane.

He spoke of the need to ensure financial security and to look ahead for the next two years as the implications on today's decision will impact on the years to come. He referred to Public Order strategy and health service plans in particular.

Councillor M.C.M. Lager gave just the headlines on the work proposed for the Committees in this coming year and the need to continue with the high standards. He said community support would continue, the Town Council would carry on with its endeavours to improve health care facilities in the town and to make Witham a safer place to live and work. The events programme would continue along with the Centenary Commemorations for World War I. Major maintenance would be required on the footpaths and bridges on the River Walk. The feasibility to commission some County and District Councils' work locally would be explored. Communications with residents would be reviewed and redevelopment behind the Town Hall now that the Period Garden has had to be closed and the future of the Information Centre in its present form considered.

RESOLVED That the information be received.

(c) Budget 2018/2019 and for the following two years

The Town Clerk tabled a new summary with up-to-date figures. He explained how the calculations for Band D are worked out and that a £5.00 increase in the Town Council element of the Council Tax would equate to a c10% increase. He said that he had made several calculations based on a 5% increase which would result in insufficient reserves in future years, given the financial forecasts over 3 years and the budget requests of the Committees. He added that the Localism Fund would be reduced to zero next year.

Councillor M.C.M. Lager said that there had been a planned drop of £60,000 with over £40,000 spent on the updated CCTV equipment and £22,000 spent on major repairs to the Town Hall. He said that a 5% increase in Band D would impact on major proposals such as additional CCTV cameras and funding the recruitment of Special Constables for Witham. £10,000 would be put into the budget over the next three years for development at the back of the Town Hall, £20,000 this year for projects on the River Walk, with £10,000 the following two years. He stressed that a 5% increase in Band D would not allow these projects to proceed. He said that the Estimates Sub-Committee had trawled through the figures in great detail. He explained that a £5 increase is within the guidelines proposed by government. He said that the budget for the Puppet Festival has been retained at £17,000 and reserves will be used to make up the difference, and when these reserves are depleted a decision will need to be taken to either reduce the Festival or increase the budget. The Town Mayor's Allowance has been reduced to £1,500 as it is not often claimed in full. He commended Members to accept the budget.

The Town Clerk explained that on the Earmarked Reserves the heading would now be labelled 'CCTV and Public Safety'.

Members then had the opportunity to ask questions and comment on the budget. It was noted that 2% tax base growth was expected but in the past this had been 2.5%. It was thought that with the building of new homes in both north and south Witham this would rise to 2.5/3% growth and a demand in services. There was a rise in public expectations but County and District Councils are pulling back and it was unfair to expect the Town Council to fill the gap. This point was picked up on in particular with regards to policing. It was pointed out that all the money raised by the Town Council in taxes is spent in the Witham.

RESOLVED That the Budget for 2018/2019 be accepted and a £5 increase in Band D be approved.

74. PRECEPT 2018/2019

The Precept Form from Braintree District Council was received.

RESOLVED That the Precept Form be received, that a Precept of £500,776 be agreed for 2018/2019, a Band D equivalent of £61.70; and approval given for the form to be signed.

There being no further business the Chairman closed the Meeting at 8.27 p.m.

Councillor Mrs J. Williams
Town Mayor

MS/GK/25.1.2018