

Taunton Charter Trustees - 10 December 2020 held via Zoom Video Conference

Present: Councillor Francesca Smith (Mayor)
Councillors Sue Lees (Deputy Mayor), Lee Baker, Chris Booth, Simon Coles, Caroline Ellis, Marcia Hill, Richard Lees, Libby Lisgo, Martin Peters, Hazel Prior-Sankey, Alan Wedderkopp, Danny Wedderkopp and Brenda Weston

Officers: Jo Comer, Marcus Prouse and Amy Tregellas

Also Present: Councillors Loretta Whetlor, John Thomson (Chair – Joint Independent Remuneration Panel)

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm)

26. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor Derek Perry.

27. Minutes of the previous meeting of the Taunton Charter Trustees

(Minutes of the meeting of the Taunton Charter Trustees held on 2nd July and 27th August 2020 circulated with the agenda)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Taunton Charter Trustees held on 2nd July and 27th August 2020 be confirmed as a correct record.

28. Declarations of Interest

Members present at the meeting declared the following personal interests in their capacity as a Councillor or Clerk of a County, Town or Parish Council or any other Local Authority:-

Name	Minute No.	Description of Interest	Reason	Action Taken
Cllr L Baker	All Items	Cheddon Fitzpaine & SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Booth	All Items	Wellington and SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Coles	All Items	SCC & SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr C Ellis	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr Mrs Hill	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr R Lees	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr S Lees	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr L Lisgo	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr M Peters	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr H Prior-Sankey	All Items	SCC & SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted

Cllr F Smith	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr A Wedderkopp	All Items	SCC & SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr D Wedderkopp	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted
Cllr B Weston	All Items	SWT	Personal	Spoke and Voted

All Charter Trustees declared a personal interest in respect of Item 10 – Report of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel – Review of the allowances for the Mayor of Taunton and Deputy Mayor, as potentially any Charter Trustee could take up that posting in the forthcoming municipal year and be in receipt of an allowance.

29. **Public Participation**

The Charter Trustees were advised that no members of the public had requested to speak or ask questions.

30. **Petitions**

The Clerk advised that no petitions to the Charter Trustees had been received.

31. **Motions to the Charter Trustees**

The Clerk advised that no motions to the Charter Trustees had been received.

32. **Communications**

The Mayor advised that she intended to allocate £1000 from the Alderman Spear's contribution to the Mayoral Christmas Fund charitable trust to the work being undertaken by Somerset West and Taunton's One Teams to purchase vouchers for families over the Christmas period. Further allocations were also being progressed.

The Mayor advised that she had turned on the Town's Christmas Lights at a virtual event. The Mayor advised that she had recorded a poem for The Castle School students, who unable to put on their usual Christmas event but were hoping to stage a virtual version.

Councillor Lisgo raised her concern about the progression of the future governance arrangements for the Unparished Area of Taunton. The recent debates around Stronger Somerset had highlighted this and the previous presentations on this matter. Despite raising this issue on many occasions, she stated that there was a lack of evidence of any progress being made on this matter. She accepted that the last nine months had been difficult due to Covid-19. She had also tried to communicate with the Somerset West and Taunton Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources Cllr Ross Henley but this forum was felt appropriate as the Charter Trustees had an active interest in the future

arrangements. She considered it important, especially within the context of Stronger Somerset that Councillors were able to see what the plan was beginning to look like for the future of the Unparished Area. Cllr Lisgo stated she had always been very clear that the creation of Charter Trustees was a temporary stopgap provision, and that something substantive needed to be put in place. Unfortunately the remit of the Charter Trustees was very limited in scope, but she requested an informal meeting in the new year of the Councillors who represent Unparished Area Wards with representatives of Somerset Association of Local Councils invited to better understand the current role and expectations of Charter Trustees, better understand the process ahead of the Community Governance Review and the potential creation of a Town Council.

The Mayor thanked Cllr Lisgo and recognised it was an important issue, and that the difficulty they encountered as a group which were meeting to support the mayoralty and the need to distinguish between Unparished Area Councillors and Charter Trustees. She stated that both unitary proposals supported a town council and very much wanted to progress this. Whilst supportive of an informal meeting to discuss the matter in private, she requested advice from officers as previous informal meetings had attracted criticism from members of the public.

Amy Tregellas (Monitoring Officer and Governance Manager – Somerset West and Taunton Council) responded and asked Councillors to be clear and careful of terminology. There would need to be a Community Governance Review of the Unparished Area, which would include all options on the table rather than the assumption a Town Council would be the end result. This might be one of the outcomes but Councillors were reminded to be careful about the language as a correct and proper process would have to be followed. She had received advice from SHAPE Legal that the proposal by One Somerset of creating a Town Council through Government order is not correct. The change order when Somerset West and Taunton Council was created also set up the Taunton Charter Trustees and any change would have to go through correct and proper consultation with that body before any decision is made, and that contravention of this could be subject to Judicial Review. The Governance Manager assured Councillors that work was ongoing on this matter with an Officer working group in place, and the new arrangements would not come into effect until the next Town and Parish Elections in May 2023 and so the timescale was still feasible to meet. She had also sought information from the National Association of Local Councils and captured helpful case studies, along with research into other Charter Trustee bodies and those that have moved to an alternative governance model. She was hoping to bring a report back as soon as possible to the Charter Trustees as well as progress a cross-party working group to be set up which would draw from the whole Council membership, as ultimately this was a review undertaken by SWT.

- The Mayor welcomed Cllr Loretta Whetlor representing Somerset Association of Local Councils.
- It was commented that some areas may wish to parish themselves, and of the need to have a good and thorough consultation to ensure a true reflection of public sentiment.
- A point was raised on the broader issue of what powers were available to a Parish or Town Council and what assets would potentially be

transferable, but that currently a Town Council didn't exist and the Councillors can't negotiate without a mandate. It was stated that Councillors would welcome more general information on the process.

- The Governance Manager signposted Councillors to the NALC website which had good documentation on what powers and duties a Town Council could exercise.
- The Mayor thanked Councillors for their comments and welcomed further updates on this matter.

33. **To answer questions under Standing Order 8**

Councillor Chris Booth raised the issue of Police feedback, and the lack of ability of the Charter Trustees to feed back into the Police the concerns Councillors have and receive updates. Councillors, could of course, as ward councillor's feedback to their local Police Community Support Officer. Councillors were cognisant of the fact that the Charter Trustees were limited in their scope of duties, feedback from Councillors on whether they supported this idea was welcomed.

The Mayor felt it would be interesting to receive feedback but the Charter Trustees were limited in scope to the Mayoralty.

The SWT Governance Manager confirmed that the Police should be providing any update to the Scrutiny Committee at SWT.

34. **To receive and consider reports, minutes and recommendations of the Standing Committee (if any)**

The Clerk advised that the most recent meeting of the Standing Committee had taken place at the end of November and the recommendations were awaiting sign-off by the SWT Corporate Resources Portfolio Holder, with these decisions reported formally at the next meeting.

35. **Report of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP) - Review of**

the allowances for the Mayor of Taunton and Deputy Mayor

The Chair of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel (JIRP), John Thomson, was in attendance and presented the report of the Panel, their findings and recommendations.

In 2019 the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel prepared a report to the Shadow Authority on Members Allowances. Included within it was a consideration of the roles of Town Mayor and Deputy Mayor for the Unparished areas of Taunton. At the time the Panel prepared the report, it was considered that there was insufficient information to make firm decisions, and so an interim recommendation regarding allowances was made, with a proviso that after “a year’s experience of the offices of Mayor and Deputy Mayor”, the allowances be reviewed by the Panel. This report was that review.

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and asked questions which included:-

- A comment was made that the potential loss of the mayoralty in 2019 had been an issue that was raised on the doorstep when campaigning so public awareness was high and the people were keen on the Mayoralty being maintained.
- The cutting of the Deputy Mayoral allowance was considered unfair in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic’s effect on the number of events that could be attended.
- It was suggested that the allowances be reviewed after a ‘normal’ year.
- It was commented that the first year of the Mayoralty which was slightly curtailed by the pandemic in March 2020 was still a valid data-set from which to draw conclusions. The Deputy Mayoral allowance being set at half the Mayor’s allowance was commented as generous as the Deputy would not carry out half of the Mayor’s work.
- The current Deputy Mayor commented that she had felt awkward taking an allowance in this current year due to the lack of activity, and so a lot had been donated to charity or to her local church.
- It was suggested that a lot of postponed events in the next municipal year may mean that the next Deputy Mayor will be a lot busier.
- The status of the Borough Mayoralty as opposed to a Town Mayor was different and time was needed to establish what work-load was required, with previous experiences not a true measure.

RESOLVED that the Charter Trustees for Taunton;

- 1) Noted the work undertaken by the JIRP which has reviewed the work-load of the Mayor and Deputy with information supplied by the Council, and has considered how the allowances compared with other areas with Charter Trustees.
- 2) Disregarded the recommendation of the JIRP to reduce the Special Responsibility Allowance for the Deputy Mayor of Taunton by half to reflect a reduced workload, with the reasoning being that due to the Covid-19 pandemic’s effects, this had impacted on the statistical information reviewed, with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Taunton unable to fulfil the

expected duties of their role and the number of events and activities they could attend. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor's special responsibility allowances for 2021/2022 would be kept the same as currently.

- 3) Supported the recommendation that the index linking of the allowance be retained.
- 4) Supported the recommendation that the situation be reviewed again in a year, when hopefully 'normal' (post Covid-19) activity had taken place.

36. Taunton Charter Trustees Budget 2021/2022

The Mayor introduced the item which set out the proposed Budget for the forthcoming year and invited the Clerk to take members through a PowerPoint presentation on the two options drawn up for their consideration.

The Clerk gave an update on the budget monitoring position of the current financial year (2020/2021). Guidance stated that Parish/Town Councils should retain 3-12 months of running costs. Local Authorities were required by law to set a balanced budget as prescribed in the Local Government and Finance Act 1992. The Charter Trustees for Taunton must set their revenue budgets on an annual basis and there was no automatic carry-over of unused budgets into the following year.

Taunton Charter Trustees Budget 20/21	Charter Trustees Budget £	Spend to date (Dec 2020)	Expected Year End Spend (Mar 21)
Mayoral Civic Activities and Events Spend	10,000	1,339.61	4000
Special Responsibility Allowance for Mayor and Deputy	4,580	Approx. 3435	4580
Insurance for Insignia/Regalia	500	650	650
Staffing/Administration Costs	31,100	Approx. 21,638	28,850
Accommodation	1760	0*	0
Mayoral Vehicle Lease	2000	0	0
Audit of Accounts	200	400	1000
Total Estimated Costs:	50,140	Approx. 27,462.61	39,080
Contingency/Reserves:	1,000	350*	1000*
Total Budget / Precept:	51,140	Approx. 27,462.61	39,080

During the discussion of this item, Members made comments and asked questions which included:-

- Concern was raised that if the Government were minded to introduce a cap on Parish and Town Councils precepting abilities, that the lower option could hamper future years budgets. The Clerk advised that this was

something to take into consideration but was not aware of current plans in this regard.

- The option to move the under-spend from this financial year into a reserve could meet the advice to establish a reserve of 3 months without imposing a higher precept on ratepayers.
- The risk of proceeding without a more substantial reserve was considered important.

Councillor Hazel Prior-Sankey proposed the main motion which was seconded by Councillor Marcia Hill.

RESOLVED that the Charter Trustees for Taunton;

1. Set a precept for the financial year 2021/2022 at the amount of £52,819, to be collected on their behalf from the Unparished Area of Taunton ratepayers by Somerset West and Taunton Council as the billing authority. This was equivalent to £3.47 expenditure per Band D property.
2. Delegated authority to the Clerk to transfer the unspent balance from the 2020/21 budget into the General Reserves of the Taunton Charter Trustees at the end of 2020/21 to fund unplanned expenses in future years (approximately £12,060)
3. Urged Somerset West and Taunton Council to precept for a Special Expenses Levy on the Unparished Area of Taunton as in previous years to fund such projects that a Town and Parish Council would typically support through the Unparished Area Small Grants Fund.

(The Meeting ended at 7.45 pm)