

REPORT



Bridgwater
Town
Council

Report to:	Full Council
Agenda Item:	All
Date of this Report:	4 December 2023
Meeting Date:	7 December 2023
Author:	Town Clerk

Briefing Paper and Town Clerk's Report

Agenda Item	Background Information
TC2023/98	Please send apologies and reason for absence to Lorna and David (at least 3 hours prior to the meeting). Apologies received from Cllr Slocombe due to ill health.
TC2023/102	The Leader of the Council, Cllr Smedley will present his report.
TC2023/103	<p>Town Clerk's Report</p> <p>Note: any references to 'the Council' throughout this report means Bridgwater Town Council.</p> <p>Devolution Pilot – work is ongoing with the transfer of the agreed assets/services. Equipment has been procured and we have started receiving delivery with some items. This work has moved onto what other services the Council can takeover. More on this under agenda item TC2023/110.</p> <p>The Council offices will be closed from 4pm on Friday 22 December 2023 and will reopen on Tuesday 2 January 2024. Answerphone messages, enquiries and cemeteries mailboxes will be monitored. Cemeteries bins will also be emptied over this period. Staff time off is taken from annual leave or time of in lieu balance.</p> <p>ReCreation Community Hub, Rhode Lane. – the opening date has been delayed due to issues encountered with the floorers. The pantry will start trading from the ReCreation on Wednesday 13 December – this will be the first day of opening.</p> <p>A programme of activity is still in the planning stage and hopefully I can update with more information at the meeting – otherwise an update will follow next week.</p> <p>Card Payments - the Council can now accept payments by debit/credit card, and this has proved popular. We started taking card payments in October, and up until the end of November the council has taken £1,807.19 in payments by card which has incurred charges of £30.52.</p> <p>Solar Panels – solar panels have been installed on the unit used by the rangers and maintenance team.</p>

	By Election for the Fairfax East Ward , will take place on Monday 18 December and I have authorised issuing of Poll Cards to maximise awareness of the poll.
TC2023/104	Portfolio holder reports received were circulated in the agenda pack.
TC2023/106	Council to consider the Project Officer's report and to adopt the recommendation. Funding initially to come from reserves but will be taken from the capital receipt due from the sale of land at Bristol Road.
TC2023/108	Questions in advance of the meeting please.
TC2023/109	Questions in advance of the meeting please
TC2023/110	<p>The last meeting of the Finance and Policy Executive committee discussed the letter received from the Leader of Somerset Council and gave direction to the Town Clerk. Further discussions with and recent reports and statements issued from Somerset Council is leading towards most (if not all) of the discretionary services outlined in the letter either ceasing or reduced to a skeleton operation. This will have a significant impact to the condition of the public realm, the health and mental wellbeing of the communities across Somerset.</p> <p>Bridgwater is growing in terms of employment and population. Bridgwater has received and is in receipt of significant investment (circa £60m). There are major projects within the town centre planned and underway over the next 3 years. The council has been allocated a service director from Somerset Council to work with on a programme of significant devolution. Costing, pooling of staff for TUPE and redundant equipment and required equipment will be commenced shortly (some work has started) and as soon as I have facts and figures these will be incorporated into the draft budget and discussed at a council meeting as soon as possible. To prevent an inequality of service delivery with neighbouring parish councils that share a boundary with Bridgwater Town Council, I have started discussions with my counter parts regarding how we could help them with service delivery. These discussions have been extremely positive and well received. We have even been approached by parish councils further afield (within the former Sedgemoor area, but for now the focus is on Bridgwater TC and surrounding parishes. Working with our neighbouring councils will produce an income stream.</p> <p>It goes without saying that the precept will need to rise to take account of any additional services/functions that council agrees to take over. The larger town and parishes within Somerset are in the same situation and not all have the capacity to expand, due to size of tax base, resources in terms of the infrastructure of their council (staffing, office space etc), staff and councillor skill set. Bridgwater Town Council is in a strong position and maintains the second largest tax base in Somerset but one of the lowest Band D costings. Furthermore, the majority of council tax bandings in Bridgwater are A and B.</p> <p>The financial emergency at Somerset Council has impacted on the drafting of the 2024/25 budget and the job evaluation exercise within the council, hence the delay in this work.</p>

TC2023/111	A unit is required to accommodate the parks and open spaces team of the agreed transfer of assets under the devolution pilot but should be able to accommodate taking over all parks and open spaces within Bridgwater. The unit secured is in an ideal logistical location and on a secured site and low rent compared with other market options.
TC2023/112	Cllr Smedley has requested a change to standing orders that will enable a comprehensive response made at the meeting where a question will be posed, as opposed to a response being made after meeting.
TC2023/113	Council to consider authorising the Town Clerk to gain an agreed sale price (without commitment to buy) on the former Royal British Legion building in Castle Street and submit a proposal and funding application to the Government's Community Ownership Fund. This application will be a huge piece of work and due to capacity constraints external help maybe required.