

Chair's Statement Item 23/015 Meeting held 30th January 2023

This statement was prepared and presented to the extraordinary meeting of Hadnall Parish Council held on 30th January 2023.

This has been prepared to provide factual information to counter and balance some of the misleading and inaccurate information placed in the public domain since the Parish Council (PC) met on Monday 9th January for its scheduled ordinary meeting.

Background

At its meeting on the 9th January, the PC discussed its budget requirements and the precept to meet those requirements for 2023/24. It was resolved at that meeting to:

1. Agree the budget for 2023-24
2. Agree to request a precept of £14,631.

There were good in-depth discussions on a range of options. A proposal was made to precept for the accepted budget of £14,998 and a counter proposal was put forward to ignore the budget requirements and align any increase to the same rise in precept being proposed by the principal authority, Shropshire Council (SC). There was a majority vote of 4-2 for the proposed precept requirement of £14,631 to meet the budget of £14,998.

No one present raised at any time during that meeting that they hadn't had time to study the budget documents. However, 2 days later, an email was received by the Clerk from one of the councillors who had been present. That email stated, "We were not given sufficient time to review the 2023 budget prior to the meeting as we only received the budget on the Friday before the meeting."

A review of our own standing orders¹ suggested that there had been no breach of policy as the summons/notification of the meeting along with the agenda had been sent out and published on Tuesday 3rd January at 15:12hrs (3 clear days before the meeting date), This is in line with standing orders and Hadnall PC have always been aware and compliant with this requirement.

However, on this occasion, and a great deal of occasions in the past it is acknowledged that not all supporting papers have been sent out with that same notice/agenda. There is no legal requirement to do so but there is 'guidance' in a document published by DCLG in 2014²

¹https://www.hadnallcouncil.co.uk/sites/default/files/hpc_standing_orders_adopted_sept_2022.pdf

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388541/Transparency_Code_for_Smaller_Authorities.pdf

that makes reference to the fact that as well as agendas, “smaller authorities should also publish associated meeting papers not later than three clear days before the meeting to which they relate is taking place”.

As a result, legal advice was sought via the National Association of Local Councils (NALC). That advice eventually came back stating that there had been no breach of standing orders and as such there was “questionable legal basis for revisiting any decisions made at the meeting held on the 9th January 2023”.

However, for me, if a councillor feels not enough time has been given to consider a matter, in the spirit of the Council’s overall objective in ensuring council business is done properly and appropriately then I, as chair, felt it was the right approach to reissue the information and as a consequence revisit the information and the decision made.

I take full responsibility for the fact that papers relating to a decision item on that agenda were not made available three working days prior to the meeting. Whilst this has consistently been the case over a number of years, I can assure all that under my tenure this will not occur again.

That aside, it has been extremely disappointing to see the level of misleading and incorrect information placed on social media platforms relating to this matter.

All feedback from members of the public is useful to guide us all to make robust, sensible, and sometimes difficult decisions. What is clear however, and not helped by misleading and inaccurate information, is that there are significant gaps in the understanding of the work of the PC, what its role, responsibilities and powers extend to³ and its budgetary relationship to SC. The aim of this statement is to assist a little with that understanding.

Your Parish Council

Your PC is made up of 8 individuals all of whom live in your Parish and volunteer extensive amounts of their own time. They are all either elected at the time of local elections or more usually co-opted at or in between those elections.

Incidentally there are likely to be a number of spaces around this table in May this year and we began in January actively seeking new councillors from within the Parish who could join the team and bring with them a diverse range of ideas, views, and skills.

Our Clerk is the only employee of the PC and provides independent, objective and professional advice. The Clerk is the ‘Proper Officer’ of the PC which is a legal way of saying ‘point of contact’. Our Clerk also acts as the ‘Responsible Financial Officer’.

³ [http://committees.westminster.gov.uk/Data/Council/20120425/Agenda/\\$09%20-%20Appendix%204%20Powers%20and%20Duties%20of%20Parish%20Councils.doc.pdf](http://committees.westminster.gov.uk/Data/Council/20120425/Agenda/$09%20-%20Appendix%204%20Powers%20and%20Duties%20of%20Parish%20Councils.doc.pdf)

All PC discussion/decisions are made within meetings open to the public. These meetings are where the public can get an accurate version of events see how their councillors conduct themselves and hopefully the reasoning behind their decisions all of which are published on the PC website and notice boards.

Moving to finances, give or take a couple of hundred pounds, 100% of the PC income comes from what is called the precept. This is the only tax that is raised locally and exclusively spent locally, within our Parish.

The proposed total precept for Hadnall PC for 2023-24 and agreed at the January meeting is £14,631. No one involved in the PC takes any increase in precept lightly and the rise for the year for the average Band D household is £3.59 for the year (or six pence a week).

This increase, which is roughly in line with inflationary pressures, is mainly down to increased expenditure for utilities, increased employment costs and the taking on of additional assets recently added to our asset register (namely land at the entrance to Wedgefields along the A49). It is also worth mentioning that a considerable sum of 5k was transferred by your Parish Council to Hadnall Village Hall Committee early last year. This was to deal with urgent H&S issues, without which left our hall was threatened with closure.

Shropshire Council

Our principal authority SC has an average annual budget in excess of £600 million⁴. The services they provide are wide ranging and include roads which many of the Facebook comments, in response to the post by administrators, alluded to. I note that no effort was made by the Facebook page administrators to help correct misunderstandings and inaccurate information in this respect.

The PC at its meeting on January 9th discussed options to 'peg' precept increases to those of SC. The proposed precept rise from SC for 2023-24 is 4.99% which includes a 2% precept the Government had already assumed it will make to support adult social care.

Blindly following this figure does not however take into account the additional revenue streams that make up SC's total budget. Approximately 60% of SC's budget comes from its precept. The remaining 40% coming from its government grant settlement, services offered, business rates and other income streams.

Analysis of the total budget shows that SC will see its total spending power grow by 8.6% in 2023-24⁵.

⁴ <https://shropshire.gov.uk/committee-services/documents/s32777/Appendix%201%20-%20V2%20Oct%20Medium%20Term%20Financial%20Strategy%202023-24%20-%202027-28.pdf>

⁵ <https://newsroom.shropshire.gov.uk/2022/12/government-settlement-confirms-councils-budget-direction/>

Misleading and inaccurate information placed in the public domain.

Disappointingly, there have been a number of inaccuracies in posts and resultant comments on social media regarding decisions made by the PC at its meeting on 9th January 2023.

By way of correcting those inaccuracies and highlighting them as such, the following factually correct statements are provided for members of the public.

- The PC at no point called a meeting to be held on the 23rd January 2023 and posts to that effect were potentially damaging to the reputation and integrity of the PC.
- Repeated claims that the PC holds reserves of £51,000 are inaccurate and misleading. At the time of writing this, the PC finance are made up as follows;

	£
Estimated closing balance March 2023	48866
Earmarked reserves*	(42000)
Remaining general reserves March 2023	6866

*£40k of capital received from Community Infrastructure Levy (Cil) and earmarked for the provision of facilities for older children in the village and £2k of capital received via grant through Neighbourhood fund earmarked for the completion of the pathway project started in 2019 due for completion in 2023.

- The Statement made that an increase of 38% was recommended at its meeting held on 9th February is factually incorrect. In any budget setting scenario, a range of options are explored. At no time was an increase of this kind recommended or proposed by anyone present

I sincerely hope that some of the above information, that has led to this meeting, proves useful for those not close to the decision-making process. In addition, I hope it provides a legacy document for future PCs to refer to. The motion to suspend standing order 7a and rescind decisions 23/010(c) and 23/010(d) taken at the meeting held on 9th January 2023, as proposed for this meeting, should in no way set a precedence for future PCs to refer to.

Doing so risks the serious potential to disrupt the democratic process which we all I suspect hold dear to our hearts. There should be no place in that democratic process for individuals or groups of individuals attempting to overturn majority decisions with which they might disagree.

A copy of this statement will be published on the Hadnall PC Website and a link to it posted to all social media accounts the PC usually post to.

John Harrison Chair Hadnall Parish Council