

Present: Councillor Sue Ransome (Chairman), (Vice-Chairman), Councillors Alison Austin, Anton Dani, Paul Gleeson, Martin Griggs, Brian Rush, Yvonne Stevens, Nigel Welton and Stephen Woodliffe

Officers –
Chief Finance Officer and Chief Executive

Also in attendance: County Councillor Paula Cooper

69 MINUTES

With the agreement of the committee the Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28 November 2018

70 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were tabled by Councillors Viven Edge; Ben Evans and Stephen Raven.

71 UPDATE ON ACTIONS FROM THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

No updates were tabled.

72 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None recorded.

73 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No questions tabled.

74 PUBLIC SPEAKING TIME

Committee received no representation from any member of the public.

Inspector Morrice was invited to address the meeting at this point in the proceedings and advised that whilst he had no specific updating to report, he could confirm that Boston was in a really good position at that time with no current crime trends or particular problems or issues out of the ordinary.

Members tabled the following questions with the response from Inspector Morrice noted in italics:

In light of the news in respect of the suspected illegal immigrants jumping off the back of a lorry, had the outstanding escapees been captured?

The last time the incident had been checked 2 of the escapees had been captured however members needed to recognise the complication of who the police were looking for; whereabouts in the world they had come from, what they looked like and so on. Normally in such situations if the people were from non EU countries they usually sought out the police as they wished to claim asylum. It was ongoing with further enquiries.

Referencing the responsibility of traffic wardens a member noted that whilst it may not be within the Inspectors remit he asked for his opinion on the role of the various traffic wardens within the borough and the confusion the various individual sets of traffic wardens caused for the general public along with the costs of policing a town for parking with so many different operators projecting a bad image for Boston.

The Chairman intervened at this point and confirmed that Traffic Wardens wearing Green were from the County Council who patrolled County Council owned property including roads and their own car parks; the wardens wearing Blue were the Council's own traffic wardens policing the Council's own car parks and finally all other traffic wardens operated independently for the owners of the private car parks. She further stated that it was not a police issue and was not an issue for Inspector Morrice to address.

Referencing videos filmed by the public in respect of the recent house fire at Kirton, when a person was shouting for help from a window, a member asked why nothing could be done in such instances as the videos were uplifted onto social media as the tragedy unfolded and was distressing for those involved?

Clearly the videos end up on social media and quite often this could be before the police had a chance to speak with the next of kin about the situation, especially if somebody had lost their life. It caused a lot of complications and upset to those involved in the incident who then had to re live the ordeal and it was appalling. Criminal law had unfortunately not caught up and of course the police would always issue the advice please do not do it but at the current time, there was nothing the police could do to legally prevent it taking place.

Most areas of the country during the Christmas period tended to experience a rise in house burglaries with Christmas presents being stolen with other areas experiencing increased pick-pocketing. Had Boston experienced any such increases of that nature over that period?

Not this year. The only thing that usually went up in Boston over that time period was shop lifting. Recent joint working with college students who were undertaking a Uniform Services Course, had allowed the police to have a higher visible presence over the period within the shops which had impacted on thefts resulting in no obvious increase in incidents. It had been a successful Christmas period in Boston.

It would be helpful to residents who saw the continued bad publicity of how dangerous Boston was supposed to be and how much crime there was in the town, to see that actually compared to other towns Boston had probably had less crime of this Christmas period. It would be nice if that positive message could be put out in the public domain to allow the people living here to recognise what a lovely place it is to live in.

Inspector Morrice stressed that he continually tried to promote such information, but that as ever the press published what they wanted to. He confirmed he did work with Andrew Malkin who did put positive news stories out in the Boston Bulletin for the police including the youths who worked with them over Christmas in the shops. The police did pass news onto the media but it was of course their decision or not to print it.

Noting the recent press release that referred to a survey undertaken over Christmas in respect of the public many concerns, a member stated than one concern identified had been the ongoing issue of homelessness. It was obvious the number of homeless people in Boston had grown but how were things at the moment?

Nationally, not only in Boston, there is no doubt homelessness is going up. The Government are looking to repeal the one act that the police had – the Vagrancy Act, which outlawed begging and the Government are looking to repeal it. Police tried to use powers under anti-social behaviour to disperse people and guidance has come out from central government that police should not use it in that way. Do you criminalise people in unfortunate situations, probably not, but we don't know what the alternative plan is was and one was needed.

Referencing village halls all over the borough a member asked if it would be possible for the village hall owners and committees to be approached to allow the rough sleepers to sleep in them. The halls stood empty overnight and were probably warmer than being on the street and it would tidy the town up. It should be worth considering and be looked at. *It would be up to the village hall owner and if they offered then consideration would be given. If it went below freezing then the Council did assist with accommodation, Inspector Morrice stated that not all of the people were actually homeless and the simply chose that lifestyle as the public were good natured and handed over money. It was known that they could make £100 per day tax free which was a considerable amount over the course of a week or month.*

Speaking as a Director and Trustee of Centre-point outreach a member noted that some of the people in the doorways had had housing on many occasions but they had so many issues with landlords and the rules and regulations that they preferred to be on the streets. They found it difficult when given accommodation to abide by the rules. In very cold weather the emergency night shelter did kick-in which was staffed by volunteers each night and it had to be 4 night's below freezing to start it. Some preferred a less conventional life.

Referencing the negativity in respect of the town, a member stated that he felt there were other parts of the Country that are far worse than Boston and which did make you feel unsafe and wary. Boston did not make you feel scared to walk around and the police did a very good job keeping general order in Boston and should be commended on doing a good job.

It was always appreciated to hear such comments, research on our violence figures following comments on people saying they do not feel safe in the evening in the town centre, shows that violence outside of pubs and clubs accounts for just 6% of violence. That is a very small amount with the biggest percentage being domestic violence which occurs inside a house. The safety of being in town is that there is not very much trouble at all in town.

A member stated that in the previous week he had witnessed 4 police cars and 3 ambulances in front of a house on Sleaford roundabout and asked if it was domestic violence and had there been a stabbing?

Inspector Morrice stressed that he obviously could not discuss a specific incident in a public forum but confirmed there was a live investigation into it.

Referencing the Christmas period a member stated that as usual there had been a few incidents outside pubs and asked if the crime rate for Christmas had been more or less in respect alcohol related incidents in pubs /clubs and on the street.

Figures are not worked up for all categories yet but crime overall has gone up as has the national trend. Lincolnshire trend is going up slightly less and Boston in healthy place compared to the rest of Lincolnshire. Boston's night-time economy outside pubs and clubs and late night eateries, reports from the hospital is it is going down year on year.

75 FINANCIAL REPORT - STANDING ITEM

Committee noted the standing report with comments and questions raised including:

A member asked for an explanation in respect of spending on public conveniences for the current year. If there was a high forecast but the actual figures were less would there be another forecast for 2018/19.

The Chief Finance Officer explained that the first column of figures identified the full budget for the year; the second column is the 'in-year' spend to date and the forecast out-turn is the revised position for the whole year. In terms of the comparison it was between columns 1 and 3.

A member asked for clarification on the £48,664 that was unallocated in the original budget.

It was explained that the £48,664 currently remained unallocated. Therefore either schemes would be bought forward in the next couple of months to allocate all or some of it, or it would be put into reserves and then the new BTAC committee in the coming year would take a view on how it wished to spend it. For confirmation the money would be carried forward in addition to the minimum £70,000.

A member asked for clarification of what the reserves would be end of this year is it £55,000 or £254,000

Currently there was nearly £200,000 projected.

A member noted that there had been extra funding found such as the events on which had bought in more monies than had been expected. Extra ways of funding had been sourced for play equipment. BTAC would set the budget but as a committee along with some of the portfolio holders they were quite active in trying to bring in extra funding to protect a lot of BTAC's money.

A member asked for further detail in respect of the £4,434 overspend for the town centre maintenance and administration.

When the budget was set it had estimated a support cost for Finance, I.T and other support services. It had then been revised in year because of the extent of the growth of BTAC during the year to ensure that BTAC was bearing its fair share of the costs.

Resolved: Committee noted the report.

76 PROPOSED BTAC BUDGET 2019.20

The Chief Finance Officer presented the report confirming it was the proposed 2019/20 BTAC budget and forecast.

The budget prepared was in essence a continuation of the services that BTAC had agreed to take on board and the report recommendation was that BTAC precept for the following year should be £680,303 with Band D council tax being £74.07 an increase of 2.9% over the current year.

The minimum level of reserves anticipated following assessment had moved from £55,000 to £70,000 being approximately 10% of the precept.

Para 1.1 reminded committee members that over the recent years the increases in council tax had helped a number of initiatives including the on-going funding of public conveniences; spending on central park; footway lights and open spaces and events including new resources for new events and the town centre operatives. The proposed budget included an inflationary increase including a further allocated sum of £48,973 to help BTAC members in the coming year to deliver on new initiatives.

The 2.9% proposed increase meant BTAC Band D would increase by £2.09 per year in essence 4 pence per week. As Members realised most BTAC properties were below band D with the increase for these properties being in the region of 3 pence per week before any benefits.

The tax base for next year had risen by 0.98%: for future years it had been taken forward as a 1% increase to provide the forward estimates.

Appendix 1 provided a detailed breakdown of the items within the budget with the forward estimates providing the position for increases assumed at this point of 2% per annum from 2020/21 which would continue to ensure there would be unallocated amount at this point each year.

Referencing the table in section 9 relating to budget sensitivities members were advised it showed the extent of changes there could be in budgets should actuals turn out to be at a different rate to inflation than those anticipated. Public consultation would take place in respect of the overall Council budget process which would open on the 9th January 2019 and close on the 8th February 2019.

In conclusion members were advised that BTAC were asked to recommend to Cabinet and Council the level of the special expense precept for 2019/20 at £680,303 with the council tax charge at £74.07 at Band D.

Member comment and questioning followed including:

A member thanked the Chief Finance Officer for the quality and data within the report which allowed ease of understanding and stated that the BTAC committee had been brave in recent years including taking over the public convenience and the maintenance of the parks, along with the introduction of the town centre operatives who do excellent work. It would be easy to think of things to spend money on and seek another large increase but it would be irresponsible to do so and BTAC needed to keep its increase around inflation and continue to provide the good services it did for local people. The committee had reserves which were unallocated and all members had the opportunity to bring ideas forward for the people of BTAC.

Boston Town Area Committee (BTAC)

9 January 2019

Another member stated that historically the precept had been increased to allow the committee to undertake many things and the future committee needed to have the same means to continue. Nobody knew how things would go financially for the town in the future and should they not go as hoped, the public would look to the Council and BTAC to do more for the town. As such a 5% increase would be better than the proposed 2.9%. It was only a matter of pence in the increase and not excessive and we would probably be asked to pay the County an additional £50/60 per year. Arguably the County would push up its rate so if BTAC raised its precept by 5% it was a very small increase particularly for those in Band B and Band A properties – the increase was negligible. If BTAC raise the money significantly it offered the committee the chance to something really positive for the town. BTAC had done some great things for the town over the last few years, in comparison to years ago when nothing was done. The town was benefitting from BTAC now and the only way forward was to spend more money and as such take in more money.

Councillor Woodliffe proposed that the precept increase be 5%.
There was no seconder to this motion.

Another member stated they had initially been in favour of no increase but stated that on reflection it had been naïve to think so and that the 2.9% was realistic. The member further stated that they felt that the events committee and events should be self-funding and would propose looking at it at the next meeting.

Councillor Stevens moved the report's recommendation.
Councillor Griggs seconded the motion.

Noting the comments of the member in respect of increasing the budget to 5% a member agreed that the BTAC committee had been transformed in how it operated and in what it did for the town. However he felt it best to leave to the new committee to take it forward. There was sufficient funds in place to carry out what BTAC was already committed to and the new committee, should they identify new larger projects could then raise the precept.

A member further questioned what the BTAC precept had been in 2015 when they had been elected.

The Chief Finance Officer recalled that it was around £12 at Band D with no unallocated sum at that point.

Whilst recognising it was good to have monies available for projects, committee needed to be very mindful that it was the rate payers of Boston who paid for all the projects. Whilst it might only be a few pence here and there as stated by a member, it soon added up for people who were struggling.

A member questioned the 61.6% jump in the increase of employee costs?

It was explained that the appointment of the town centre operatives had increased the employee costs of BTAC

The portfolio holder for the town centre and liaison member for BTAC at Cabinet stated that he felt quite proud in that the committee over the previous three years had had its ups and down and disagreements and fights, but it had all come together at this point. He stated he felt all members appeared to feel proud in what the committee had achieved and stated that when he himself took over the chairmanship two years previously, he had a vision of getting the committee to where it was now.

Councillor Ransome had done an admirable job over the last year. There was money left over at the end of the year. The ambition of BTAC and its finances is not about how much it can be raised, but about how much money the committee itself could raise. Income from the toilets was one way. Income from bigger and better events with two years of events having taken place: the first year with very little income, the second year had seen us break even on some events and make a little money on others. Hopefully in year three some of the events would be bigger and better including festivals which could be done here but needed to be done so carefully and sensibly and they could start bringing in more income. It was not just about how much could be raised via the precept it was about how the committee could raise income into the town. There had been huge differences identified over the last two years both in what was visually obvious but also in what people said about the town and that was down to the BTAC committee.

RESOLVED: That the BTAC committee recommend to Cabinet and Council the level of the special expense precept for 2019/20 at £680,303 with the council tax charge at £74.07 at Band D.

77 WORK PROGRAMME - STANDING ITEM

The Chairman sought any future reporting for the remaining four meetings of the municipal year.

A member asked for a report on the trial of 24 hour opening of Central Park to identify the impact of the change in leaving the gates open. The committee had received no information on this over the period of change.

A second member requested the presence of the police to be in attendance for that report.

No further reporting requests were noted.

To Do: The Lead Officer for the committee to be advised of the request for the additional report.

The Meeting ended at 7.45 pm