

Minutes of the Governance & Finance Meeting

Date: Thursday 16 October 2025

Time: 6:00 PM

Venue: Town Hall, Bridge Street, Downham Market PE38 9DW

Present

Councillors Hobbs, Lane, Perkin

Non-Committee Councillor – Cllr Brewer

Claire Dornan (Town Clerk)

There were 2 members of the public present.

Cllr Hobbs (Chair) opened the meeting and reminded members that phones need to be placed on silent. Cllr Hobbs also reminded members of the fire evacuation procedures.

1. To note Apologies for Absence and resignations

Cllr Perkin gave apologies for Cllr Pegg.

It was noted that A Buxton had resigned from the Council on Tuesday 14 October 2025 and there were now 3 vacancies on the Committee.

The Town Clerk advised that Cllr Dickson and Cllr Brewer were interested in joining the Committee. This will be requested at Full Council.

2. To receive Declarations of Interest and consider requests for Dispensations

There were no declarations of interest made by members.

3. To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 14 August 2025

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 August 2025 be approved as a correct record.

Proposed: Cllr Lane, Seconded: Cllr Perkin, All in Favour.

4. To review correspondence from Melody Allsorts of Downham and receive representation from members of the group

All Members had received a copy of the correspondence ahead of the meeting.

2 members of Melody Allsorts of Downham (MAD) spoke in favour of increasing the discount provided by the Town Council.

Members acknowledged and appreciated the important mental health support services MAD provides to the community. Supporting mental wellbeing is a priority, and the Council value the role that community-led initiatives play in this area.

However, after careful consideration, members felt that the request to increase the discount beyond the current 10% for use of the Town Hall should be declined, for the reasons outlined below.

Members feel that they have a responsibility to treat all users of publicly funded facilities equitably and consistently. While the work of MAD is commendable, many other community groups also provide vital social, educational, or wellbeing services.

Members explained that granting a deeper discount or special terms could create an expectation or precedent for other groups, leading to inconsistent policy application and difficulty managing future requests.

It was noted that the MAD hire involves Sunday use, which has additional staffing implications. Currently, Sunday working is not offered to other hirers. This agreement introduces staffing pressures and can result in additional costs for the Council that are not recovered through hire fees and members felt that this should be acknowledged.

Members stated that the Town Hall is a publicly funded asset. While the Council offers a 10% discount to support community access, further discounts would reduce income needed for the maintenance and sustainability of the facility. Members felt that hire rates should remain at a level that supports the facility's upkeep without increasing the burden on local taxpayers.

Members encouraged MAD to seek financial assistance through funding schemes such as Love Your Town which exists to help groups deliver community benefit, including mental health and accessible support.

It was acknowledged by members that the Council does not usually allow funding each municipal year through their own funding scheme but members are open to revisiting this if there is a clear capital expenditure need.

Representatives from MAD left the meeting.

The Chair invited Cllr Brewer to the table to discuss agenda item 20 as Cllr Brewer had expressed an interest in this item and was unable to stay for the full duration of the meeting.

20. To review suggested amendments to Terms of Reference following Chair's meeting recommendation to Full Council

Members discussed the proposal from the Property Committee to assume responsibility for contracts, leases, and licences. It was strongly argued that these functions should remain within the remit of the Governance & Finance Committee, given the Committee's core responsibility for financial oversight, procurement, legal compliance, and risk management. Contracts and leases often involve complex legal and financial obligations; such as indemnities, penalties, and renewal or break clauses that require scrutiny not just from an operational perspective, but through a governance and financial risk lens. The Governance & Finance Committee, supported where appropriate by finance and legal advisors, is structured to assess these implications in line with value-for-money principles and

regulatory requirements. While the Property Committee plays an important advisory role in identifying needs and recommending premises, it was considered inappropriate for the same committee to both recommend and authorise legally binding agreements. This would risk weakening financial scrutiny, blurring accountability, and undermining the separation of duties that supports strong governance. Concern was also expressed that removing these responsibilities from the Governance & Finance Committee would significantly erode its strategic function and lead to fragmented oversight of the Town Council's legal and financial commitments. Members were broadly supportive of the suggested arrangement that Governance & Finance Committee recommend contracts, leases, and licences to Full Council for ratification.

RESOLVED – That the existing Terms of Reference for Governance & Finance Committee be amended to show that all decisions relating to contracts, leases, and licences be ratified by Full Council following recommendation from members.

Proposed: Cllr Lane, Seconded: Cllr Hobbs, All in Favour.

Cllr Brewer left the meeting.

5. To discuss Borough Council funding opportunity and make recommendation to Full Council

Members discussed the opportunity to participate in the Borough-led scheme to purchase gazebos, tables, and seating (chairs/benches) for use at community events. The scheme is heavily subsidised, with the Borough funding 80% of the total cost, requiring only a 20% contribution from Town Council reserves.

The investment would support local community groups and residents to deliver their own events, reducing reliance on the Town Council for event delivery. It also removes the need to loan out the Town Council's own gazebos, which are essential for market operations and at risk of damage when used externally.

The scheme was viewed as a cost-effective way to empower community-led activity, encourage local engagement, and preserve Town Council assets.

It is understood that the 20% funding would come from Reserves however in the long term reduce costs to the precept payer.

RESOLVED – That it be recommended to Full Council that the Town Council accept the offer of the Borough Council.

Proposed: Cllr Lane, Seconded: Cllr Perkin, All in Favour.

6. To receive tender for Town Hall bar contract and make recommendation to Full Council

Members noted that on 13 June 2025, the Town Council published a call for quotes on social media and contacted the existing provider directly, inviting expressions of interest for the role of Designated Premises Supervisor at the Town Hall. The post specified that the contract would include bar hire for all relevant events and required submissions to include drink prices, hire charges, and the percentage return offered to the Town Council. Four parties initially expressed interest, and by the 1 September 2025 deadline, two quotes were

received; one from the existing provider and one from another provider. The other provider submitted all requested information, including specific drink prices. The existing provider submitted an overview but did not provide all requested detail; for example, drink prices were stated to be in line with local pubs, but no price list was provided.

It was noted that the existing provider currently charges a fee to hirers, £100, whereas the other provider does not.

The existing provider offered to invest in the premises and construct a permanent bar, however this was not material to the discussions as the Council has previously indicated a permanent bar is not desired.

In terms of financial return, the existing provider proposed 18% of net profit, compared to 13% offered by the new provider.

It was noted that income from the current bar contract has historically been low; totalling £198.60 from 8 events in 2024. For 2025, Quarter 1 income received on 31 March 2025 was £63.20 (from 2 events), and Quarter 2 income received on 30 July was £59.30 (from 2 events). Members therefore stated that there was little financial risk to changing provider. It is hoped that a new provider may increase income levels.

Members are aware that changing provider would incur a cost to change the Designated Premises Supervisor on the Town Council's licence.

RESOLVED – That the new contract for the provision of bar services and Designated Premises Supervisor at the Town Hall be awarded to J&K Event Bars (Downham Market), on the agreement that the existing provider be permitted to fulfil any events already confirmed in the diary prior to the changeover.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Perkin, All in Favour.

7. To discuss lease amendment request from Discover Downham and make recommendation to Full Council

Members welcomed the lease amendment request from Discover Downham, recognising that the only cost to the Town Council would be the legal fees associated with the amendment.

Discover Downham's commitment to fully fund the project and secure planning permission independently demonstrates their dedication and reduces financial risk to the Council.

Members suggested extending the lease by 10 years to provide a total term of 25 years, thereby offering Discover Downham crucial security of tenure to confidently safeguard and promote the rich history of Downham Market. A longer lease term not only supports the sustainability of Discover Downham's efforts but also enhances the value and stability of the Council's asset. Furthermore, by proactively extending the lease now, the Council avoids the disruption and additional legal costs associated with future renewal requests, representing a prudent and forward-thinking approach that benefits both the community and the Town Council.

RESOLVED – That it be recommended to Full Council that Council approve the lease amendment, along with a lease extension, subject to planning permission being obtained and legal terms being agreed.

Proposed: Cllr Perkin, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

8. To discuss a twinning opportunity in Italy and make recommendation to Full Council

Members discussed a potential twinning opportunity with San Lorenzo Nuovo Council in Italy. It was noted that the Downham Market Twinning Club met on 14 October 2025 and confirmed that no members of their Committee were agreeable to organising a new twinning arrangement or take on the responsibility of hosting visitors. Additionally, no members of the Governance & Finance Committee expressed an interest in taking forward or supporting such an arrangement. As the proposal was for a Council-to-Council link, rather than a school-led initiative, it was considered unlikely to deliver meaningful community engagement or tangible benefit to Downham Market. Members felt that, given the lack of capacity and community demand, it would not be appropriate to pursue the opportunity further.

RESOLVED – That Full Council does not proceed with the proposed twinning arrangement with San Lorenzo Nuovo Council.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

9. To review recommendations from Norfolk Computer Services

9.1 Replacement Laptop

Members were advised that the existing Maintenance Team laptop operates on Windows 10, which is no longer supported or upgradeable, rendering the device unsecure for Council use. Due to the associated risk to data security and operational continuity, replacement of the device was approved under emergency expenditure, in accordance with Financial Regulation 4.1. The urgency of this decision was based on the need to maintain secure and uninterrupted access to Council systems.

It was also noted that purchasing a device from an alternative supplier would not offer good value for money, as it would require reprogramming by the Council's IT support provider, Norfolk Computer Services, incurring additional costs. Procuring the laptop directly through the Council's IT provider ensured compatibility, immediate setup, and avoided unnecessary expense.

RESOLVED – That the emergency purchase of the replacement Maintenance Team laptop be approved and that Norfolk Computer Services remain the supplier to ensure value for money.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

9.2 Penetration Testing

Members discussed the potential implementation of penetration testing as part of the Council's approach to IT security. Members agreed that penetration testing provides a proactive measure that simulates cyberattacks to identify vulnerabilities in the Council's IT

systems before they can be exploited. Members noted that it will provide a detailed assessment of potential risks, helps ensure compliance with data protection requirements, and will support the safeguarding of sensitive Council and personal information. It was noted that regular testing will also demonstrates due diligence and strengthens the Council's overall cyber resilience, reducing the likelihood of costly data breaches or system downtime. Members acknowledged the value of this preventative approach in protecting the Council's digital infrastructure and reputation.

RESOLVED – That the Governance & Finance Committee recommends to Full Council that the quote from Norfolk Computer Services be accepted to carry out penetration testing as part of the Town Council's ongoing IT security measures, to identify vulnerabilities, protect sensitive data, and strengthen cyber resilience.

Proposed: Cllr Perkin, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

10. To discuss budget planning for 2026/2027 and agree process

Members discussed the approach to budget planning for the 2026/2027 financial year.

It was noted that the Property Committee is due to meet on 29 October 2025 to review and discuss its budget requirements.

It was noted that the Human Resources Committee will need to be asked to confirm when they intend to consider their budget proposals.

Members also highlighted the need to review Ear Marked Reserves, particularly noting that the £10,000 previously allocated for Electric Vehicle Charging is no longer required.

The Planning Committee has requested a £200 budget, which will be incorporated under the Council Expenses budget line.

In the absence of a dedicated community-related committee, the Town Clerk and Deputy Clerk were asked to draft a proposed events budget for consideration.

It was agreed that the Council requires a clear, strategic financial plan to support decision-making. Members noted that no formal resolution has yet been made regarding whether to proceed with a 3G pitch or reinvest in a Skate Park; both of which would have significant implications for Capital Reserves. An update is also needed in relation to the Jubilee Community Centre, which may impact future financial planning.

The importance of aligning budget discussions with strategic priorities and ensuring timely input from all relevant committees was emphasised as the Committee will review the budgets in mid-November 2025.

11. To review Property Committee over-budget spend request for curtains in the Assembly Room and make recommendations to Full Council

Members reviewed the Property Committee's request for funding to replace the curtains in the Assembly Room. It was noted that no budget currently exists for this expenditure; however, the curtains are significantly damaged, including paint stains and sun damage, making replacement necessary to maintain the appearance and usability of the venue.

Members of the Governance & Finance Committee agreed that, given the prominent location and frequent use of the Assembly Room for public hire and weddings, that good quality, hand-made curtains would offer better value and presentation than off-the-shelf alternatives. The importance of maintaining a high standard in Council-owned facilities was recognised.

Members also recognised that the recommended provider was a local seamstress from Downham Market.

RESOLVED – It is recommended that Full Council approves the funding of high-quality, hand-made replacement curtains for the Assembly Room, as the existing curtains are damaged and no longer fit for purpose. It is further proposed that the cost be met from the Ear Marked Reserve budget originally allocated for Electric Vehicle Charging, as this reserve is no longer required for its intended purpose.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

12. To receive an update on the Howdale Pax lease renewal

Members received an update on the renewal of the Howdale Pax lease. The Council's solicitor had advised that the cost of drafting a new lease would be in the region of £1,500 plus VAT, whereas a straight renewal would be significantly more cost-effective.

The Town Clerk confirmed that discussions had taken place with a representative of Howdale Pax, during which some amendments were requested. The amendments requested would have weakened the Council's legal position, and it was explained that Full Council had previously approved a straight renewal with a 10-year extension. This approach was accepted by the Howdale Pax representative once the reasons were explained.

13. To plan review of Standing Orders

Members agreed to hold an additional meeting in November to allow sufficient time for the review of Standing Orders. This will ensure that ordinary Committee business is considered separately in one meeting, with the Standing Orders review taking place in the second meeting to allow for focused discussion.

14. To plan review of Financial Regulations, including Property Committee request to increase Committee expenditure from £5,000 to £10,000 per item

Members noted that while the Council does not usually meet in December, an additional meeting will be scheduled during that month to allow for a focused discussion on the review of Financial Regulations, ensuring adequate time is given to this important governance matter.

15. To review current legal cover and confirm if it remains appropriate, including consideration of alternative quotes and make recommendation to Full Council

Members reviewed the Town Council's current legal cover arrangements. It was noted that there is no formal contract in place and it is based on a 'gentleman's agreement' made before 2018.

In light of recent matters, members agreed it would be appropriate to carry out a broader review to ensure the Council is receiving effective support and value for money and that it would be prudent to initially hold a meeting with the current provider. The Council's representation was suggested as The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Town Clerk.

Members asked that there be a review of the Risk Register in November 2025 as part of this process, alongside consideration of alternative legal providers and an examination of past resolutions to assess performance and responsiveness.

16. To note the Conclusion of Audit from PKF Littlejohn LLP

Members noted the conclusion of the external audit for the 2023/2024 financial year by PKF Littlejohn. It was highlighted that the external auditor identified a breach relating to the publication of the Notice of Conclusion of Audit, which was not uploaded to the Council's website within the timeframe specified by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015. This finding aligns with the Internal Auditor's response to Internal Control Objective N.

It was confirmed that the Notice for the 2024/2025 audit was uploaded to the Council's website on 23 September 2025 and also displayed on the Council noticeboard, with evidence provided to the Internal Auditor.

The Town Clerk challenged the Internal Auditor's findings regarding the 2023/2024 notice, noting that although the notice was mistakenly removed from the website, printed copies remained on the noticeboard in November 2024 and that the notice had been publicly available for the mandatory 14-day period following 30 September 2024 and beyond this.

Members were not concerned by the Conclusion of Audit comments, as this matter is historic and the Council has acted correctly for 2024/2025. It was acknowledged that it is not possible to conclusively prove compliance for the 2023/2024 period.

17. To review finance papers for Chair's signature

17.1 August 2025 bank reconciliation

Members reviewed the August 2025 bank reconciliation and agreed that it was accurate and could be signed by the Chair.

RESOLVED – That Cllr Hobbs be authorised to sign the August 2025 bank reconciliation completed on 24 September 2025.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

17.2 September 2025 bank reconciliation

Members reviewed the bank reconciliation for September 2025 and agreed that it was accurate and could be signed by the Chair.

RESOLVED – That Cllr Hobbs be authorised to sign the September 2025 bank reconciliation completed on 09 October 2025.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

17.3 Actual V Budget Report to 30 September 2025

Members reviewed the Actual vs Budget Report to 30 September 2025 and noted that Cost Code 14 was showing a balance of -£12,142.09, which should correctly read as £3,254.50. It was identified that insurance expenses totaling £23,887.59 had been incorrectly allocated to Professional Fees – Legal/Audit and should instead be charged to Property – Insurance (Cost Code 75).

Cost Code 25 (Bank Interest) was discussed; currently at 114%, members agreed it should be reviewed in light of the newly adopted Investment Policy.

It was also noted that the Council appears not to have been invoiced for water supply from the Water Fountain.

Internet charges have been allocated under Cost Code 19 as the provider also supplies the telephone service, resulting in Cost Code 117 not being used.

Cost Code 119 (Outdoor Gym Equipment & Skate Park) is over budget by 86%, largely due to ongoing payments for harris fencing while the Skate Park remains closed. Members agreed a decision is required on whether to repair the existing Skate Park or dismantle it to prevent further expenditure, pending exploration and costing of a potential concrete replacement.

17.4 Bills for payment

RESOLVED – That payments 310 – 424 be authorised and signed by Cllr Hobbs.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

17.5 Bank Statements

Members had received copies of the Bank Statements on 24 September 2025 and 09 October 2025 alongside the bank reconciliation paperwork. Members had no concerns.

17.6 Receipts List

Cllr Lane declared an interest in receipt 537

RESOLVED – That receipts 491 – 712, excluding 537, be authorised and signed by Cllr Hobbs.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

RESOLVED – That receipt 537 be authorised and signed by Cllr Hobbs.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Perkin, Both in Favour. Cllr Lane did not vote.

17.7 Quarter 2 VAT return

Members had received a copy of the VAT return for Q2 and had no concerns.

18. To agree date for 10% finance check for August 2025 and September 2025

Following the issuance of the agenda, Councillors Perkin and Hobbs completed the outstanding checks on 13 October 2025. Both Councillors confirmed that no issues were identified.

It was noted that Cllr Brewer has offered to assist with the checks in future.

19. To update the asset register

19.1 Bench disposal x 2 – Hollies Service Road

The disposals were noted.

19.2 Happy To Chat bench sign – Paradise Road

The disposal was noted.

21. To review Council Bank Signatory requirements and make recommendation to Full Council

Members reviewed the current bank signatory arrangements for authorising payments.

Under audit requirements, all payments must be approved by two authorised signatories. At present, only Cllrs Lane and Wiles are active signatories. It was noted that Cllr Buxton has resigned and Cllr Jordan has not completed the application process.

To strengthen capacity, it was suggested that additional members of the Governance & Finance Committee be made signatories.

Members also discussed the impact this may have on the Council's 10% audit check, which currently requires two non-signatories. If committee members become signatories, it was agreed this process could be revised to require one signatory and one non-signatory to carry out the check, ensuring continued oversight and compliance.

RESOLVED – That it be recommended to Full Council that additional members of the Governance & Finance Committee be added as bank signatories, and that the 10% audit check be updated to allow verification by one signatory and one non-signatory.

Proposed: Cllr Hobbs, Seconded: Cllr Lane, All in Favour.

Meeting Closed: 7:47 PM