

MARCH TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Meeting of March Town Council held on 6 January 2025 held in The Skoulding Suite at March Town Hall commencing at 7.15pm.

Present	Councillor	G Christy A Woollard	Town Mayor Deputy Town Mayor
	Councillors	S Court J French J Lawler M Purser T Taylor	M Field K French H Orbell N Spencer
	Town Clerk		S Lemmon
	Assistant Town Clerk		S Taylor
	Public		4
	Press		1

130 Apologies

Apologies were received from County Councillor John Gowing.

131 Police Update

Presentation/Minutes of the 2 December 2024 meeting were circulated by the Clerk on 2 December 2024. The next meeting date remains to be confirmed.

132 Planning Applications

Because of her position on the Fenland District Council Planning and Development Committee and her commitment to Paragraph 28 of the Fenland District Council Code of Conduct, Councillor J French declares a permanent personal interest and takes no part in discussions relating to planning matters.

Application

Name and address of applicant, details of application, Number and recommendation of March Town Council

It was agreed that one additional planning application would be discussed at tonight's meeting.

F/YR24/0973/F

Mr Simon Hayes, 67 County Road, March.

Erect part single-storey part 2-storey extension to side/rear of existing dwelling including formation of annexe (single-storey) involving demolition of existing conservatory to rear and detached garage at 67 County Road, March.

Received: 17 December 2025

Reply by: 7 January 2025

Recommendation; Approval

F/YR24/0999/F

Mr S Bushell

Erect 1 x dwelling and 1 x agricultural building and the retention of existing agricultural building at Land at School Grounds, Farm School, Creek Fen, March.

Received: 3 January 2025

Reply by: 24 January 2025

Recommendation; Approval subject to assurance that the occupation of the dwelling will be tied to the farm and agricultural store in perpetuity.

133 Public Participation

Mr Marcus Philips and Mr Clive Lemmon had contacted the Clerk (within the prescribed timeframe) to confirm their wish to speak in the matter of the Summer Festival.

134 Minutes of Meetings

The following Minutes were agreed and signed by the Mayor:

Main Meeting – 2 December 2024

Planning Meeting – 16 December 2024

135 Matters Arising

None

136 Summer Festival – Funding Presentation

Marcus Philips, Chair of the March Summer Festival Committee (a non-March Town Council, separately constituted organisation) delivered a “presentation” to March Town Council to secure nearly £20,000 of funding from March Town Council for what would be the 25th anniversary of the event.

This sum is nearly double the previous sum that March Town Council had previously awarded.

Mr Philips had not been able to speak at the December meeting since the requisite notice to speak had not been served on the Clerk in accordance with the Council's Standing Orders. Mr Philips (and other members of the Summer Festival Committee, who were councillors) had been advised that, in addition to serving notice to speak at the next meeting (January), Mr Philips / the Committee would need to submit any *“presentation to the Clerk together with a full set of accounts and details of any other funding secured or applied for by the Festival Committee for Councillors to consider before any bid for funding could be entertained”*

A “budget” was sent to the Clerk on 19 December 2024 by Mr Philips, which comprised a list of projected costs for a 2025 event (no accounts or other details such as bids for alternate funding sources etc were provided).

The Clerk advised by email to Mr Philips on 23 December 2024 that the information supplied was wholly inadequate to support a bid for funding.

Accordingly, could the following also be provided;

- *“up-to-date bank statements*
- *a full set of accounts*
- *evidence of all grants/funding applied for*
- *details of any fund-raising activities etc and monies raised so far*
- *further information about the committee and its make-up*
- *information on how you plan to realistically deliver an event in less than 6 months as well as the “series of events involving the local community leading up to the festival”**

*the above-mentioned information requested is aligned with the Council's policy relating to applications for Quarterly Grants and Donations, albeit those requests are for very small sums of money.

The under-pinning rationale however, is that all applications for funding must be supported by comprehensive evidence, to justify an award of taxpayers' money.

A response was received on 29 December 2024; Mr Philips confirmed that the Treasurer (Cllr Christy) would send bank statements and accounts directly to the Clerk.

Mr Philips confirmed that the key positions of Event Manager and Stage Manager had **not** been filled, but those roles would be shared between other committee members.

He stated in his email that “we can now apply for funding based on proposed events and we are making contact with FDC and Arts Council regarding funding as well as MTC” thereby making it clear that **no other funding had yet been applied for**, despite assertions by the Committee, for over a year, that they should be able to secure a large amount of funding from the Arts Council to stage the event.

On 30 December the Festival accounts were submitted by email to the Clerk (but not copies of up-to-date bank statements).

All information was circulated to councillors upon receipt by the Clerk so that they could thoroughly review the information prior to the meeting.

During the presentation to councillors, Mr Philips was asked to clarify items in the budget, and to explain how some of the figures were arrived at - such as £8,400 for marquee/stage hire and nearly £10,000 for paid acts. Were there actual costings/quotations, or were they pure estimates?

The “budget” had caused some confusion since it seemed to suggest that some items of “income” was actual “cash-in-hand”, whereas in fact it related to potential grant funding that had not been applied for.

Attention was also drawn to a discrepancy of over £900 in the accounts, which Cllr Christy assured Councillors that he would investigate.

Councillors asked Mr Philips to explain what the event involved as there were no details of acts booked, or detailed information regarding events to be held in the run up to event.

Councillors continually expressed that they had no issues with providing *some* funding to the Festival Committee so that an event could go ahead.

However, for the large sum requested, it was essential to fully understand what was proposed and how it could be delivered.

Crucially, the event was only 6 months away...

Cllr Spencer, organiser of the March Armed Forces Fair, acknowledged that the over-all costs of staging events had risen some 14-16% in real terms recently, and a request that reflected this kind of uplift, rather than 100%, might have been more appropriate/realistic?

The Town Council had only been advised in November 2024 (after the budget had been drafted) that an event for 2025 had even been confirmed.

The confirmation **had not** been communicated until that time.

No minutes had been shared with the Town Council since February 2024, when the Clerk was still the Committee’s Secretary.

(By way of background, the Town Clerk in post had always acted as Secretary to the Festival Committee, given that the Town Council had essentially historically funded the event, once Arts Council funding dried up. The Town Clerk’s role was to oversee the committees’ activities, its expenditure, and to ensure against financial impropriety).

Cllr Field suggested that the Clerk would have known that event was confirmed if she was still acting as Secretary to the Committee.

When the previous, experienced committee disbanded in the summer of 2023, the Clerk had initially remained as Secretary and meetings were convened in order to attract new committee members to facilitate a 2024 festival. However, it had not been possible to appoint to certain key roles, the most significant of which being ‘Event Manager’. As such, no provision was therefore made in the Council’s November 2023 budget (for 2024/2025) for a 2024 festival.

By December 2023 it had become overwhelmingly clear that it would not be possible to stage an event in 2024. Committee members acknowledged that it would not be possible to pull together an event of the intended scale in 6 months.

In February 2024, on the basis that a full committee had still not been appointed and no funding had been provided by March Town Council for a 2024 event, the Clerk stepped back as Festival Secretary but attended the February meeting, took minutes and circulated them to councillors, as was common practise.

The Clerk has had no involvement with the Festival Committee since 12 February 2024. No further minutes had been forthcoming from the new 'Minutes Secretary' (Cllr Purser) since that time.

Cllr Purser acknowledged that, in spite of being on the committee for many years, he had not realised that the minutes were circulated to councillors.

In the absence of direct communication, or receipt of minutes, March Town Council had not been aware that an event for 2025 had been confirmed, as there had been no prior mention of it, from any source, notably Town Councillors.

Furthermore, Councillors on the committee were reminded that they knew when the Council's budget is prepared each year, and therefore it would be essential to make any request for funding prior to its drafting (October/November) for submission to Councillors at their December meeting. The Budget has to be ratified at the January meeting. Communication, observance of protocol and Standing Orders, and timeliness was essential.

There were clearly failings on all counts.

Mr Lemmon, former Town Clerk to March Town Council had requested to speak at the meeting. Mr Lemmon had been involved in the Festival Committee for over 20 years and acted as its Secretary and Treasurer during that time. He explained that he also spoke in his capacity as a taxpayer.

Mr Lemmon explained how the Festival Committee was formed and how it evolved from Colourscape.

He alluded to the fact that circulation of approved minutes of the Festival Committee to councillors had *always* been a condition of council funding, and queried certain breaches of protocol in the application process.

He mentioned the inaugural 2024 Estafest event was delivered with no initial funding, yet, through hard work and fund-raising, had managed to raise over £7,500 for good causes.

Had the Summer Festival Committee been involved in any fund-raising activities? [No]

Notwithstanding, the event had supposedly been advertised without any funding in place.

Mr Lemmon asked whether Arts Council funding had been applied for.

Cllr Field confirmed that an application was submitted just before Christmas.

The outcome would not be known possibly for 10 weeks.

Mr Lemmon asked why had this not been applied for sooner if there was such confidence that funding could be secured and an outcome would not be known until only a few months before the actual event?

Mr Lemmon also suggested that the staging of a one-off weekend festival carries significant risk in the event of inclement weather. There had been a few years when the weather was so bad that the number of helpers outnumbered actual festival-goers.

Mr Lemmon suggested that the Festival Committee went “back to the drawing board”, got its admin in order and start fund-raising using its own endeavours, rather than expecting the tax payer to almost fully cover the cost of the event, which he described as a potentially “risky project”.

Cllr French added that the previous committee had been very experienced in staging the event for a number of years, but the new committee had not adequately or confidently demonstrated their ability to deliver an event of this size/nature that could justify an award of £20,000.

Mr Lemmon urged Councillors to consider their duties and responsibilities very carefully before granting the funding, in light of the “questionable paperwork” and breaches of established protocols by Summer Festival officers (not March Town Council) that could expose the Council to challenge.

He intimated that in terms of the “public perception test”, the Council cannot be seen to be favouring an application for funding for an event/organisation simply because councillors were sitting on the Committee when the application process for the funding was flawed.

The Clerk advised that five councillors had an interest in this agenda item due to their involvement with the Festival. Their request for a “dispensation” to speak had not been necessary since their interest was not technically a pecuniary one, merely personal.

However, she encouraged councillors to be very mindful of their duties as councillors when making any decision in relation to the grant of Festival funding.

She reminded them that in the context of Quarterly Grants/Donations Applicants, Councillors involved in the Festival Committee had oft cited “availability of alternative funding streams” as a reason for refusal. This had effectively set a precedent in their decision-making.

She felt it would be dangerous to dismiss this specific consideration when determining an application for funding an event in which members of the applicant organisation had a vested interest.

To move the matter forward, Cllr J French proposed that the application for funding for a **2025** event be **rejected**.

This was seconded by Cllr Spencer.

5 councillors voted for the motion, with 3 against, and 3 abstaining.

As such, the motion to **refuse** funding was carried.

It was reiterated that the Council **would** be happy to provide funding for future Festivals, on the condition that protocols/standing orders were followed, funding was applied for in time (ie in advance of the budget), other funding sources explored and the application supported by comprehensive documentation and accounts. Minutes would also be expected to be supplied to March Town Council.

The Council has to protect itself against legal challenge and has a duty to account to taxpayers.

137 Local Highways Improvements

The deadline for submission of applications is Friday 10 January 2025. The Clerk had requested that all information be submitted pre-Christmas in order to collate and prepare the evidence and had completed the online expression of interest form.

Since there were 2 County Council divisions and 3 County Councillors, it was possible to apply for 2 schemes for 2025/26.

The Clerk would complete and submit the application for the widening of North Drive and the creation of parking bays. In support of this proposal, Cllr Field had provided a residents' petition. Unfortunately, the ambulance service had not yet responded to his FOI request for further information about incidents where parked vehicles had prevented ambulance access.

Councillors voted in favour of an application for a further MVAS sign for the town.

138 Christmas Switch-on Event

The Clerk advised councillors that she anticipated that Christmas Lights-related expenditure for £2024 was likely to be in the region of £24,000-£25,000 (compared to 2023 expenditure of just over £16,000), against a budget of £20,000.

Fund-raising and sponsorship in particular had been significantly down on 2023 figures.

The cost of the event was likely to increase *dramatically* in future years and a number of factors were highlighted;

- Wall bolt testing was previously only done every other year. This now needs to be carried out every year (over £1,800)
- Lights have never been PAT tested previously. This will now take place every year
- The switch-on is now a Tier 3 event. As such, a paramedic is required in addition to first aiders, so this more than doubles the SJA bill
- Private security is now required for the event
- Fire training is now required
- Full traffic management (in addition to a road closure) is now required for the delivery and installation of the tree in Broad Street
- The Council's insurance premium has risen significantly by virtue of the new lights (valued at over £100,000)
- There is no budget for replacement/repair of the new lights – the £20,000 present was vandalised having been in situ less than 1 week.
- FDC have strongly indicated that the event will require additional toilet facilities at the switch-on event.
- The entertainment/band costs have increased significantly
- The PPL/PRS (music licence) for the event has risen 300% from £270 pa to £725.
- The cost of the unmetered supply has increased dramatically following a 49% increase in September 2023.

- The major issue is the erection/dismantling of the lighting. If we use a contractor in future, this alone will blow the entire Lighting budget (£20,000 - £30,000). If Balfour Beatty provide electrical supervision for every occasion that our team erect or dismantle lights, this would also prove to be too expensive. Alternatively, there is potential for some of the committee members working towards the necessary qualifications (NRSWA and G39), but, this option is certainly not without its difficulties, complications or cost implications (willingness, numbers, availability, continuity, capacity, insurance).

Councillors were not prepared to discuss the matter until the February meeting. In the meantime, the Clerk would prepare a full report including costings and proceed with part-organising an event for 2025.

There is Christmas Lights meeting later in the month.

139 By-Election

FDC Elections had confirmed that they had received the required number of requests for a By-Election to take place. It is anticipated that the By-Election will be held on Thursday 27 February 2025, if contested.

The cost of the by-election is likely at a cost of £6,000 to March Town Council and a further £2,820 for 3,611 polling cards to be printed/issued (approximately £8,820 in total)

Councillors voted in favour of polling cards.

The Clerk would notify Elections accordingly tomorrow.

140 CCTV – Quote for March Town Council

The Clerk had received a quotation from Ocular for the installation of a CCTV system linked to the control tower, following the burglary in March 2023.

Unfortunately, two systems were recommended but the respective cost was £7,116.95 & VAT and £10,755.47 & VAT and was considered to be beyond the budget.

The current CCTV system would be retained, which complements existing CCTV within the town.

141 Air Conditioning Unit – March Town Council Office

The Clerk advised councillors that the unit in the Clerk's office needed replacing.

The cost of a replacement would be £1,995 + VAT.

In the event that scaffolding was required, this would cost an additional £800-£1,000 + VAT.

Given that the Town Council's offices have no windows that can be opened, and the large front window that causes the front office to quickly over-heat, councillors authorised the Clerk to proceed with the installation of the replacement unit.

Following on from a comment made by Cllr J French about the requirement for planning permission when using scaffolding in the context of Listed Buildings, the Clerk will double check with the Planning Authority/Conservation Officer whether planning permission for scaffolding would be required..

142 Clerk – Work Telephone

The Clerk advised that she was spending significant sums of money on ‘phone calls on her private mobile and from her home landline. As such she invited councillors to consider whether they would be prepared to authorise the purchase of business mobile. Only a very basic device would be required as it would only be needed for making/taking calls.

Councillors authorised the purchase.

Cllr J French possibly has an old ‘phone at home that would be suitable for this purpose, and would update the Clerk further in that regard.

Cllr K French enquired about the ongoing issue with the office ‘phones and BT. The Clerk and Assistant briefly explained the protracted difficulties they were having trying to resolve the problem. Essentially, the BT OnePhone system is no longer supported, so it may be necessary to investigate other options/a replacement system.

In the meantime, an engineer visit had been requested.

Officers will follow this up.

143 Budget Ratification

The Clerk had not been advised of any changes to the Council Tax Base, thereby requiring an adjustment to the Precept.

No changes had been made to the budget.

As such, the budget and precept were **duly ratified** (proposed by Cllr K French, seconded by Cllr Woollard, all voted in favour).

144 IDB Drainage

Cllr Taylor updated councillors following a meeting he had attended recently as a member of the farming community to discuss the withdrawal by the Government of Environment Agency funding and the impact that this would have on future development.

143 Cambridgeshire County Council Update

Cllr J Gowing had reported no updates.

Cllr J French provided updates in relation to LHI, including Norwood Avenue.

144 Fenland District Council Update

The 2027 elections had been postponed until 2028.

FDC will become part of a unitary authority.

145 Payments List

The Payments List, as circulated, was agreed with one exception; Cllr Taylor queried the payment relating to VAT advice to Whitings.

The Clerk confirmed that this related to a written request from the Mayor (to the Clerk) in November to have a meeting with the accountant about VAT-related issues in connection with the Mayor’s Charity Account and grants.

The Clerk duly sought advice from the Council’s internal auditors to confirm the position.

Any instruction of this nature would, in future, need to be discussed at full council.

Cllr Christy agreed that he would pay this invoice.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 9:38pm.

Councillor G Christy3 February 2025
Mayor of March.