

Axminster Town Council

Office Hours

Monday to Thursday

9am – 4pm

Mayor: Cllr Jill Farrow

Town Clerk: Paul Hayward

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Minutes of the meeting of the Operations Committee held on Monday, 15th September 2025 at 7.00 p.m. at Axminster Guildhall.

Minutes approved 26th January 2026: Part One version

Present: Cllrs Walden (JW) (Chair), Price (JP)(Vice Chair), Bridge (PB), Dowdeswell (MD), Dunsbury (RD), Farrow (JF), Osborn (RO) and Willey (DW).

The meeting was quorate.

Also in attendance were the Clerk to the Council, Paul Hayward, the Deputy Clerk, Sarah Jackson and the Administrative Assistant, Katie Edgell.

No members of the public were in attendance.

The meeting began at 7.00 pm.

The Presiding Chair of the Committee, JW, welcomed all in attendance and outlined the fire precautions, exits, etc. and ran through the agenda procedure and protocol, noting the agenda statements as published.

Public Forum:

As there were no members of the public present, the Chair asked if any members of the Committee wished to speak in the public forum. No member wanted to speak. The Chair subsequently closed the public forum session at 7:02 pm.

OC25/054

To note members of the committee present:

As detailed above.

OC25/055

To note and, if thought fit, to approve apologies (and reasons for absence). (LGA 1972 S.85 (1))

Apologies were received from Cllr Leat, Cllr Paice and Cllr Hayward. These apologies were noted, along with the reasons for them.

The Chair proposed that these apologies be accepted, which was seconded by JP. Resolved unanimously.

OC25/056

To note members of the Committee not otherwise in attendance.

Cllr Hurren and Cllr Warwick were noted as absent.

Continued Overleaf

OC25/057

To receive any declarations of interest from members of the Committee in relation to items of business on this agenda and to note any dispensations previously afforded.

A declaration at this point does not preclude the need for members to declare any additional interests that may arise during this meeting.

At the FULL Council meeting held 10/06/2024, Cllr. Osborn was afforded a dispensation * to discuss and vote upon matters pertaining to allotments. This dispensation applies until May 2027 (unless rescinded prior to that date) and is afforded in respect of Cllr. Osborn's disclosable pecuniary and personal interests as set out in the Register of Members' Interests. * Localism Act 2011 (s.33).

There were no other declarations of interest.

OC25/058

To consider and, if thought fit, approve the minutes of the Operations Committee meeting held 7th July 2025 and to consider any matters arising.

The Chair proposed approval of these minutes.

Seconded by JP. The approval of the minutes was resolved unanimously.

Action: The Chair signed the approved minutes accordingly.

Matters Arising.

There were seven matters arising, which the Clerk gave an update about:

i) Regarding the purchase of additional tables for the Guildhall.

The Clerk confirmed that these had now arrived.

ii) Conflict resolution training for staff.

The Clerk confirmed that this was now booked for 17th October with an SIA-qualified instructor for nine staff at the cost of £44 per person.

iii) Emergency store locations.

The Clerk explained that Purzebrook Chapel had declined to allow use of its car park for this amenity; however, he was currently in negotiations with EDDC regarding the use of one of the garages situated in the West Street car park for free, or failing that, two of the car parking spaces in the long-stay car park. This would then serve the South-Eastern part of town, alongside the planned site to the West, and the existing store to the North.

iv) The potential acquisition of a Hearing Loop for the Guildhall.

The Clerk updated the Committee regarding correspondence with a provider who is an RNID partner, which confirmed that the loop could indeed be installed at the Guildhall and has provided a ballpark estimate of £3,000 to £5,000. However, they had also suggested a site survey would be prudent at £108 plus VAT to check field uniformity and metal interference compliance.

DW, who has hearing loss, questioned the need for a loop system, noting that mobile technology may offer better solutions. JF, also partially deaf, shared concerns about cost without clear demand. JP added that a loop would be more useful for events than meetings, as it could be integrated with the sound system and attract more ticket buyers, but agreed that demand should be assessed first. He proposed that the Guildhall manager poll users via email and Facebook, a suggestion everyone supported.

Actions: Clerk, please instruct the Guildhall's manager to establish the need for a hearing loop at the Guildhall.

Continued Overleaf

Matters Arising – Continued

v) The Glyphosate alternative trials.

The Clerk highlighted a number of councils that had returned to using Glyphosate in moderation, given its efficacy compared to non-Glyphosate-based products and the damage caused by hand-weeding on some surfaces.

PB queried the Council's stance in banning the chemical, saying the problem lay with an old wetting agent - now removed from product manufacture in Europe - and not with the active ingredient itself. He also noted that the concerns were primarily related to its use in marine, not terrestrial, environments. JF pointed out that DEFRA is reviewing their Glyphosate policy and advised waiting for its guidance, which the Committee supported.

Actions: Clerk, please bring this item back following the publication of DEFRA guidance.

vi) Stoma-friendly status.

The Clerk said he had consulted Rose Bunce, an ambassador for stoma-friendly facilities in our area, who had visited the Guildhall and confirmed that only minor changes are needed. Once made, she will recommend adding the Guildhall to the Stoma Friendly Association's directory and help promote it after it has been approved.

Actions: Clerk, please proceed with the necessary adaptations to make the Guildhall's disabled access WC stoma-friendly.

vii) Assertion 10 compliance.

The Clerk reported that he has a meeting scheduled with the internal auditor to discuss the initial changes required to comply with the AGAR by March 2026.

OC25/059

To consider any matters listed on this agenda that Councillors consider should be dealt with as confidential business as per the provisions of The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960.

One matter was already tabled for Part Two consideration - agenda items OC25/065(IC) and an additional matter of urgency in relation to item OC25/062 (IC) was raised by the Clerk.

Agreed.

Operations Committee business to be considered:

OC25/060

To consider matters pertaining to Town Amenity and services:

i) To consider "in principle" adding an additional camera to the existing town centre CCTV system, utilising existing building infrastructure – costs estimated at around £1000.

The Committee considered the following:

- Whether a planning application should be submitted for the FULL and LBC aspects of the said installation (estimated costs £150).
- Whether to seek grant funding from the OPCC (Devon and Cornwall Police) for the materials and labour necessary for the enhancements to the CCTV system in the town centre.
- If funding was not available, whether the Town Council should proceed using its own non-earmarked reserves.

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The Clerk reported on the OPCC grant scheme, noting the Town Council is ineligible for the initially highlighted program, but that he has been directed to another grant fund specifically for town and parish councils.

Councillors discussed the current CCTV network coverage and limits, camera types, and the need for full coverage of the square. The challenge of monitoring the church's south side was also considered, noting that the Police were already aware that the church's CCTV system partially covered this area.

The Chair proposed that the Town Council proceed with the scheme, including obtaining planning consent, regardless of the success of the grant application.

Seconded by DW. Resolved unanimously.

Actions: Clerk, please proceed with the grant application, planning permission application and ultimately the installation of an additional camera on the Symonds & Sampson building.

Justification/Powers: Local Government and Rating Act 1997 s.31 / Crime and Disorder Act 1998 s.17

ii) To consider entirely removing the existing Dog Free Zone at Jubilee Field to provide a more accessible and larger recreation space for all users.

The Committee noted that replacing the fence, loosened by ground shrinkage, would incur costs. Some members rarely saw the dog-free area in use, while others had observed occasional use. JW emphasised that the zone was deliberately created for community inclusivity and to create a space where people uncomfortable with dogs could enjoy the field. JP cited a local poll showing demand for dog-free spaces nearby, highlighting that people may not know it was there. It was suggested that a survey be conducted to gauge the need before deciding on removal or replacement.

Actions: Deputy Clerk, please conduct a Facebook poll to establish if the community still wish to retain a dog-free area in Jubilee Field.

iii) To consider a request from a parishioner to host a "Dachshund Dash" community event for dog owners on the Jubilee Field in October.

The Committee discussed liability, site openness, and safety concerns for dogs, road users, and the public during a race, noting the risk from loose dogs. Renting the space exclusively could mitigate this, but the Committee was unwilling, as it would limit access for regular users. JF highlighted that whilst an organised event of this nature would not be permissible, an informal play date for dachshund owners at Jubilee Field would be fine, provided site rules were followed. RD suggested that nearby secure dog spaces are available for a small hire fee, and that these would probably be a better option for such events.

Actions: Clerk, please communicate the Council's position with the member of the public.

iv) To consider a proposal for the purchase of a suitable QR code card-printer for use with the Axminster Helps project and for future employee/officer/contractor/volunteer/user card/ID production.

Councillors considered cost, value for money, and the printer's capabilities. The Deputy Clerk noted that, beyond ID cards and Axminster Helps, the printer could serve several other applications, improving overall value.

JP proposed that the Council proceed with the purchase of the printer for £662 and the associated software licence at £240. Seconded by JW.

There were seven votes in favour of the proposal and one against. The decision was carried.

Actions: Clerk, please proceed with purchasing the printer and software.

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To consider matters pertaining to allotments:

i) To consider additional revisions to extant allotment regulations, including Waiting List Policy, and the Livestock Policy.

The Clerk introduced the item, emphasising that the team had given great consideration to ensuring the proposed changes were reasonable and aimed at clarifying expectations and procedures, and that additional changes covering the keeping of livestock will follow in due course.

MD agreed with the proposed changes but noted a minor typo, and suggested replacing "shall" with "must" for legal enforceability, and recommended changing the accident notification period in Section 14 from "within 48 hours" to "within one working day", as the council office was not open 24/7.

JF highlighted some minor amendments to the wording in Section 11, "Conduct on the Site"

The Committee discussed whether to continue allowing ponds, noting the existing rules make no provision for them. The Deputy Clerk explained that ponds attract wildlife, such as frogs and hedgehogs, which naturally control pests. She clarified that tenants are responsible for public liability on their plots and are encouraged to obtain insurance independently or through the Allotment Association.

It was proposed by the Chair that all proposed changes be adopted subject to the highlighted corrections and amendments, and that the final copy be circulated to Councillors in advance of wider distribution, so that Councillors could refer back to it if challenged.

Seconded by MD. Resolved unanimously.

Actions: Clerk, please arrange with the admin team to make the necessary changes to the Allotment rules and circulate them accordingly.

ii) To consider proposals for an alteration to allotment plot charging for tenancy year FY2026-27; to move away from current half/full plot charges towards a more equitable and fair banded charge based on the square metre area of the existing tenanted plot [This decision has been delegated to the Operations Committee by a formal resolution of the FULL Town Council on 8th September 2025]

The Deputy Clerk recapped the previous pricing structure considered in July's meeting, which sought to make fees fairer across plot sizes, but noted that a recent measurement and impact assessment showed it fell short. Three alternatives were presented, based on 33p, 37p, and 40p per m² for mid-size plots, with pros and cons for each. The Committee also heard that Seaton Council recently raised their fees from 30p to 60p/m².

RO noted that some tenants on larger plots might give up and asked about options for splitting plots. The Deputy Clerk acknowledged this was a real risk but explained that there were only seven tenants above a Band D who would see a more significant increase in their bill. Using the 37p option as an example, most tenants in bands B, C, and D would see modest increases compared to what the two-tier 2026/2027 fees would likely have been, while many plot holders would actually pay less than under that benchmark.

The Deputy Clerk explained that splitting plots in the past often led to less desirable plots and poor boundary layouts, and many plots were too small to divide once new pathways were added. Consequently, halving plots is no longer routine. However, a strategic site assessment identified a few plots suitable for splitting and some small plots that could be combined. Additionally, smaller plots (bands A and B) have been retained to allow tenants on larger plots to downsize if desired.

Continued Overleaf

Other discussions included:

- The potential for a water charge in future, subject to consideration of ongoing water usage.
- Whether tenants of multiple plots would have their plots' areas combined for billing purposes, or whether each plot is priced separately.
- The costs for running the sites in general.

JP supported option C (40p/m²) but felt all options were too conservative given Seaton's fees, allotment running costs, and capital investment requests, suggesting 60p or 80p might be more appropriate. The Deputy Clerk calculated the impact on fees at these rates. After discussion, the Committee agreed to use 40p/m² for the pricing structure.

It was proposed by the Chair that pricing scheme C, at 40p/m², be taken forward for the 2026/27 billing year, and that an explanation be issued alongside the statutory advanced notification.
Seconded by DW. Resolved unanimously.

Actions: Clerk, please arrange for the administrative team to draft the necessary communications to be included in the annual renewal paperwork pack.

iii) To consider the current financial out-turn position for the allotment sites.

The Clerk explained that the financial out-turn report would best be presented after the billing exercise, as there would be some income data to report, and asked if the Committee would consider it at the next meeting, which focuses on budget setting.

Councillors were asked to consider withdrawing payments by cheque for allotment fees as these are operationally difficult and the Council and Guildhall do not accept cheques for other payments. The Deputy Clerk noted that tenants can still pay by card or BACS, as stated on all invoices. It was also noted that cash payments were successfully withdrawn last year with the reintroduction of card payments.

Discussion focused on the benefits of cash and cheques, the possibility of a surcharge for cheques, and the increasing difficulty of obtaining chequebooks.

It was proposed by the Chair that the Council withdraw the ability to pay allotment fees by cheque.
Seconded by DW.

There were seven votes in favour of the proposal and one against. The decision was carried.

Actions: Clerk, please arrange for the administrative team to update the billing documents to ensure allotment holders are aware that the Council will no longer accept payment by cheque, and bring the financial out-turn report back to the next Operations Committee meeting.

iv) To consider further correspondence from Axminster Allotment Association.

The Committee considered the latest correspondence from the allotment association. No specific action was deemed necessary.

Action: Clerk, Deputy Clerk and Admin Assistant to continue to liaise with the Allotment Association and undertake any actions felt appropriate.

Continued Overleaf

v) **To consider matters pertaining to allotment tenant engagement, and payment processing events towards the end of October (ie. after the commencement of the FY25-26 renewal cycle).**

The Clerk asked whether the Council wanted to proceed with the event, noting staff can face pressure from some attendees. A positive newsletter had already been drafted by the Deputy Clerk for circulation with Allotment Renewals. Possible changes to reduce pressure included requesting questions and feedback in advance or offering one-to-one drop-in sessions.

Councillors agreed that a presentation and payment evening remained the best approach, with JW offering to host, supported by officers. Collecting questions in advance was seen as helpful for preparing responses, while still allowing tenants to ask additional questions on the night.

The Deputy Clerk asked whether a weekend daytime or Thursday evening session was preferable. After discussion, a daytime session was deemed unfeasible as weekends were busy for most people. A Thursday evening session toward the end of October was agreed, subject to hall availability.

Actions: Clerk, please book the hall for a Thursday night in late October for a presentation and payment evening.

vi) **To consider whether Committee wishes to endorse and approve the provisional "Report a Problem" service to be hosted on the SurveyMonkey platform.**

The Deputy Clerk explained that allotment problems are often reported too late, as plot holders forget to notify the office. To address this, the admin team proposes a mobile-friendly web form via SurveyMonkey, allowing plot holders to report issues and upload photos on-site. The Admin Assistant noted it would provide a clear paper trail, though other reporting methods would remain available.

Councillors supported the initiative and asked if it could be extended to other reports. The Deputy Clerk said the website already has a general enquiry form, but a new form could be developed if this new allotments initiative were successful. They also requested that any QR code on noticeboards be accompanied by the URL.

It was proposed by the Chair that the "Report a Problem" platform be implemented and that this be. Seconded by RD. Resolved unanimously.

Actions: Clerk, please direct the admin team to proceed with the report a problem platform.

OC25/062

Chair's Announcements / Matters of Urgency for discussion only to be noted:

One matter of urgency was raised by the Clerk for discussion in Part Two, which related to energy supply contracts.

OC25/063

Date of next scheduled meeting for the Committee: 17th November 2025 – 7pm (Guildhall).

This meeting will primarily consider budgetary requirements ahead of the Full Council setting its annual budget. For future committee meetings, see the 2025 meeting calendar.

OC25/064

JP proposed that [under the provisions of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, (as amended by the Local Government Act 1972] the public (including the press) should be excluded from the meeting as publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted. Seconded by JF. Resolved unanimously.

Matters to be considered in committee session (Part Two)

The items of business listed below and any others from this agenda are to be agreed upon by members of the Committee if and when appropriate (see OC25/059).

OC25/062 (IC)

To consider a contractual matter regarding an energy supplier.

This matter is deemed confidential as it pertains to a contractual dispute and ongoing Ombudsman investigation.

The Clerk outlined issues with a current energy supplier and matters pertaining to billing and historic accounting (incorporating invoices, credit notes and re-billing). Clerk also reported upon the transfer of Guildhall operations from the former GMC charity, to the Town Council in August 2023 and the implications of that governance change on extant energy contracts from that period.

Clerk advised that they will continue to progress this matter with the Energy Ombudsman and bring a further report back to the Committee (or Council) as soon as a determination on the case is made. Cllr. Dowdeswell offered his help (and previous experience with legal matters) to the Clerk if required.

Actions: Clerk, please liaise with Cllr Dowdeswell and continue to correspond with the Ombudsman on this matter.

OC25/065 (IC)

To consider a confidential matter pertaining to an allotment tenancy.

This matter is deemed confidential as it pertains to an individual's allotment tenancy.

The Council Administrator reported that a plot holder was not actively cultivating their overgrown plot. Normally, a warning notice would be issued, but due to contemporaneous events and prevailing external circumstances, this has been deferred until now. The Deputy Clerk noted that, as a result, this deferral had subsequently complicated the process of issuing warnings to other tenants whose plots were in better condition but still substandard and having reached the threshold for an informal warning as per the Allotment Regulations. Officers sought the Committee's direction on whether to proceed with the issue of a warning to this particular tenant at this time.

After some discussion, the consensus was to apply the warning process consistently. The Deputy Clerk confirmed that the team had been engaging with tenants as appropriate throughout the year and that other tenants would also receive warnings if the Committee deemed action should recommence.

It was proposed by the Chair that the Council instruct officers to proceed with the warning process for this tenant and any others whose plots are not being adequately maintained or cultivated.

Seconded by JP, Resolved unanimously.

Actions: Clerk, please instruct the team to resume the warning process for all tenants whose plot is not maintained or cultivated as expected.

With no further business to attend to, the Chair closed the meeting at 21.18 hrs.

Signed Date: 26th January 2026

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