

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 23 JANUARY 2023 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.56 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Peter Dennis (Chair), David Cornish (Vice-Chair), Shirley Boyt, Norman Jorgensen, Laura Blumenthal, Chris Johnson, Pauline Jorgensen, Gregor Murray, Alistair Neal and Michael Firmager (Sub)

Executive Members Present

Councillors: Ian Shenton (Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure) and Imogen Shepherd-DuBey (Executive Member for Finance)

Officers Present

Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) and Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets))

67. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Gregor Murray. Michael Firmager attended the meeting as a substitute.

68. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the extraordinary meetings of the Committee held on 17 October, 26 October and 29 November, and the Minutes of the meeting held on 3 November 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising

- Could the action regarding whether WBC was responsible for unaccompanied asylum seekers who left care to go to University be chased;
- Could assurances be given that our in-development and planned solar farms would be connected to the grid in good time, as there were reports of other large sites having to wait up to 15 years to be connected.

69. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

70. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

71. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

72. COMBATING DRUGS PARTNERSHIP

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 47 to 50, which provided an update on the work carried out to date in relation to the Combatting Drugs Partnership.

Due to the Lead Officer being unwell, Members raised a number of points which they would like to see included when this item returned.

Ian Shenton, Executive Member for Environment, Sport and Leisure, attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and queries:

- How spread was the drugs problem within the Wokingham Borough Council Area? Executive Member response – Further information would be provided when this item returned to the Committee;
- What actions were being considered to break the cycle of demand? Executive Member response – Further information would be provided when this item returned to the Committee;
- Could further comment be provided regarding the relatively high levels of ‘drug driving’? Executive Member response – Further information would be provided when this item returned to the Committee;
- What was being done to combat the use of Nitrous Oxide, especially amongst school children? Executive Member response – Further information would be provided when this item returned to the Committee.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Ian Shenton be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The above comments and questions be included within a more detailed report at a future meeting of the Committee.

73. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP) - UPDATE TO BIDS

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 51 to 84, which provided an update to Capital and Revenue bids following receipt of the Local Governance Finance Settlement.

The report presented updates to actions raised at previous meetings of the Committee, in addition to updated bids.

Imogen Shepherd-DuBey (Executive Member for Finance) and Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive (Director of Resources and Assets)) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Had the process of budget scrutiny, and associated suggestions, offered any further savings options? Officer response – Whilst suggestions may not have had a direct effect in this year’s budget, many of the suggestions would provide useful insights into future bids and budgets;
- What other options had been considered for the Toutley Depot scheme? Officer response – Other options included everything from partial refurbishments, partial completion, through to full completion. A considerable amount of work had been put into considering what works could be foregone within the capital programme;

- Were the effects on increasing our insurance excesses worthwhile when considering changes to premiums? Officer response – Specific details would be included within individual tenders;
- It was noted that the £1.8m additional funding via the Local Government Finance Settlement or the additional £2m in expenditure regarding national living wage increases to Adult Social Care staff was not included within the original assumptions presented to the Committee, which had been based off of the best estimates available at the time;
- How were negotiations related to additional grant income from the better Care Fund progressing? Officer response – Both the nature of the calculation and improving the calculation were important issues. This was not a straightforward issue, and further detail would be provided as a written answer;
- It was noted that Council Tax did not cover all expenditure, and other income streams including retained business rates and grants were used to fund the revenue budget;
- It was noted that a chart, which broke down the income sources available to the Council, was contained within the Chief Finance Officer's report;
- It was noted that the proposals before the Committee represented a balanced budget, which was a statutory requirement;
- How much did the DSG recovery (plus 1%) represent? Officer response – The regulations relating to this expenditure had changed, and would now represent an approximate £1.25m spend in year 1, an approximate £2.25m spend in year 2, and an approximate £3.86m spend in year 3. We had limited control over this spend as this was about early intervention, support, partner working and complex needs;
- The Committee had been previously advised that reserves could not be used this year. Why was reserve utilisation of £1.4m being proposed? Executive Member and officer response – The £1.4m was being taken from the re3 equalisation fund rather than the General Fund, and the re3 fund had no obvious use at this time. The critical reserve was the General Fund, and the narrative given to Local Authorities within the Local Government Finance Settlement was that Council's should make use of reserves where possible;
- It was requested that additional detail be provided in relation to the additional special item proposed for demand management within the Adult's Services Directorate;
- It was noted that the changes to the bid relating to communities running smaller libraries represented an accounting change rather than an actual change to the bid value;
- With regards to the social care system, was there no expected growth during the life of the contract? Officer response – A written answer would be provided;
- In relation to the previously proposed £900 charge for a second resident car parking permit, was this still planned to go ahead, and if so, could this increase be justified? Officer response – This had not been decided upon, however, such a change would not be implemented until at least 2024/25;

- Was the savings bid of £250k in relation to waste and recycling as a result of increased recycling rates? Officer response – No, this was a growth bid which had been reduced as the assumptions behind it had been challenged and the Service now felt that they could make do with less growth;
- It was noted that the bid relating to Domestic Abuse Commissioned Services had been changed from a growth bid to a one-year special item to allow arrangements to be reviewed;
- A range of comments were made with regards to the additional Coroners Court expenditure. It was noted that this Service was operated by Reading Borough Council, whilst the Service itself was a statutory requirement and was funded by each Berkshire local authority. It was agreed that a paper be presented to Overview and Scrutiny to understand the works carried out and the associated costs;
- In relation to the identified risks, was there a scale or percentage chance of such risks occurring? Officer response – These were still of relatively high risk, however they were just below the threshold to require inclusion within the proposed budget. There was no doubt that inflation pressures would increase budget lines across the Council;
- What inflation figure had been included within the proposals? Officer response – The inflation figure was broken down into three areas. Officer pay award was budgeted for four-percent (23/24), four-percent (24/25) and three-percent (25/26). Adult Social Care was budgeted for a six-percent increase during the next financial year, which would be challenging. Contract inflation was budgeted at three-percent. Officers and Members would need to work very hard to keep all inflationary pressures down;
- In relation to the new California Lakeside refurbishment bid, totalling £600k, did this take into consideration that the project would be half funded by the Parish Council? Officer response – Whilst a written response would be provided for clarity, it was understood that the £600k figure included contributions from all parties, and credit lines would be shown elsewhere;
- How were savings of £6m to the California Crossroads project proposed to be realised? Officer response - Whilst a written response would be provided for clarity, it was understood that the scheme had been significantly reprofiled to future years, whilst it was possible that some of this spend had been carried out during the current financial year;
- As the Earley footbridge was now proposed to be repaired rather than rebuilt, was there a risk that this could lead to increased long-term costs? Officer response – The bridge had not yet reached its operational lifespan, and no firm decision had been made on whether it was to be repaired or replaced. Further investigations needed to be carried out on the best way forwards, and any decision would be based on a detailed business case;
- Was there any update with regards to the proposed Arborfield pool? Officer response – This scheme had been moved to 2025/26 as it had yet to be proved in terms of a business case. This had been an aspiration for some time, and had featured in a number of Medium Term Financial Plans;

- Did the reduction in funding for public rights of way indicate a reduction in future schemes? Officer response – It had been imperative to produce a balanced budget, and as such all Services had been challenged to provide savings wherever possible;
- Were public rights of way schemes which were part funded by Town and Parish Councils, for example in Shinfield, at risk? Executive Member response – A number of schemes were still proposed to go ahead, and details on specific schemes could be provided by the Service or Executive Member;
- It was suggested that it may be prudent for the Committee to spend additional time reviewing the Capital Programme in future years, as these represented very large spends which impacted on the infrastructure delivered for residents;
- How were savings associated with land acquisitions for major road schemes to be achieved? Officer response – The Council held a contingency fund to compulsory purchases relating to major highways development schemes. As the Core Strategy was now coming to an end, there was only one further property to be purchased at this time. As such, the remaining contingencies could be released which was very helpful when producing a balanced capital programme;
- Assuming there was to be a move to fortnightly bin collections, would wheelie bins be purchased via capital funds? Officer response – The business case was based on utilisation of the re3 equalisation fund to fund the cost of purchasing the wheelie bins. These funds would be replenished via the revenue provided within the ongoing business case, which would provide savings overall. A net position would be realised after year two of the changes being implemented;
- If the re3 reserve was being utilised, what would happen if savings were not achieved and if so what were the risks of the reserve being held at a lower level? Officer response – The risks were the same as any other savings proposal, and savings which were not realised would be reported as a pressure within ongoing revenue monitoring. There was always the potential to need to use the re3 reserve, as towards the end of the contract there would be costs, and using such reserves did increase the risk should something unexpected happen outside of the contracted spend. The Council currently held over £100m in earmarked reserves;
- Was there budget for provision of extra green recycling bags should collections move to fortnightly? Officer response – There were over 54,000 bags in storage should residents need extra bags, and the existing budget was deemed sufficient;
- Was the re3 equalisation fund used for refurbishment of refuse vehicles? Officer response – No, the fund could be used to cover costs associated with the end of the contract;
- How much interest would be lost as a result of utilisation of £3m of the re3 equalisation fund for purchasing wheelie bins and balancing the revenue budget? Officer response – A written answer would be provided to the Committee;
- It was noted that specific details regarding the proposed changes to waste collection would be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at an upcoming meeting;

- It was requested that an item be considered by the Committee in the summer of 2023, detailing the different earmarked reserves held by the Council in addition to what they were safeguarding against;
- It was noted that the Personnel Board had considered a more detailed (part 2) report regarding specific agency staff, and a further update would be taken to the Board in future.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Imogen Shepherd-DuBey and Graham Ebers be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) A written response be provided as to the effects on increasing our insurance excesses when considering the associated changes to premiums;
- 3) Additional detail be provided as to how the negotiations related to additional grant income from the better Care Fund were progressing;
- 4) Additional detail be provided in relation to the additional special item proposed for demand management within the Adult's Services Directorate;
- 5) A written answer be provided as to whether there was any expected growth over the life of the social care system contract;
- 6) A paper be presented to Overview and Scrutiny to understand the works carried out by the Coroners Court and associated costs;
- 7) In relation to California Lakeside, a written answer be provided as to whether this bid took into consideration that the project would be half funded by the Parish Council;
- 8) A written response be provided as to how savings of £6m relating to the California Crossroads project were to be realised;
- 9) The Committee consider spending additional time reviewing the Capital Programme in future years, as these represented very large spends which impacted on the infrastructure delivered for residents;
- 10) A written response be provided as to how much interest would be lost as a result of utilisation of £3m of the re3 equalisation fund for purchasing wheelie bins and balancing the revenue budget;
- 11) An item be considered by the Committee in the summer of 2023, detailing the different earmarked reserves held by the Council in addition to what they were safeguarding against.

74. LCWIP TASK AND FINISH GROUP TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee considered the draft Terms of Reference for the LCWIP Task and Finish Group, set out on agenda page 85.

It was noted that the Group would be considering the high-level LCWIP document, which would be used to facilitate future bids to Active Travel England for Future Schemes. It was likely that the Group would meet on two occasions, prior to producing a short summary

report for consideration by the Committee in early March and subsequently the Executive later in March.

It was requested that plans and other documents submitted to the Group for consideration be well formatted and of a good resolution, as these were issues during the consultation.

It was suggested that expert groups including SusTrans be considered as witnesses by the Group.

RESOLVED That the Terms of Reference be agreed, subject to the addition of expert groups including SusTrans to be considered as witnesses by the Group.

75. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme for the remainder of the municipal year, set out in agenda pages 87 to 90.

The Committee received an update on the work of the Preferred Registered Providers Task and Finish Group, who had come to the end of their review and would be submitting their report to the Committee and the Executive in March. In response to queries, it was requested that officers ascertain how a Preferred Registered Provider might be removed from the list, and whether Loddon Homes was selected for many developments.

RESOLVED That

- 1) Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The work programme be noted;
- 3) Officers ascertain how a Preferred Registered Provider might be removed from the preferred list, and whether Loddon Homes was selected for many developments.

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