

STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

12 SEPTEMBER 2013

PRESENT:

Councillors, Eadie (Chairman) Thomas (Vice-Chairman) Mrs Barnett, Derrick, Powell, D.S. Smith and Tittley.

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillor Spruce attended the meeting)

A representative from the District Council's external auditor also attended.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Apologies were received from Councillors Mrs Arnold and Isaacs.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

No declarations of interest were made.

MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 20th June 2013 were taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED: The Minutes of the Meeting held on 7th February 2012 be approved as a correct record.

MONEY MATTERS: 2012/13 REVIEW OF FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Committee received a report on the District Council's financial performance from April 2012 to March 2013. It was reported that there had been an underspend of £625K and one of the reasons for this was that departments started making savings as soon as the Fit for the Future programme was announced. It was noted by Members that the format of the report had changed to include more figures and be easier to understand.

Members asked if the savings from the loss of running costs of Chasewater would cover the expected additional cost and it was reported that the savings had already been paid for therefore internal borrowing would be required for any expenditure. Members also asked if the underspend in the Capital budget could be used to pay for the Friary Outer development and it was reported that the underspend was due to slippage in delivering schemes and those schemes were still planned so to legally have a balanced budget, resources still had to be identified. It was reported that internally borrowing would allow for future opportunities to be utilised, if possible, including the use of Capital receipts.

Members asked what the implications would be for the District Council if the Government's proposals to top slice New Homes Bonus to Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) were to come into force, especially as the District Council was a member of two LEPs. It was reported that there had been much discussion and consultation was ongoing, however Members were reassured that the percentage of grant lost would not go up due to being a member of two LEPs but just split between the two areas. Members asked if there was a need to be a member of two LEP's

and whether it would be best to put all weight behind the Staffordshire one and it was reported that it would remain best to be a member of all LEPs that had influence for the Lichfield District area and that this was the recommendation from the Heseltine review.

Members noted that as the multi story car park was linked to the Friarsgate scheme, it would not close until that development had begun. It was also noted that there was not a plan to close the temporary University car park on the same day the Friary Outer car park opened.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2012/13

The Committee received the Statement of Accounts for 2012/13 and it was noted it was a legal requirement for a Local Authority to have a set of audited accounts by 30 September each year. It was also noted that the accounts had been produced in line with the Code of Practice on Local Authority accounting in the United Kingdom – 2012/13.

It was reported that £121,665 had been used from reserves which was less than budgeted for. It was then reported that cost of services was lower than the previous year and it was noted that other operating expenditure was lower due to the writing out of Chasewater from the budget.

It was reported that there had been a sharp increase in pension costs however this was not deemed real cash and was only reported to show the liability. It was also reported that the net worth of the District Council was lower the last year and this was due to the long term pension liability. However as this value was known to change, when a balanced view is taken, the net worth remained the same year on year. It was noted that there was a rolling scheme to re-evaluate assets and this was helping to offset the pension liability in part. Members asked if there was a plan to review the contribution rates for the pension scheme and it was reported that there had been a review in the employers contribution with conclusions planned to be reported in the autumn 2013. It is also reported that the employee scheme would be reviewed in 2014.

It was reported that there had been a surplus from the Collection fund but this was shared between all preceptors resulting in a low amount for the District Council.

The District Council's external auditor updated the Committee and it was reported that they had been satisfied with the quality of the accounts as well as the supporting papers and assistance received by Officers.

Members asked if the budget for IT was enough and it was noted that it was but only to keep the IT system ticking over and for the replacement of equipment. Members also noted that there would be a need for a task group to look at how to go forward as Microsoft soon would not be supporting the Council's current operating system.

Members noted the 10% reduction in Parish Council precepts to contribute into the local council tax support scheme. Members noted that if Parish Councils wished to increase their proportion of council tax over 2% to compensate this, they were now also at risk of being capped by the Government.

Members noted that it was unlikely that the District Council would ever encounter the high interest rates experienced before the recession and a more entrepreneurial approach on how to make money would be required.

RESOLVED: That the Statement of Accounts 2012/13 be noted.

REVIEW OF STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTIONS 2013

Members received a report reviewing the operation of the election and count of the Staffordshire County Council elections 2013. It was reported that preparations for elections start months in advance with the project team comprising of key Officers with other Officers from the Council brought in as and when required to deal with specific matters such as IT.

Members noted that this had been the first election for the Chief Executive, Diane Tilley, as Returning Officer and that she had been amazed at the level of legislation and regulations that needed to be adhered to.

It was reported that some issues had become apparent which were mainly the long gap between the verification of ballot papers and the actual count. It was noted that as it was a requirement to advertise the time for the count, it would not have been easy to bring that time forward but ways to alleviate this problem would be looked into for the future. It was also reported that other issues like seating at the count were rectified at the time.

Members felt the election and count were run very well and also that the feedback received was helpful. Members had some concern that the triple election in 2015 could potentially confuse electors and cause an even lower turnout and asked if anything could be done to streamline the process. It was reported that where something could be done it would be, however the process was very constrained by regulation. It was noted that the venue for the count would need to be considered.

Members asked if the amount of polling stations could be lessened especially with the higher use of postal votes and it was reported that the number of electors regulated the number of polling stations regardless of postal vote applications.

Members also asked if cost analyses were conducted and it was reported that accounts were compiled however a look at the impact on the District Council on a whole could be done. It was noted that it was dependent on the type of election held as to who funded it for example the Government would fund the majority of a General Election.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Consideration was given to the Work Programme and Forward Plan.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted and the Work Programme be noted.

(The Meeting finished at 7.38pm)

CHAIRMAN