

STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2013

PRESENT:

Councillors, Eadie (Chairman) Norman (Vice-Chairman) Thomas (Vice-Chairman) Mrs Arnold, Mrs Barnett, Isaacs, Powell, Wilson and Mrs Woodward.

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

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Apologies were received from Councillors D. S. Smith and Tittley.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

No declarations of interest were made.

MINUTES

Subject to the inclusion of Councillors Norman and Mrs Woodward in the apologies for absence, the Minutes of the Meeting held on 12th September 2013 were taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 12th September 2013 be approved as a correct record.

MONEY MATTERS: 2013/14 REVIEW OF FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Committee received a report on the District Council's financial performance from April to September 2013. It was reported that the savings of £588,910, made from phase one of the Fit for the Future programme (F4F), had resulted in a reduction in the sum required to be transferred from General Reserves to balance the budget. It was also reported that there had been a reduction in the projected Outturn meaning a transfer now of £577,780 from General Reserves would be required.

It was reported that the use of internal borrowing had meant the District Council was borrowing at a rate of 0.70% instead of a rate of close to 4.00% if it was done externally.

It was reported that a number of business rates appeals were outstanding and that many of these appeals were from large companies which were likely to be successful. When asked, it was reported that the likely discount in these companies' business rates would be in the region of 10%. It was noted that the Government was still deciding how appeals would be dealt with the Localisation of Business Rates and this had caused uncertainty and was difficult to make projections.

It was then reported that there were evolving pressures with the Capital Programme including IT, Friarsgate and Disabled Facilities Grants. It was noted that these would be considered as part of the Capital Programme Review that would be taking place as part of the preparation for the Medium Term Financial Strategy (Revenue and Capital) 2014-17.

Members asked if best value was always sought when replacing vehicles and it was reported that the District Council would always use a procurement exercise but was also investigating other means including joining other Authorities with a view to utilising a bulk buy system.

Members then asked for further details as to why there was an adverse budgetary variance in Leisure Parks and Play, specifically for the lift at the Garrick Theatre and legal fees. It was reported that as the landlord to the Garrick Theatre, general wear and tear maintenance had been budgeted for however recent failures in the lift had meant a complete overhaul had been required. It was then reported that the increase in legal fees had been associated with the Garrick Trust continuing into the current financial year.

Members asked why the delay in the County Council moving to Venture House could not have been projected for. It was reported that the budget had to be fixed sometime ago and at that point the District Council could not foresee the delay from the County Council.

It was noted that the District had a broad range of large corporations and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and it was asked how the Council was monitoring business rates from home businesses. It was reported that the Council monitored and investigated through the use of home visits and tip-offs. It was noted that these investigations will become even more important in the future.

Members asked about the strategy looking forward and it was reported that the Council would be reliant on the Fit for the Future Programme (F4F) to create the savings needed for the District Council to be self financing, as expected to be, in six years time. It was noted that there would be a consultation exercise next year to get residents views on services. Members expressed the need to properly consult and conduct equality impact assessments so as to prevent any judicial reviews in the future as seen elsewhere in the country. Members were pleased that there was now a Member Group looking at the F4F programme but stressed the need for all Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider the detail of the service reviews they receive.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

FIT FOR THE FUTURE – ASSET MANAGEMENT REVIEW

The Committee received a report on the latest position regarding the review of asset management that was taking place as part of the Fit for the Future Programme. It was reported that the purpose of the review was to consider what service was required and assess how it was currently delivered and through comparisons and challenges, determine how it could be delivered differently in the future to ensure efficiencies were delivered and the service improved.

It was reported that a Project Initiation Document had been prepared and a Project Group comprising of Officers from across the Authority had been established. It was then reported that that Group agreed to focus on three key themes of the Council's asset base, the management of assets and facilities retained by the Council and consideration of staff suggestions. It was reported that some efficiencies had already been achieved including increased rental income from co-location with both the Police and County Council who were occupying space at the District Council.

Members welcomed the review and felt it would give real opportunities although the marketing of assets was important. It was asked if all assets were open for suggestions and it was reported that all areas would be looked at objectively. It was noted that the leisure portfolio would be looked at together and not separate to parks and open spaces.

Members noted that there were a lot of Officers on the Project Group however this was due to many areas being directly involved in assets and so meant the group was fairly represented. Members asked if there would be external representation on the Project Group and it was

reported that it was planned to have a 'critical friend' invited from another authority and it was also noted that all reviews had a challenge director.

RESOLVED: That the report and the work taken to date as part of the review be noted.

FIT FOR THE FUTURE – CORPORATE DEBT REVIEW

Members received a report on the latest position regarding the review of Corporate Debt Recovery that is taking place as part of the Fit for the Future Programme. It was reported that the Corporate Debt Recovery Team was responsible for the collection of Council Tax, Non Domestic Rates, Sundry Income and Housing Benefits Overpayments. It was also reported that the net collectable debt for the financial year 2012/13 was £89,477,000.

It was reported that a Project Initiation Document had been prepared and a Project Group comprising of Officers had been established. It was reported that there had been two meetings where it was agreed that the review would focus on the management of Council Tax debts, the management of Business Rate debts, the management of housing benefit overpayments and the management of sundry income debts. It was noted that the review would not include debt counselling and advice, the actual collection of income and the collection of miscellaneous income.

It was reported that there was only a small team dealing with corporate debt recovery so the review was focused more on having an efficient service. It was noted that the District Council was third best in the country for Council Tax collection and 15th for Business Rates collection and it was the aim to be just as efficient with sundry debt collection.

It was reported that leisure centres used a different system called SCUBA for income relating to leisure contracts.

Members asked why debt advice was not part of the review as avoiding debt in the first place would allow for an efficient service and it was reported that the review focused on corporate service more than a community one. Members still requested that paperwork be made as clear as possible especially with older and more vulnerable people in mind. It was reported that a discretionary council tax payment scheme would be being brought forward in the future and that the scheme would be means tested.

Members asked if interest was charged on debts and it was reported that it wasn't as it would be difficult from an equality standpoint.

RESOLVED: That the report and the work undertaken to date as part of the review be noted.

MID YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT – ONE YEAR ACTION PLAN 13/14

The Committee received a report on the progress against activities and projects set out in the District Council's One Year Action Plan for 13/14. Members had no comments on this item.

RESOLVED: That the mid year performance report for 2013/14 be noted.

SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR COUNCILLORS

The Committee discussed training and support for Members on Overview and Scrutiny. It was reported that training had been arranged for April 2014. The observations of the Strategic Director Democratic, Development and Legal and the Overview and Scrutiny Officer were then reported to the Committee which included the positive use of pre-decision scrutiny at the District Council and the use of task groups allowing for in depth consideration of items. It was however felt that Members needed to take better ownership of the work programmes and have fewer items on the agenda.

Members agreed with these observations and felt briefing papers could be better used. Members also felt that training in questioning skills could be advantageous, as it would help Members come to conclusions and make recommendations on items and not just voice their views.

Members felt the role of the Overview & Scrutiny Coordinating Group was important and should meet more regularly and use the meetings to evaluate and monitor each of the Committees' work programmes.

RESOLVED: That the forthcoming training on Overview & Scrutiny be noted and further discussions on this item take place by the Overview & Scrutiny Coordinating Group.

WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Consideration was given to the Work Programme and Forward Plan. It was requested that a briefing paper updating the Committee on the Fit for the Future Programme be circulated in January 2014.

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

(The Meeting finished at 7.45pm)

CHAIRMAN