

FOR: COUNCIL MEETING

9th DECEMBER 2014

AGENDA ITEM 8

(BLUE ENCLOSURE)

REPORT OF CHAIRMAN OF STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

Councillors Strachan (Chairman) Pullen (Vice-Chairman) Norman (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Barnett, Derrick, Leytham, Mynott, and Mrs Woodward.

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Eadie, Greatorex, Pritchard, Spruce and Wilcox attended the meeting)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were received from Councillors Constable and Powell.

At the meeting of the Strategic (Overview and Scrutiny) Committee held on 18th November 2014 the following matters were considered:

1 FORWARD PLAN AND WORK PROGRAMME

- 1.1 Consideration was given to the Forward Plan and Work Programme. Clarification was sought on an item for the Forward Plan regarding action on an empty property and it was confirmed that it was for a property where the owners/occupiers had died and there was no probate and was a complex legal matter. When asked it was confirmed that the item on a Sales and Marketing contract was for Leisure Services.

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

- 2.1 A report was submitted on the Council's financial performance against the Financial Strategy for the half year April to September 2014 for the financial year 2014/15. It was reported that the Approved Net Revenue Expenditure 2014/15 originally required a transfer from General Reserves however due to a reduction of the use of Reserves and the projected net operating cost, there would now be a transfer of £1,040 to General Reserves rather than a transfer from it.
- 2.2 It was then reported that Council Tax collection had decreased due to recovery action being suspended for one month because of the unscheduled direct debit made on the 13th August 2014. It was noted that arrears outstanding were lower in this quarter compared to last year.
- 2.3 It was reported that latest projections indicated a surplus on the Collections Fund for Council Tax of £1,005,460 with the District Council's share of this being £131,115. It was noted that this would be shown in the Budget for 2015/16 and the growth in the Council Tax base was likely to be permanent s could be incorporated into future year's budgets.
- 2.4 Consideration was given to the reduction in civic expenses and it was noted that it had come from undertaking events differently and a reduction in the use of Chairman's Car. Members wished to express caution as there had been documented attacks on Civic Heads elsewhere in the Country and it was felt that the Chairman could be in an unsafe and vulnerable position without the use of a civic vehicle.
- 2.5 Clarity was given to the Committee regarding the Council no longer requiring the Community Assets Earmarked Reserve. It was noted that the reserve was for any claim in compensation by private owners and after assessing the risk, it was deemed as very

low as based on the types of properties on the Community Asset Register, it was unlikely that they would be sold or were owned by the District Council. It was noted that all that had been agreed was to no longer have an earmarked reserve but General Reserves could still be accessed if there were ever a need in the future.

- 2.6 When asked for the reason for the reduction in property rental income, it was agreed that this be investigated and the Committee informed. It was also agreed that the Cabinet Member to clarify what the reduction in fees re Management Fees for Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation were. The Committee also requested details on the projects that had caused the slippage from 2013/14 capital programme into 2014/15 capital programme.
- 2.7 It was asked that because the surplus in the Council Tax Collections Fund was partly due to changes to the discounts and exemptions, whether that money could go towards supporting those who were no longer receiving as much assistance with their Council Tax. It was reported that the District Council had an agreed Local Council Tax Support Scheme which was means tested and was in line with a County wide policy. It was noted that any change to this policy could be legally challenged.
- 2.8 The following was resolved
- (1) That the report be noted; and
 - (2) That the closely monitoring and management of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Capital Financial Strategy 2014-17 be noted.

3 MID YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT – ONE YEAR ACTION PLAN 14/15 FOR FINANCE, DEMOCRATIC AND LEGAL DIRECTORATES
--

- 3.1 The Committee received a report on progress against activities and projects set out in the Directorates One Year Action Plan for 14/15. It was reported that all projects were on target or in progress.
- 3.2 It was asked why it was only at this point the Council would be contacting those affected by the Spare Room Subsidy to notify them they could make a claim for a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP). It was reported that the DHP had been advertised widely and the Council was continuingly working with partners like Bromford Housing and the Citizens Advice Bureau to reach those who would be eligible and directly contacting residents would maximise pro-activeness to ensure no one was missed. When asked it was reported that around 30% of the fund had been spent. It was agreed that the very latest position be sent to the Committee.
- 3.3 The Committee congratulated Officers for reaching a 100% invoice payment target within 30 days.
- 3.4 It was requested that any consultation regarding Polling Places and Polling Districts be forwarded to all Councillors to enable them to comment and raise proposals. When asked it was also noted that the Council was slightly above average compared nationally regarding Individual Electoral Registration and it was noted that the canvass had finished the day before so would soon know its additional impact.
- 3.5 The report was noted.

4 COMMUNITY CONSULTATION 2014

- 4.1 The Committee received a report on the Community Consultation exercise that was carried out from 23rd May to 23rd June 2014. It was reported that the consultation was to help inform the Fit for the Future Programme and get the views of the public regarding services. It was reported that a questionnaire was developed by a cross party Member Working Group along with the Staffordshire Intelligence Hub and Officers.
- 4.2 It was also reported that the questionnaire was delivered directly to over 40,000 homes via the InTouch magazine along with being on the Council's website and hard copies being delivered to publicly accessible buildings and some street interviews. It was noted that Members had also helped distribute and promote the questionnaire.
- 4.3 The response rate was reported and it was noted that 1148 were received resulting in an approximately 3% return rate which was considered a robust number. It was noted that there had been more responses from urban areas compared to rural and there had been an underrepresentation of the under 35 year old bracket but this was not considered a surprise. Overall the Intelligence Hub felt the number and range of respondents was more than satisfactory.
- 4.4 The Committee then discussed how the data from the consultation would be used to inform decision making and they felt that residents should be able to see evidence that the results being used by it being referenced in reports and policy development. Members also felt there was a real opportunity to investigate some results deeper through the Overview and Scrutiny process. It was reported that the data from the consultation would be used to help inform service reviews. It was also reported that it was planned to produce a summary report at both 12 and 24 months after the consultation to show how the results have been used and might be appropriate within a service review for resident focus groups to be used to add qualitative data to the review.
- 4.5 The Committee praised Officers on conducting a successful consultation at minimal cost with a good level and wide demographic spread of responses.
- 4.6 It was agreed that the data from the Community Consultation 2014 would be used to inform Service Reviews under the Fit for the Future Programme.

5 PEER REVIEW REPORT

- 5.1 Consideration was given to a report following the Peer Review of Lichfield District Council by the Local Government Association (LGA) in September 2014. It was reported that all Local Authorities had the opportunity to have a peer review and that the District Council had never had one before.
- 5.2 It was reported that the peer review team from the LGA were made up of Members and Officers from other Authorities and organisations and they looked at various areas of the District Council including financial planning, governance and decision making and leadership. The District Council requested that the peer reviewers also looked at two specific areas. These were economic development and overview & scrutiny. It was noted that it was hoped Ed Hammond of the Peer Review Team and an Officer of the Centre for Public Scrutiny, would come back and work with the Council in improving overview and scrutiny.
- 5.3 Some Members of the Committee disagreed with the peer reviewers that relationships between Members and Officers were at times too informal and over-familiar. It was felt that Members and Officers were one big team and a casual style of working aiding this. The Chief Executive reported that her observations had been similar to those of the peer reviewers and felt there were some deep cultural issues that needed addressing at

the Council. She reported that these informal relationships could pose a risk to sound governance.

5.4 When discussed, it was felt that any decision on changes to the overview and scrutiny structure along with any training could not be completed before the next election, due to the requirement for careful reflection and planning before making significant changes. Some progress on implementation had already taken place as regards the wider strategic implications of the report and this was reported by the Chief Executive.

5.5 There was some disappointment from some Committee Members that it was reported that there were no surprises in the conclusions of the review even though there were some serious criticisms and it was agreed that a small task group comprised of Overview & Scrutiny Members could help identify and prioritise what areas of work needed to be carried out to take the recommendations forward.

5.6 The following was agreed

(1) That a small Task Group comprising members from the Strategic (Overview and Scrutiny) committee be formed to identify what key priorities should be for the Council to take matters forward.

(2) That a task group would likely be formed to develop proposals on future Overview & Scrutiny procedures, but that this would be a longer piece of work that was likely to require input from the peer reviewers, and as such no knee jerk decisions would be made until careful consideration had been given to the recommendations contained in the report.

R. Strachan
Chairman
Strategic (Overview and Scrutiny) Committee