

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 JANUARY 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors M Wilcox (Chair), Norman (Vice-Chair), Cross, Eagland, Evans, Grange, Leytham, Ho, A Little, Robertson, Silvester-Hall, Mrs Tranter and A Yeates

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Pullen and Strachan attended the meeting).

29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence. Councillor Eagland arrived late at 7pm.

30 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

31 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 15 December 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

32 HEALTH MATTERS

The Chair, Councillor Wilcox, emphasised the notes following the previous Staffordshire County Council's Health & Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 28 November 2022 in the agenda pack. It was also noted that the next meeting on Monday 13 February did have agenda items – Draft Mental Health Strategy and Mental Health Support Teams in Schools Update which this committee had pushed to see on their agenda. He said he would ask the Chair beforehand for specific data on the Lichfield district and report back. Members were extremely glad that this item was, at last, being heard as it was very important for all ages now not just children.

It was noted that looking ahead at the Work Programme for 2023/24 an agenda item had been suggested on Social Prescribing. It was known that a couple of groups in the district were receiving referrals for social prescribing but with no funding. The Chair was asked if he could achieve more detail at the necessary time to see if there was any way the funding options could be explored.

The Chair, Councillor Wilcox, advised members that he had also attended the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny County Council meeting recently on behalf of this committee where a presentation from the Stoke and Staffordshire LEP had been received together with their annual report. He said it was quite apparent from that meeting that there was an emphasis on the north of Staffordshire projects being funded so those on the south had asked whether the SSLEP would consider doing a presentation to members of Local Authorities in the south of the area (Stafford, Cannock, East Staffs, Lichfield & Tamworth) which they have said they would be happy to do. He said he would arrange this for after the Elections in May as following the LEP review by Government, those Authorities who are presently in two LEP's will need to move into one single LEP in the spring which in our case will be Staffordshire, and therefore we will remain in Stoke & Staffordshire LEP.

RESOLVED: That the information given be noted.

33 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Councillor Strachan, Cabinet Member for Finance & Commissioning advised the committee that following the health matters notes previously discussed on health benefits and planning for healthy communities carried out at shire district level, this element had been alluded to in our consultation response to the provisional government finance settlement as it supplements the direct provision made by Staffordshire County Council. It had been highlighted what good work we at shire district level do and that the Council could do more if there was a little bit more provision, funding, and a little more space to work in that sector.

He introduced the Medium Term Financial Strategy report and appendices for the final time to overview and scrutiny before Cabinet and Full Council (substantive document) and Audit & Member Standards (treasury management) next.

The Assistant Director - Finance & Commissioning, Mr Thomas, gave a presentation on the provisional local government settlement key points as there was quite a change in approach on a positive side. He said the Government now recognised the pressures local government were facing and wanted to provide stability and increase funding to provide services in communities and had therefore introduced a new Funding Guarantee which ensured every local authority would see a minimum 3% increase in their core spending power in 2023/24 before taking any decisions to increase council tax rates.

The government priorities, the change in core spending power, the change in settlement funding assessment and band d increases were illustrated and it was agreed to forward the presentation to all members for further examination.

In summary Mr Thomas advised:-

- Better-than-expected settlement (big increases in funding announced in the Autumn Statement 2022);
- Increases focused on social care (both grant increases and Adult Social Care precept);
- Some attempt to balance grant allocations for non-social care authorities (3% Funding Guarantee, £5 fire authority increase);
- Distribution is still very short term (no numbers for 2024-25, cliff-edge in 2025-26).

Councillor Strachan agreed that having to plan a 4 year MTFS with only very short-term certainty for 2023/24 and the principles only known for 2024/25 was not helpful for financial planning purposes. The remaining 2 years of MTFS after the guideline figures will remain uncertain until central government can come up with a multi-year settlement which we have constantly been asking for. However, the provisional settlement had some considerable benefits for Lichfield District Council, particularly re: the windfalls/retained business rate income as there was £2.1m unforeseen income for 2023&24 and projected £1.8m the following year. It was noted that it was proposed to use this for the wider strategic projects and place in the strategic priority reserve pending approval for its allocations.

Councillor Strachan advised members that Lichfield District Council will freeze its element of Council Tax in the forthcoming financial year recognising the unprecedented financial difficulty for our residents and due to our own better than expected situation. This was welcomed by members that cabinet have listened and was the caring thing to do.

It was noted under the capital programme that we had been unsuccessful with the second Levelling up funding bid, which was disappointing but not entirely unexpected as even £5m from central government would have assisted. Councillor Strachan advised there were still sources of funding that can be accessed, and Lichfield District could fund it from our own

resources. The Leader of the Council had also announced today that this council will still deliver the replacement leisure centre so many residents wanted at an 8-figure sum.

It was noted that Mr Thomas had reviewed what minimum reserves were required and these had been increased from £1.6m to £1.9m which had been driven by the current economic climate and the specific risks, but this would be regularly reviewed and amended if necessary.

Members made the following comments/observations:-

- Why was our settlement less than the average shire district?
The Cabinet member could not confirm this as a central government decision.
- The Budget Consultation was responded to by over 1130 people – a reduction in council tax was suggested, why was this not an option?
The Cabinet member said the consultation had come so close to the MTFs that some things may be implemented this year, and some may be in future years. A reduction in council tax had never been stated as there was still a funding gap for this council and so to freeze council tax this year and consider subsequent years is the correct thing to do.
- What was the cost of developing and presenting the LUF bid to government?
The Cabinet member confirmed that the bid was resourced by internal officers and using feedback from the first round bid so no additional capital costs only officer time; figures for revenue costs not known. The outcome is extremely disappointing, and we were given to understand that our bid was a strong one but there was a large number of bids and only a certain amount of money. It was felt the comments recorded externally were not factually correct. A formal response outlining the rejection reasons will be forthcoming.
- The demographics of the budget consultation respondents should be requested as this response rate is not representative of the Lichfield district. It is still less than 1% of the population so is this still valuable – qualitative consultation needed to give us themes rather than a quantitative approach. More engagement is a good start moving forward. Perhaps the first four digits of post codes would help?
The Cabinet member agreed and defended the value of the consultation as it had increased so much since last time and agreed with a qualitative approach and agreed to speak to the Cabinet Member for Community Engagement and improve this for next year.
- Inconsistency between two years approaches – last year and this year to council tax rates – why?
The Cabinet member said a detailed review of monies had been carried out to create the strategic reserves and gave us more confidence together with the windfall settlement which are the key drivers for the change in approaches.
- Funding gap – can we start to nurture a culture of innovation/entrepreneurship and change to a more commercial mind but thinking of public sector ethos?
The Cabinet Member said the recent recruitment of new commercially minded officers under the Chief Executive had given him and cabinet more confidence in the executive arm of the council now to aid this culture.
- Moving forward, can we do a heavy lobby campaign for multi-year financing, can we write to MP Michael Fabricant and ask him to speak to Harriet Baldwin (Chair of local governments finance committee) or the Minister who is looking for ideas for reform of local governments?
The Cabinet Member confirmed that the district council network and LGA are already lobbying but he agreed to seek further contact as stated.
- As interest rates only going one way, how does the change to fund a new leisure centre affect the projected funding gap and can any comments be made on current figures or is future clarity needed.
The Cabinet member confirmed that the detailed planning of what the cost will be are not yet available, but Mr Thomas had details which would be forwarded for scrutiny as soon as possible. Internal borrowing is an option as will be at a lower cost and can be repaid if future windfalls received.

- Cost of Living contingency budget is good but are the figures appropriate?
The Cabinet Member said yes, he felt so given the modelling and the pressures from the local council tax support scheme – money to be taken from the unexpected windfall monies.
- What is the lifespan of a new Leisure Centre likely to be?
*The Cabinet member could not answer but the Leader said it would be at least 25 years and the loan would not exceed the lifetime of the building.
(Cllr Norman said the LGA suggested the average lifespan was 38 years).*

It was agreed that a multi-year settlement would give us more certainty and that the budget principles were sound and overall, we are well run, and thanks were given to the Cabinet Member and Anthony Thomas and his team for all their hard work.

RESOLVED:

The Committee scrutinised the MTFs and provided feedback to Cabinet in relation to:

- The 2023/24 Revenue Budget of **£13,815,000**, the Council Tax Requirement of **£7,614,000** and a District Council proposed Band D equivalent level of Council Tax for 2023/24 of **£187.85** (no increase on 2022/23).
- The MTFs 2022-27 Revenue Budgets set out in **APPENDIX A**.
- The MTFs 2022-27 Capital Strategy including the 25 year capital investment model and the Capital Programme shown in **APPENDICES B & C**.
- The recommended increase in the Minimum Level of General Reserves from **£1,600,000** to **£1,900,000** based on the current economic climate.
- The recommended inclusion of a cost of living contingency budget of **£50,000** in 2023/24 and also provisionally for 2024/25.
- The recommended inclusion of an in-year growth/contingency budget of **£100,000** in 2023/24 and also provisionally for 2024/25.
- The recommended transfer of 'windfall' income from the Provisional Finance Settlement estimated at **£2,433,000** for 2023/24 and projected at **£1,889,000** for 2024/25 to the strategic priorities reserve.
- The 25 year revenue financial planning model shown at **APPENDIX E**.
- The results of the Budget Consultation summarised at **APPENDIX F**.

The Committee noted:

- The requirements and duties that the Local Government Act 2003 places on the Authority on how it sets and monitors its Budgets, including the CFO's report on the robustness of the Budget and adequacy of Reserves shown in **APPENDIX A**.
- Members agreed to set up a MTFs Task Group from the new Council who could work alongside the Cabinet Member and Finance so members can have more of an understanding of the development of the MTFs and the Leader asked if the scope could be widened to include the continuing improvement of engagement with members of the public. This was fully supported with a suggestion of bimonthly meetings and quarterly reports being provided to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

34 ELECTIONS ACT INCLUDING VOTER IDENTITY

Christie Tims, Assistant Director of Operations, Regulation & Enforcement and Deputy Returning Officer delivered a presentation further to the recent briefing note delivered to members on the changes to the Elections Act including Voter Identity. She said that information and updated guidance was being received daily from the Government Change team, the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission and processes were being written and updated on a regular basis. Ms Tims explained that there were a number of actions within the Elections Act to be undertaken in the next 18 months but

the most immediate activity concerns the District and Parish Election on 4 May 2023 which required all voters to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper can be issued and to extend election accessibility to support voters with a disability in the polling stations. The acceptable forms of ID were discussed and if the voter does not have a photo ID that looks like them, they could apply for a free voter identification document from the government portal which went live on Monday 16 January. She confirmed that postal vote handling was not included in this phase and had been delayed after the May elections, until August 2023. She said even a proxy voter must provide a photo ID of themselves even though they were voting for another.

The process of getting the voter identification document from the government portal was explained and it was noted it did need to include an up to date photograph as well as a NI number. Ms Tims explained that if residents did not have a NI number and/or photograph, they could come into the council office and the customer services team would be able to assist with the process and take a suitable photograph on their service I-pads. It was clarified that all applications had to be made by 25 April 2023 as this would allow for the government office to post it on in time for the election day. Specimens were illustrated and the presentation would be forwarded on to all with the deadline dates and links within for information purposes.

Ms Tims said the national campaign had begun with television adverts and so had our local awareness campaign from today. She said there were scheduled posts to be delivered on social media/through newsletters and posters and all the poll cards would be marked very clearly with the need for photo ID when attending to vote. Concerns were made about getting the message out to older people and those who did not have computers and Ms Tims appealed for any ideas to increase the publicity. An idea of a tag on the bin had already been received which would be explored and members were asked to assist in any way at all. The local communications plan was in compliment with the national campaign and would be ongoing now until late April. It was confirmed that all Elections staff would be fully trained to observe the documents and do the appropriate checks on polling day with additional Polling Supervisors being put in place to support anyone wanting to vote. Ms Tims, the Governance team and Elections Manager had attended training to date and would be attending more in February as updates were received. It was noted that it was a requirement of the act to also record how many voters are turned away on the polling day.

It was agreed that it was paramount that everyone who wants to vote has an opportunity to do so. Members said it was good to see the disabled support and suggested contact be made to voluntary groups and organisations so that no one would be disadvantaged in any way. Ms Tims advised that some mobiles would have to be used but these had been reviewed over the past few years to ensure they are at a minimum. She said we would be engaging with groups so they can be accommodated and listening to the experience of presiding officers and members said they would also be able to offer support if alternative venues were sought in key locations across the district.

Members asked the following questions and made the following observations:-

- How many voter ID applications had been received to date?
The Deputy Returning Officer advised that the Voter ID applications were steadily coming in as the national campaign had only just begun – 3 or 4 a day at the moment being received on the portal. Testing in other areas had illustrated that the expectation was likely to be 2-3% of the electorate. LDC's current electorate being 81,000.
- How has £20k been calculated to cover the burden of the extra duties and is it felt to be enough?
The Deputy Returning Officer confirmed that this had been done on a national calculation but advised that we do have the opportunity each April to make further requests for any additional costs incurred. As we do not have a separate elections team it would mean we will need to ask for additional short-term resources to cover the governance team and customer services and to help run the elections, so it is felt we do have a strong business case for this.

- If this new system leads to a fall in numbers voting, what figure would worry officers if this council had not reached it?
The Deputy Returning Officer could not comment as this would be a matter for the Electoral Commission.
- Will there be a mechanism at polling stations to record how many voters get turned away?
The Deputy Returning Officer advised that this is a requirement of the Act, and the full details were not yet known but the training for this aspect would be in February and those attending will need to train when recruiting to presiding officer posts and poll clerks who will need to help with this. It was envisaged additional support from polling station supervisors would be required. Ms Tims said it was known that this will be subject to a review at the end of the process as there were some staged reviews to see how the system of Voter ID had impacted at these local elections so lessons can be learnt.
- It is known there is a national shortage of accessible mobiles, can we pre-order now?
The Deputy Returning Officer confirmed that over the last number of years a review of mobiles had been done and checks were being done in line with the project plan about the accessible mobiles now. She confirmed the venues would be risk-assessed and consultation with presiding officers and supervisors will take place as they have the local knowledge of the areas within which they have worked before.
- Is there an officer to signpost residents to who may have difficulty with the Voter ID process?
All the Customer Services team can assist residents in-house or on the telephone.
- Are there enough resources to accommodate this challenge? Is team flexible and multi-functional? To ensure delivery, governance team must get what they want as election must not fail and no one to lose their right to vote in May.
The Deputy Returning Officer said a lot of planning and cross-working on previous bi-elections had been done by the governance team and with additional temporary resources it was achievable.
- We must connect with everyone wanting to vote, can we liaise with Nursing Homes and Care Homes/Mosques/worship groups in addition to the usual communications plan? The geography for people in rural areas also needs to be given attention.
- Have the additional materials in poll stations been ordered if residents need to remove facial coverings?
The Deputy Returning Officer said, yes, the preparatory orders had been done and will be delivered in time. She confirmed there had been some moderation in what is expected as initially we had been told everything must be removed meaning a privacy screen would be required at all stations, but this has since changed meaning only the removal of facial coverings is required. Luckily, a lot of the polling station environments had privacy spaces within them.
- Have we had any engagement with neighbouring authorities to share good practice?
The Deputy Returning Officer said, yes, all the project team had attended the National Conference when the findings had first been presented and a lot of work done had been done with our neighbours especially in Tamworth and the Electoral manager meets neighbouring authorities regularly to ensure things are being done similarly.
- Simon Fletcher, as Returning Officer for the district elections was asked directly if he would ensure that resources, finance and staff, would be provided to ensure the voters were not deterred to vote.
Mr Fletcher assured members that this would be provided.
- Thanks were given for delivering briefing and presentation in such a short turnaround time and member support was offered to assist.

RESOLVED: That the views of the Committee be noted and a verbal update be given at the next meeting in March.

35 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee asked that the Work Programme be updated as some Officer Leads specified had now left Lichfield District Council. This was noted and would be amended.

Additional items for discussion in March were:-

Update on Election changes;
Outcomes of the Procurement process;
Communications – how does this Council engage and how could it be improved?;
LEP membership discussion.

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted. The Chair advised that the next meeting for this committee was 16 March 2023 before the Elections were held in May.

36 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED: That as publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business, which would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972

IN PRIVATE

37 NOTES FROM TASK GROUPS

The Chair from the Masterplan Task Group, Councillor Ball, and the Chair from the New Leisure Centre Task Group, Councillor Baker, updated the committee on the progress made to date.

RESOLVED: That the notes be received.

(The Meeting closed at 8.05 pm)

CHAIR