

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 NOVEMBER 2022

PRESENT:

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

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Cox, E Little, Matthews, Pullen, Smith and Strachan attended the meeting).

14 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Grange and Cross.

15 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

16 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 4 October 2022 were agreed as a correct record. The Chair informed the committee that he had received an update from Councillor Marshall (Chair of Planning Committee) and having considered all the members concerns and due to the degree of public participation, it had been agreed to revert back to the original Planning Committee Protocols allowing ward members 10 minutes for speaking at planning committee meetings.

17 DUAL STREAM RECYCLING IMPLEMENTATION

The Cabinet Member for Waste & Recycling, Councillor Little, introduced the report to the committee. She informed the committee that the methods of the district's recycling were changed in April/May this year to dual stream recycling however, implementation did not go as well as desired. It was reported that by the end of May the roll out was complete however, due to concerns, an Independent Expert's report had been requested to look at the issues experienced and how the service could move forward. This report was attached and Councillor Little asked the committee for any questions or observations. She said there was a work programme for the Joint Waste Service now to address the concerns but asked for any other feedback. She agreed the service needed to move forward and get back to the gold standard service the residents had enjoyed prior to this implementation and lengthy discussions took place around the failures and lessons learnt.

Cllr Matthews attended to brief the committee on the involvement of the Task Group and it was noted that although he was tasked in November last year to look at the roll out of the dual stream recycling scheme, for various reasons the Task Group did not meet until 17 Feb 2022 and met only once with one task and that was to review the communications strategy surrounding the roll out – the notes of this Task Group were provided.

The following views/questions were given:-

- There was not sufficient support or “buy in” from local residents as members were not involved early enough; February for the Task Group was too late;

- The Joint Waste Committee did not scrutinise or feed in to Overview & Scrutiny committees nor members as to the progress and why blue bags were decided upon;
- As this was a new service why was there no pilots/trials so staff could be trained in advance?
- The Leader was asked why the communication plan and deadlines were not adhered to?
- Can we signpost to where Tetra-packs can be recycled (at the County Council's recycling centres) on the website?
- The Cabinet Member, at the time, Cllr Ashley Yeates, was not interviewed by the Independent person for his input in to the report;
- Why did the other local authorities who were part of the introduction of the blue bag system, Tamworth, South Staffordshire, Cannock and East Staffordshire not seem to have the same problems as Lichfield District?
- What was the additional costs in providing extra rounds?
- When will HMO's roll out be complete?
- In hindsight, it was agreed a dedicated helpline would have been beneficial; it was highlighted that this was a suggestion of the Task Group but was not acted upon.
- The delay in the supplier providing the bags meant staff were not given appropriate toolbox talks and this had had an enormous strain on capacity as it took drivers off collections to deliver bags, why was there no modelling done?
- It was noted that the quality of recycling is good but it is the volumes that are not where they should be;
- There was an obvious delay in responding when things seemed to be going wrong/briefing notes required if this happens again so members are fully advised;
- A lot of reputational damage had been done and so the public were now very suspicious and not complimentary about the service at all so to overcome the suspicions, all Xmas information due to go out needs to be educational and give the proper information i.e. what goes where and when collection dates are?
- LDC website needs to be clearer and information easy to find – and there should be the use images/photos/graphics to be more eye-catching – not reliant on social media;
- Videos of what happens to the rubbish is educational and residents may appreciate this;
- Members can contact the depot for extra blue bags and deliver to residents within their ward if required;
- Good idea to upskill the current staff and employ agency staff who want to work at LDC with systematic recruitment process; Employment committee members are aware that the very small gender pay gap is attributed to the waste service as they disproportionately employ a large amount of men - Anything that could be done to encourage as wide a group in to this service by upskilling would be worthy and will future-proof the service;
- The Collection teams have endured a lot of residents' complaints recently and the committee would like to pay tribute to these teams as it is known they work very hard and are not to blame for the problems incurred. It was requested that the Chief Executive pass this on to the teams.

It was noted that the missed bins reports had gone down and had now stabilised although not going much lower so it was confirmed that the Recycling Officers would be going out to households to help get this back on track and educate the residents as well as providing information on any contaminated bins as it was hoped to get the percentage lower. Councillor Little said if any resident was struggling to understand why their bins were being labelled as contaminated, then they could contact the Recycling Officers direct.

Councillor Little advised the committee that the rounds were to be fixed first and Xmas planning but that she would then be looking at the data and looking at rounds to possibly encompass purple bins as a lot of requests for purple bins were being received and 15,000 residents currently had two blue bins across the district. The Chair, Councillor Wilcox, asked if this Committee could look at the Joint Waste Service work programme before anything went

out to residents and this was agreed. He also felt this O&S committee could add value to the transition of the trade waste customers roll out due in February next year. Councillor Little agreed and said she would bring this item in the future as she also wanted to look at a tiered structure to encourage the trade waste customers to go to dual stream recycling instead of comingled.

RESOLVED:-

- (1) The Committee noted the report of the Independent Expert into the design and implementation of the dual stream recycling collection services in Lichfield and provided comments.
- (2) The Committee considered and commented on how the three key recommendations arising from the report could be achieved, i.e. the need to:
 - (i) Improve scrutiny of the joint waste service, using scenario planning, pilots, and progressive implementation of major change.
 - (ii) Ensure the service team has sufficient skills, competencies, and confidence to implement major change programmes going forward.
 - (iii) Increase the acquisition, use and interpretation of service data, including an increased focus on trend analysis and operational analytics.

(A confidential discussion around the procurement issues followed).

18 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Cabinet Member for Finance & Commissioning, Councillor Strachan, introduced the Medium Term Financial Strategy Report and said this was the second time this item had come to the O&S meeting and members will see some of the comments from the previous meeting had been incorporated and the remainder of comments were still under consideration before it is made final and taken to Council on 28 February 2023.

The Assistant Director - Finance & Commissioning, Mr Thomas, gave a presentation covering the Autumn Statement announcement today even though the detail would not be available until the settlement is released which is not due until 19 December:-

Local Authority Elements:-

- Spending Review numbers not changing from numbers for 2021.
- Adult social care funding. (new money available)
- Delaying adult social care charging reforms. (saves a lot of money)
- B and D council tax thresholds. The maximum core threshold will increase from 1.99% to 2.99%, and the ASC precept will be 2% in 2023-24. Thresholds will increase for both district councils and for authorities with social care responsibilities.
- Business rates multiplier. The multiplier will be frozen in 2023-24. Local authorities “will be fully compensated for the loss of income as a result of these business rates measures”. No confirmation yet whether cap compensation will be payable based on RPI or CPI.
- Business rates reliefs. Extension of Retail, Hospitality and Leisure (RHL) reliefs into 2023-24, plus a Supporting Small Business Scheme (SSBS).
- Revaluation 2023. Revaluation will go ahead but there will be a more generous transitional scheme, with additional Government support.
- New Homes Bonus – No mention of this in the Autumn Statement but likely to be in the settlement details in December.

Further information was also given on the potential financial impact of a higher Council Tax threshold - 3% threshold in all years was illustrated on the presentation.

Councillor Strachan then gave his update:-

- Financing of the Leisure Centre - Reiterated that Option 1 was always and remains a successful application to the Levelling up Fund. He sees it as a replacement of a very well used but aging facility that without a replacement would be lost so avoiding levelling down not just levelling up. However, members were asked to note that if the application was unsuccessful, the original plan was to look at funding via external borrowing but this now looked less probable and it was discussed why in the current economic climate it is becoming a challenging option in the report. Alternative options are under consideration.
- Fees and charges – Balancing act of user affordability versus offset to increasing costs as there were a number of things that were significantly restricted and we have to do on a costs recovery basis. At previous meeting, the committee agreed to a 2.5% increase (2023/24). It was agreed we have to recognise where residents are struggling to afford things we are operating but look at where we are committed too.
- Local Government Finance Risks – Very difficult climate at the moment and the Audit & Member Standards Committee have been monitoring strategic risks where the financial related risk is currently outside our risk appetite. Anthony Thomas has advised as Section 151 Officer that he is required to report to Council on the adequacy of the level of reserves and that we need to review our minimum level of reserves in the current economic climate and this may result in an increase and Councillor Strachan agreed. Therefore, the level of available reserves to support the budget and other projects may vary but it is a very prudent and necessary step.
- Council Tax – the Autumn Statement has given the provision to allow 3% (or potentially £5 whichever is the higher) but still a balancing act to be done and no decision has yet been made.
- Budget Consultation – Still open until 31 December 2022 and this year a budget simulator has been launched to attract more returns. The simulator includes moving sliders/seeing the challenges we face and what affects would be made and whether you get a balanced budget at the end. Members were encouraged to take part and encourage everyone to do so to maximise response rates.

The Chair reminded members there was an additional Budget O&S Meeting scheduled for 15 December and suggested they think about other areas that may not have been thought of and use the simulator beforehand.

Questions were asked:-

1. Would Councillor Strachan be in a position to bring the budget forecast to O&S meeting on 15 December? The answer was yes, but may not have the settlement information.
2. There were concerns there was a Projected External Auditors 150% fee increase and that seemed very high and would only mean further increases year on year. Agreed it was nearly £90,000 per annum more which the Audit & Member Standards Committee would be looking in to but unfortunately the Council were in a wider procurement exercise so could not do much. It was reported that it did reflect the audit environment currently with a lack of qualified staff. It was noted, that there could be a possibility the Council may get some government funding in the settlement to mitigate this rise.
3. The level of reserves were discussed and it was asked what were they used for? It was felt that they should be to help the Council represent the people as well as running a good council. To be discussed at budget meeting on 15 December. It was noted that there was a difference between Earmarked and General Reserves and also that c£5m of earmarked reserves had recently been repurposed to support the cinema project.

4. It was asked if there could be a freeze on Council Tax for two years due to the exceptionally bad time predicted on peoples' incomes. It was reported that it was appreciated that the Council had to be prudent but also needed to be looking after people.
5. It was noted that discretionary funds to support people experiencing financial hardship are available at Lichfield District Council.

RESOLVED:-

(1) The Committee noted the specific updates on:

- The Medium Term Fiscal Plan.
- Local Government and Wider Finance Issues.
- Business Rates Revaluation.
- The financing of a replacement Leisure Centre and the potential impact on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (pending the Local Government Finance Settlement).

(2) The Committee provided views to Cabinet in relation to:

- The approach to fees and charges increases for 2023/24.
- The management of financial risk in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- The potential level of the District's Council Tax increase for 2023/24.

19 LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME CONSULTATION FEEDBACK AND PROPOSALS

The Cabinet Member for Finance & Commissioning, Councillor Strachan, summarised the proposed new Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme Report and thanked Steve Woods and Lizzie Barton and her team for the consultation exercise which now meant the Council could move forward with a new proposed scheme.

The proposed changes were detailed on page 1 of the report and Councillor Strachan confirmed that the scheme aimed to make it better for claimants and better for council taxpayers allowing them more financial support, less paperwork and thus confusion, provide more financial stability and reduce debt recovery activities. He said the new scheme had the ability to award 100% reduction to those on the very low incomes and there were a number of income disregards. It was a banded route which should permit fluctuation within the band and all major preceptors had been consulted and widespread support had been reported. The need for extended payments (where someone who was unemployed, but gains employment, retains the same council tax reduction for the first four weeks of their employment so that they do not face bills as soon as they start working) had been revisited and given the new scheme is designed to encourage and support people into and to remain in work it was proposed that extended payments be retained in the new scheme despite the consultation feedback. Members support and comments was requested.

The following questions/comments were given:-

1. Were there exemptions for students and care leavers?
2. Can we develop the automation for the process?
3. Who were able to comment on the proposed scheme and were CAB asked to comment as an organisation who also deal in benefits?
4. It was agreed the extended payments element should be retained – very valuable.

5. Good to see that discretion was to be built in but there was concern as to a 2 child limit – (it was agreed to look at this policy for discretionary payments at the O&S meeting in January).
6. How are we going to inform customers of the new scheme as needs to be as seamless as possible?

Lizzie Barton assured members that the contact centre staff would all be trained and know how the new scheme works and she will be working with the CAB to signpost effectively and encourage people on to the new scheme which will all be in place before it goes live.

RESOLVED:-

- (1) The Committee supported the introduction of a new income banded Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for working age claimants with effect from 1 April 2023 in line with all proposals (detailed in Appendix 1), except for the removal of extended payments.
- (2) The Committee supported the retention of extended payments to better support residents who gain employment (see 3.21).
- (3) The Committee noted that subject to their input, the proposals will be considered for approval by Cabinet in December. If the scheme is approved, the exact rates for the 2023 – 2024's Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme will be brought to Cabinet and Full Council in February 2023 as part of the council tax setting proposals.

20 HEALTH MATTERS

The Chair, Councillor Wilcox, highlighted the email he had sent to all members on Monday following the previous Staffordshire County Council's Health & Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee which gave a resume of the meeting. He also advised that he had emailed the Chair of the committee detailing the concerns previously voiced here about the lack of mental health facilities and he had now received a detailed response which he would forward on to members via email also. Councillor Wilcox said he was assured as the Chair had now confirmed that there would be two papers coming in the early part of next year in relation to Children's Health & Wellbeing and Mental Wellbeing in Schools and it was most definitely on their radar.

Cllr Eagland confirmed this too and stated that the SCC Safeguarding group were also really going forward on this subject and Councillor Silvester-Hall confirmed she had been to a SCC event today - Journey of a child – which was also looking at mental wellbeing in early years/school children/teenagers and beyond. She said there were a lot of good initiatives going on including how children are supporting each other.

21 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Work Programme and the Chair confirmed that the next meeting was scheduled to take place on 15 December 2022 and was the one item only agenda - Budget meeting.

There was a concern voiced that there were Elections next May where Voter ID Cards were being brought in as a necessity by the government to vote yet no criteria had yet been set by councils for those who do not have the approved forms of ID. It was requested this item be discussed at January's meeting. This was agreed as circulars were being received about this which Members asked to be copied to them and it was agreed that a special meeting could always be arranged if timings did not coincide.

The discretionary policy (Section 13) for the new Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to be added in to January's work programme also – Lizzie Barton.

22 UPDATE FROM TASK GROUPS

Christine Lewis, Principal Governance Officer, advised members that the Lichfield Masterplan Task Group met last night and the notes would come to the budget meeting to be held on 15 December;

The New Leisure Centre Task Group were meeting beginning of December so the notes would come to 15 December meeting;

And

The Climate Change Task Group were also hoping to meet 5 December dependent on the planning committee meeting agenda.

(The Meeting closed at 8.50 pm)

CHAIR