

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 NOVEMBER 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors Norman (Chair), Leung (Vice-Chair), Ball, Booker, Trent, Robertson, Woodward and B Yeates

29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Hawkins, Ho, Holland, Ray and Whitehouse.

30 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

31 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2023, previously circulated, were taken as read and approved as a correct record, subject to amending Item 24 (Review of Civic Matrix function) to include the suggestion to examine the activities of the Chair and Vice-Chair of Council outside of the district and what benefits these engagements have.

It was highlighted that the previous minutes record the Leader of the Council as stating he would consider the views of the committee. Ultimately however, the appointment of the LATCO board member proceeded, as additional action/recommendation is required during the meeting from the committee, to indicate an alternative resolution. It was felt committee members should be made aware of this.

32 HEALTH MATTERS

The Vice-Chair updated members on the recent meetings of the Staffordshire County Council Health and Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee. It was reported that retaining, retraining and reform are key factors in their strategy to help improve current staffing levels. It was noted that the ICS is prepared for up to 6 months in workforce plan to deal with any winter surge demand for healthcare. There have been efforts to encourage younger people to get involved in healthcare through work experience and school visits. The Freedom to Speak policy will be updated in January 2024 to reflect recent events and ensure a clear staff and patient process for whistleblowing.

- Members asked if SCC could provide greater clarity on items unticked in the work programme, including whether they were discussed and when results will be achieved on those items.
- Members suggested Employment Committee could look at what could be done locally to mitigate the 16% vacancy rate of staff.

33 NOTES FROM TASK GROUPS

The notes of the recent Climate Emergency Task Group, taken as read, were reviewed by the committee. Members praised the Task Groups focus on actions to be undertaken. It was highlighted that the authority is now 15% of the way towards the target date set out in the Climate Emergency declaration.

34 COUNCILLOR COMMUNITY FUND

The Cabinet Member for Community Engagement (Councillor Richard Cox) presented the report to members and sought the views of the committee. He stated he would like to continue with the scheme after ensuring the original teething issues are ironed out.

It was noted that new members did not have chance to fully utilise the scheme before the conclusion of its pilot. Members also highlighted that in principle, the scheme is designed to show local democracy in action and get members involved in their respective areas.

Members queried if the scheme was not simply duplicating what parish councils and local organisations are already doing, rather than taking advantage of existing funds.

Members suggested amalgamating the fund to support individual projects, as well as a dedicated member of staff to be assigned to aid councillors with a mix of community development and grant application advice.

- It was asked if there could training for members on how to access the fund.

The Cabinet Member recognised previous issues with the scheme and agreed with the suggestion of a training session to be arranged, including a presentation from We Love Lichfield.

The differing views of the committee were acknowledged by officers who assured members that the governance of the scheme will be improved. The Community Foundation will be commissioned to administer the scheme from end to end, as well as provide support around marketing, promotion and training with councillors. It was proposed that the scheme could be run for another year before engaging in a further reflection point at the end of that time. The ongoing relationship with Support Staffordshire, who provide support to community groups around grants and bids, could be utilised to address member concerns on this area.

RESOLVED: The committee:

- Reviewed and provided views to the Cabinet member on the impact of the Councillor Local Community Grant Fund.
- Provided views to the Cabinet member on the continuation of the scheme and the proposed improvements outlined in paragraph 4.2.
- Provided views to the Cabinet member on the level of funding available per councillor
- Proposed that employing a part time member of staff to facilitate small groups accessing grant funding may be appropriate.

35 KNIFE ANGEL

The Cabinet Member (Councillor Richard Cox) presented the report to committee. He stated that the awards involved were an acknowledgement of participation rather than self-gratification. The cabinet member outlined his hope that the Knife Angel would create a legacy of the council working in the community to tackle knife crime.

- Members asked how much LDC usually budgets for its public health messages/events, and does it have a public health programme?

The Cabinet members stated that he did not believe there was a public health programme but instead saw this in terms of public safety.

Officers explained that funding is provided yearly from the PFCC via assessment. There are currently seven priorities relating to the community safety delivery plan. The

authority has environmental health duties such as food safety and health & safety. Whilst LDC does have a health and wellbeing team, their funding is derived from external sources and employed to engage hard to reach groups and young people.

- Members asked if the community safety partnership were also offered an award.

This was confirmed.

- Members asked who made the decision that £25,000 worth of funding would come to Lichfield and when this occurred.

It was confirmed that there was no single decision on this. The opportunity arose April, the first £10,000 was allocated in May, whilst the second £10,000 was allocated in June. The financial figures in question fall into the delegation officers possess to make decisions on.

- Members asked if any elected members – including the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner – were involved in that decision.

The Cabinet member confirmed the proposal was presented to him and whilst he felt there was justification in proceeding there was no formal decision process as this was an operational decision within the funding allowances permitted. However, he acknowledged that in retrospect this proposal should have come to O&S beforehand.

- Members asked if any monitoring was being carried out on the kinds of knife disposal. *The Cabinet member confirmed the police are regularly monitoring the bins and storing the knives before they are melted down by the British ironworks.*

- Members asked what was being done with schools to ensure a legacy of this project.

It was confirmed that as part of an ongoing education program, relationships have been created with schools that visited the site. LDC can continue to repeat that messaging with these schools as a result of the knife angel.

Members noted that the publicity saying knives were “seized” is incorrect and should instead say that they were donated.

RESOLVED: The committee reviewed and commented on the findings of the report.

36 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Commissioning (Councillor Rob Strachan) presented the report. He highlighted that although two further updates to O&S were intended, this may fall to one following discussion with the Chair, as the Government has announced the financial settlement was likely to be delayed due to the later Autumn Statement. He proposed that one option is that any windfall from the business rates revaluation is transferred to reserves to address any funding shortfall in the Capital Programme and negate the need for borrowing. The significant pressure on general reserves was highlighted, although this excludes any potential returns or development costs relating to the Birmingham Road Site. The Assistant Director Finance & Commissioning (Anthony Thomas) recommended an increase of minimum reserves to £2,000,000 from the current £1,900,000. Members were encouraged to engage with the budget consultation.

Members stated that the reports predication that the Lichfield 2050 strategy “may” impact on MTFS should be changed to “will” impact on MTFS.

Members urged that any returns to be invested from the Birmingham Road Site need something firm identified to attach that to.

Members proposed leveraging external investment by looking at the National Lottery Heritage Fund as a potential source of significant funds.

It was stated that the protection of VCSE funds in cash terms raises real concerns, as that is in effect a real term cut given the inflation rate of 17% across 3 years.

The pressures on voluntary and community sector funding were raised by members, highlighting that the whole council supports the need to take food security seriously and funding is required to support this.

- Members questions the figures in Appendix C, including £400,000 for paddle tennis courts in Beacon Park, £10,000 for a fence around Chasetown Memorial Bowling Green, £4,000 on an upgrade to the heating system at St Stephens Church.

The Cabinet member confirmed he would write to members regarding the specific figures outlined.

It was noted that Appendix C includes all projects and all sources of funding including Section 106 bids. The waste fleet figures are based on a straight replacement of the current fleet. This does not include food waste, although central government have indicated they will fund that implementation.

- Members reiterated that resident's ability to pay council tax should be included as a key factor when considering any rise in the council tax level.

The Cabinet member highlighted the council tax support scheme and encouraged any residents who find themselves unable to pay to contact the team.

RESOLVED: The committee:

- Noted the current position on the development of the MTFs and the next steps.
- Provided views to the Cabinet member on the initial revenue investment and capital investment modelling identified in the report.
- Provided views to the Cabinet member on the projected Minimum Level of General Reserves and the modelled initial approach to beginning the process of replenishing the level of Total Reserves.

37 WORK PROGRAMME

Proposals were discussed for task groups on Public Transport and Local Health Scrutiny. The request for a Civic Matrix Task & Finish Group made at the last Overview & Scrutiny committee was also noted. Members were reminded that the authority only has the capacity to run a limited number of Task Groups at any one time and requests for new Task Groups may have to wait until that capacity is available.

It was confirmed that the Empty Homes Policy will come to O&S before being presented at Cabinet.

38 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

39 CONFIDENTIAL NOTES FROM TASK GROUPS

The confidential notes of the recent Lichfield City Masterplan Task Group and New Leisure Centre Task Group, taken as read, were reviewed by the committee.

(The Meeting closed at 9.08 pm)

CHAIR