

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 SEPTEMBER 2021

PRESENT:

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

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Cox, Lax, Strachan and A.Yeates attended the meeting).

8 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Parton-Hughes.

9 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interests.

10 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the previous meeting be approved.

11 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered their work programme. Along with points raised on health matters and the Car Parking Strategy, the Councillor Community Fund was discussed and it was noted that some Members had received applications. It was felt that Councillors could aid the advertisement of the fund through their local Parish Councils or social media and it was agreed to send Members wording to use when doing this. Councillors Grange, Tranter, M. Wilcox, Warburton and Eagland volunteered to be on a Member Task Group, if required, to evaluate the pilot of the scheme when data was available. The Cabinet Member reported that a press release would be communicated shortly to remind residents of the funding scheme and would bring back a report on the performance of the scheme before finalising the need for the task group to meet.

Dry Recycling was discussed and the Chair of the Committee invited the Cabinet Member to speak on this item. He reported that the decision had been made to move to a dual scheme to begin in April. It was felt that communications on the scheme had not been sufficient and it was questioned what use a task group could be at this late stage. It was reported that the group could work through the communications plan going forward into the implementation of the new recycling scheme as well as evaluating its success. Councillors Norman, Robertson, Warburton, A. Little and Powell volunteered to be part of this task group. When asked for a briefing paper on the new dual recycling scheme, the Cabinet Member reiterated that it would be starting in April. There were some questions around the use of a bag and bin and it was asked if the choice of material into each receptacle and it was reported that there had been various conversations with other authorities who are running similar schemes and their advice had been taken into account. Volume of materials was also discussed and it was noted that more bags could be requested if required.

Climate Change was discussed and there was some disappointment that information on what had been undertaken so far had not been forthcoming. The Cabinet Member was again invited to speak on this item and was asked why a briefing paper had not been produced following the previous meeting and it was reported that it was due to the lead officer being on leave. It was felt that as the Council had declared a Climate Change Emergency, it was getting time critical to have an action plan in place and meet the targets set by the Council. It was reported that the previous Chief Executive had taken the lead however due to the pressures faced during the pandemic, much had stopped. However there had been some improvements made including to Burntwood Leisure Centre. It was then reported that a new lead officer was appointed, following the departure of the chief executive, and a company called APSE to help gather baseline figures and work on an action plan. It was also reported that an Officer would be appointment on a two year contract to lead on the matter as well as comprehensive training for other officers. The figures of emissions needed to be reduced was reported and noted by the Committee. It was envisioned that the action plan would be considered by the Committee when ready. It was noted that the LGA could help access best practice from other authorities that may prevent the need to employ external companies however it was reported that it was difficult to have a one size fits all solution as all councils were different.

It was questioned why there was not already an action plan even if in draft form and a briefing paper again requested with the information given at the meeting especially the base data which could be considered by a Member Task Group if created. It was agreed that Member involvement was critical.

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted and amended where required.

12 HEALTH MATTERS

Whilst discussing the work programme, the Chair reported that there had been a High Court Judgement that the Environment Agency would be held liable for the pollution coming from Walleys Landfill Quarry in Newcastle under Lyme.

It was then reported that Staffordshire County Council's Health and Wellbeing Overview & Scrutiny Committee would be considering access to GP practices.

RESOLVED: That the information received be noted.

13 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS)

The Committee received a report on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2020-2025 which took into account the all reports that had been approved at Cabinet and Council but refreshed to remove the previous financial year 2020/21 and add the new financial year of 2025/26 as well as refresh and update assumptions to reflect the latest information available. It was reported that news had been received that a multi-year settlement from central government would be forthcoming as part of the spending review although the contents of that settlement were unknown until the settlement in December 2021. The multi year settlement would potentially provide some certainty for budget setting and financial planning. It was reported that due to this, the principles and assumptions as stated in the report would be reviewed as part of the MTFS and therefore would be reviewed by the Committee again in November.

The Head of Finance & Procurement then gave an update on the current situation regarding financial matters and reported that the Spending Review 2021 as mentioned, did confirm a three year settlement but there was a short timescale for government departments to submit their responses to the review. It was also reported that some analysis undertaken from external experts predicted that there will not be any significant increase in spending power in unprotected departments including Local Government. It was noted that another key

announcement was regarding Social Care funding and although Lichfield District Council did not provide this service, it would have an impact for example the increase in National Insurance contribution as an employer and it was estimated the cost of this would be around £100k per annum although it had been reported that the government will offset this for the Council as a public authority. It was noted that this offset would not apply to partners who provide services on behalf of the Council so there would be an impact to the Council that way. It was reported that the social care funding announced was not intended to offset "increases in demand and unit costs" and therefore these will have to be funded from "increases in Council Tax, Adult Social Care precept and long term efficiencies".

The future of local government funding would be impacted by a number of pressures and reforms including Covid Recovery, Planning reform, Devolution as well as potentially the requirement for Councils to submit long term spending plans to government (a 25 year model is already included in the MTFs) and it was felt that this could add some value in terms of longer term financial sustainability. It was reported that the government had announced that the opportunity to remain in the Business Rate Pool for 2022/23 had been offered and this would be considered. It was reported that the three year settlement could involve a roll over settlement for the first year which could mean keeping more Business rates growth followed by phased changes however Ministers were recasting what would be happening over the next three years making forecasting very difficult.

It was requested that views be given on a proposed savings strategy with key outcomes of sustainable, balanced budget over the medium term using general reserves to achieve outcomes. Targets set would have to be flexible and adaptable to change and General Reserves could not fall below a certain level.

It was reported that following a rollover one year settlement for 2021/22 that enabled the retention of business rate growth and additional grant funding, a Risk and Recovery reserve was created. Half of the budget had been allocated and there was a desire to continue the strategy of supporting initiatives that made the district a good place to live and visit as well as spend to save projects and the Committee was requested to ratify this continuation.

The unrestricted earmarked reserves were discussed what happened if these were no longer required. It was reported that there are two types of earmarked reserve - restricted reserves that were created for items required by partnership and legal agreements and unrestricted reserves that were policy based and could therefore be released for other priorities if required.

The funding gap was confirmed and it was reported that it was based on a number of prudent pressures including the pay award, Government Funding and items subject to Council approval.

It was noted that Capital Receipts would be lower than projected due to the non sale of Netherstowe & Leyfields . It was reported that the Capital Receipt was envisioned to be used for the pay off the capital investment for Burntwood Leisure Centre funded by borrowing and the funding to enable this invest to save initiative would have to be found elsewhere.

The budget consultation was discussed and it was felt exploring more ways of engaging and identifying best practice elsewhere could help increase engagement. It was reported that this was already being undertaken including the use of third party platform.

Council Tax setting was discussed by the Committee and it was felt that the rise in National Insurance would also have a big impact on residents, as well as Universal Credit reduction and very high inflation rises, and it would be wrong to just carry on with a maximum rise year on year. It was reported that the Cabinet was in agreement that any rise should be balanced and are aiming for a compromise between allowing the continuation of service delivery without being too high a pressure on residents. It was also reported that the Council Tax Support Scheme would be reviewed to ensure help is available for those who require it. There were also views however that additional cost pressures should also be taken into account and not

forgotten. It was also expressed that it was predicted that any inflation rise would be for the short term. It was also considered that if Council Tax were to rise, then spending should too to ensure residents can see something for it.

The visitor economy was discussed and it was agreed that it had been good to see events return however it was requested that there were also attractions outside the city centre and these should be advertised equally.

The investment in the Planning Service was discussed and it was hoped that it would pay dividends for the authority.

RESOLVED: (1) That the allocations from the risk and recovery budget totalling £571,000 be noted;

(2) That the views expressed in relation to the approach to setting targets be considered by Cabinet and a theme based approach to delivering sustainable MTFS savings is implemented with a savings target of £500,000 for 2022/23;

(3) That the views expressed in relation to the potential level of the District's Council Tax increase for 2022/23 be considered by Cabinet; and

(4) That the approach to Budget Consultation 2022/23 be noted.

14 MEMBER TASK GROUP UPDATES

The Committee received notes from Member Task Group meetings held since the last full Overview & Scrutiny Committee. For this round, it included notes from the Lichfield City Masterplan Member Task Group where they considered the Car Parking Strategy. During discussions for the work programme, it was felt that more was needed to understand the actual strategy rather than a list of ideas. It was also felt that privately run car parks should be included in the overall strategy especially in light of issues experienced with the transfer of carparks in the city centre. It was agreed that it would be of remiss to not consider the strategy from a residents point of view. It was asked if future capacity could be considered and it was hoped that the consultants commissioned to work on the strategy had taken this into account. It was agreed to give these points to the Chairman of the Task Group.

RESOLVED: That the notes from Member Task Group meetings be received and noted.

(The Meeting closed at 7.46 pm)

CHAIR