

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 SEPTEMBER 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors Norman (Chair), Leung (Vice-Chair), Ho, Holland, Trent, Robertson, Whitehouse, Woodward and B Yeates

18 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Ball, Booker, Ray and Hill.

19 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Kerry Dove (Chief Operating Officer) declared an interest in Item 4 as a director of the LATCo.

20 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 02 August 2023, previously circulated, were taken as read and approved as a correct record, subject to amending Item 14 (Local Elections 2023 Review) to note the potential of using SPI information in analysing election turnout drops in specific wards.

21 MEMBER CALL IN - APPOINTMENT OF LATCO BOARD MEMBER

Principal Opposition Group Leader Councillor Woodward requested the call-in on the following basis: "We have not been told of the rationale behind the decision and, on the basis of the new post-May political landscape, it appears that no alternative nominees have been considered; they have certainly not been discussed with Opposition Group Leaders."

Councillor Woodward confirmed that this was not a comment on the suitability of the appointee, but instead an issue of lack-of-consultation. The appointment may be interpreted as a reactive decision rather than proactive in the new political landscape. The potential to increase the number of directors on the LATCo was highlighted.

Council Leader Councillor Pullen stated that having a councillor on the LATCo board is key to keeping the aims of the LATCo aligned with the aims and objectives of the council. Due process as set out in the constitution was followed accordingly. It was highlighted that government advice received on this indicates that mixed LATCo boards of councillors and officers work well. Any material changes to the business plan are required to be go before cabinet and Internal Audit will be looking at the Governance processes of the LATCo in their 2023/2024 review.

The Chair referred to advice from some organisations, including the district's own external auditor, that a LATCo might be more successful with no councillors on the board.

Members believed that it was important to get the LATCo board membership correct, in order to decrease the risk of related votes being lost at full council, which could subsequently jeopardise the appetite for private investment. A suggestion for a LATCo board comprised of 2 officers, 2 councillors and 3 other directors was made.

Councillor Pullen stated he would consider the views of the committee. He agreed that avoiding group think was always positive, whilst noting that the LATCo needs to be sufficient

agile and responsive. The LATCo is new and should be further established in a phased process that can be reviewed in the future.

Councillor Woodward stated that she found the discussion useful.

22 HEALTH MATTERS

There has only been one meeting since the last O&S committee. It was confirmed that Flu vaccines are now available for over-75s. Residents will be contacted about this so there is no need to contact GPs directly. Mental health and contributing factors were discussed.

The committee was reminded that the Samuel Johnson Birth Centre has been closed since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a reluctance to reopen the centre, due to a shortage of staff. However, the Vice-Chair confirmed she would be pushing County Council to get the centre reopened at their next meeting in November.

Members raised the possibility of a potential community booking event at Burntwood Leisure Centre, in partnership with the County Council to ease issues of GP capacity.

23 NOTES FROM TASK GROUPS

The notes of the recent Lichfield City Masterplan Task Group and New Leisure Centre Task Group will be ready for review at the next O&S meeting in November.

24 REVIEW OF CIVIC FUNCTION MATRIX

Kerry Dove (Chief Operating Officer) and Christine Lewis (Principal Governance Officer) presented the report to the committee. They confirmed that they were seeking views on the civic scoring matrix and civic allowances. The current matrix was developed by a task group in 2015. However, since then there has been an increase in the number of invites from charity and community events. When an invitation falls in the amber section of the matrix, approval is sought from the Leader or Chief Executive on that. Members were asked if that function should be delegated to the Monitoring Officer instead. The IRP have also recommended amalgamating the Chair and Vice-Chair allowances.

- Members asked if the Constitution required LDC to have a Chair of Council.

Christine Lewis confirmed that it is a legal requirement for there to be a 'Chair' of Full Council meetings. It is only a traditional aspect of the role that the Chair would attend local events.

- Members asked if a comparison had been conducted against other similar councils.

It was confirmed that this had been done with the original Task Group in 2015 and could be reconducted if the committee wished.

Kerry Dove noted that there is a personal responsibility on the Chair and Vice-Chair to ensure they are conducting appropriate checks and balances when determining if attending civic events are of clear value to residents.

- Members asked what the total allowance for the Chair and Vice-Chair was.

It was confirmed that in 2023/2024 the Chair's allowance was £2,120. The Vice-Chair's allowance was £1,070. The Council Chair and Vice-Chair's SRA recognises that they may require additional ticket and clothing expenses.

Members agreed that the matrix was not working effectively in its current form and suggested a point scoring system instead.

RESOLVED: The committee considered the matrix and the types of event invitations the Chair receives. The committee recommended a one-off Task & Finish Group be established to resolve this issue.

25 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Anthony Thomas (Assistant Director Finance & Commissioning) and Councillor Strachan (Cabinet Member for Finance and Commissioning) presented the report to the committee. The Cabinet member noted this was the first time this cycle that the MTFs had come before O&S. He confirmed that the authority is in a broadly resilient financial position, though budgeting remains challenging. The higher than expected use of reserves to balance the budget in 2023/24 at the current time is due to non-delivery or late delivery of income/savings proposals and Leadership Team is seeking to reduce the projected level through savings proposals. He stated that the Capital Programme is included in the report and sees no reason to depart from what has been set out.

Mr Thomas clarified to new members that benchmarking is conducted on nearest statistical neighbouring councils.

- Members asked what options were available for reducing the funding gap.

The Cabinet member confirmed local taxation, cutting additional waste, cost savings and additional income proposals were all options available. Mr Thomas expressed doubts over whether local finance reform may occur in 2025/26 and noted that the modelling included was based on policy papers from before the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Members questioned how the spending commitments would be funded.

The Cabinet member highlighted opportunity led investment that may exist in areas of the district.

- Members asked if car parking revenue had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The Cabinet member confirmed demand was still significantly reduced.

- Members asked for more information on how the scenarios outlined are determined.

Mr Thomas explained that the worst case scenario envisions low growth in the council tax base; no council tax increases in the period of the MTFs; implementation of financial forms at the more extreme levels, with no transitional arrangements; the loss of a number of grant streams.

Mr Thomas explained that the latest modelling assumes a 4% increase on pay which may still be too low. He noted that it was appropriate not to budget for the new homes bonus beyond 2024/25 given the uncertainty around it. The Virgin Media business rate assessment has been transferred from the local list that the Council bill to the central list that the Government bill due to it being reclassified as national infrastructure. This reduces the Rateable Value the Council administers although compensations are made in other parts of the business rates system to ensure a revenue neutral outcome for the Council.

- Members questioned the departure charge for using the bus station.

The Leader, Councillor Pullen, explained that among other authorities it is standard practice to charge fees for use of the bus station, but this was previously shelved. He noted that the viability of bus journeys and associated impacts need to be considered if revisiting decision.

- Members asked if the 2.99% modelled on council tax increase would be permitted by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Mr Thomas stated that the settlement last year indicated council tax increases would remain at 2.99% and believes that is an option for 2024/25 however from 2025/26 it will be for a new Government to decide. The Cabinet member added he was not looking to rely on council tax increases to protect the financial position of the authority and nor would he take this lightly.

RESOLVED: The committee provided views to Cabinet in relation to the Revenue Budget and Capital Investment priorities, and the potential level of the District's Council Tax increase for 2024/25.

26 WORK PROGRAMME

Members approved amendments to the work programme in the 2023/24 year.

27 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".

28 CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 02 August 2023, previously circulated, were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

(The Meeting closed at 8.02 pm)

CHAIR