

STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

22 NOVEMBER 2018

PRESENT:

Councillors Strachan (Chairman), Mrs Woodward (Vice-Chair), Mrs Barnett (Vice-Chair), Mrs Evans , Greatorex, Tittley and White.

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors Mrs Little, Spruce, Wilcox and A. Yeates attended the meeting).

19 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Constable, Powell, Rayner and Smith.

The Committee thanked the Head of Leisure & Operational Services who had recently left and the Head of Development Services who would soon be leaving the authority for their work and input at Lichfield District Council.

20 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Tittley, Mrs Woodward and White declared personal interests in any reference to Staffordshire County Council as they are also Members of that authority.

21 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on the 5th September 2018 were signed as a correct record. It was noted that some aspects of the Property Investment Strategy report were confidential and it was questioned as to why. It was reported that the information contained in the appendices had been commissioned from outside agencies and making them public would be in breach of contract as it was privileged information. The Chairman gave a commitment to monitor confidentiality regarding similar items in the future.

22 WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was noted.

23 DRAFT MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2018-2023 - PROPOSALS FOR CLOSING THE REVENUE FUNDING GAP

The Committee received a report on the approved Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), Draft Capital Programme and its Revenue implications and finally proposals for closing the Revenue Budget funding gaps.

It was reported that the MTFS would be approved in as approved in February and due to emerging cost pressures such as pay awards and changes to funding from grants and local taxpayers, the Approved MTFS identified funding gaps from 2019/20 onwards. It was reported that a review had been conducted earlier than in previous years to allow for Members views on proposals to reduce this gap before the MTFS came forward for approval. It was noted that the proposals did not include fundamental reviews including waste management. It was also noted that there were reserves to close the gap but only on a short term basis.

It was also reported that the Capital Programme was reviewed annually and 10 capital investment bids had been identified with 2 of them, invest to save projects.

Regarding Capital projects, it was felt by some Members that there was not equity across the district especially in Burntwood. It was asked if there was a lack of opportunity or drive to deliver projects in Burntwood and it was reported that progress had been made with increased activity with landowners of the area. It was also reported that many of the projects benefitted the district as a whole. When asked for proposals, it was requested that a review of equipment in parks including Burntwood parks as investment was needed and it was agreed to look at this further.

It was asked if the recent letter from CIPFA regarding commercial properties had been received and what the thoughts were regarding its advice on borrowing for commercial use and associated risks. It was reported that the advice had been given following some local authorities borrowing high amounts however the district council had robust plans in place and there would be a rigorous system in place when deciding investments. It was agreed that a copy of the CIPFA Statement would be circulated to the Committee.

It was asked if there was any pending investment opportunities and it was reported that a team to consider due diligence was required before any investment was considered. It was also asked if the assumptions used to calculate the Funding Gap proposal figures for the Property Investment Strategy could be sent to the Committee and this was agreed.

Members then asked what lobbying was taking place to Government regarding the reduction of funding to Local Government and it was reported that as Chairman of the West Midlands Local Government Association, the Leader of Council was making them aware of the impact of the cuts and a paper had been produced to this effect. It was reported that MP's were being approached as well. When asked, it was noted that the WMLGA did believe that the Council Tax cap should be removed with the final decision the amount of council tax paid made at the ballot box by residents however it was felt that central Government did not share this view.

It was asked what affect losing two Heads of Service could have in delivering savings and it was reported that interim arrangements would be put in place whilst a review of the structure took place. Staffing numbers were then discussed further and it was noted that although a reduction in headcount could mean a saving, it could also result in loss of services that can be delivered. It was also noted that all opportunities including shared services were and would continue to be considered.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) were discussed and it was noted that the Council no longer had to match what was received from Government and that figure was not expected to fall. It was noted that need was increasing and the importance of DFGs was still high as it allowed residents to remain in their own homes. It was suggested that renovation of care equipment be considered as it could result in a saving from purchasing new.

It was asked if proposals around public conveniences and shopmobility be reconsidered as they are beneficial to visitors of the district not just residents.

When asked, it was confirmed that no acceptable bids had been received for S106 monies to provide affordable housing and a report with further proposals will be considered by the Community, Housing and Health (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee.

Officers were thanked for the report and proposals given.

RESOLVED: That the views given on the Capital Bids and Funding Gap proposals be noted and the additional areas as discussed be considered as part of the development of the new Medium Term Financial Strategy.

24 OUR APPROACH TO DIGITISATION: PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received a report updating them on work undertaken to deliver channel shift and digitisation and outlining the progress that has been made in delivering the five 'strategic' projects.

It was reported that online forms had minimised demand on Connects staff, although the introduction of new services like garden waste had increased the number of calls, and this had allowed for better customer service as there was now capacity to deal with more queries including more benefits issues at that first point of contact.

Members asked why the use of Direct Debit had not been incorporated within the garden waste subscription processes in the first two years of operation.

It was reported that in developing the initial administration processes to go live with garden waste in 2017, the potential for allowing payment by direct debit was reviewed.

It was noted that whilst the council used direct debit facilities to collect council tax and rates and other payments, there was little scope to extend existing direct debit processes/systems to allow for the collection of garden waste subscriptions. Existing systems rely on signed paper forms which could not integrate with the garden waste administration processes.

It was noted that the number of direct debit payments was likely to be relatively small and relatively infrequent. The garden waste subscription is paid annually (unlike council tax which is collected monthly) and the value is small at £36/£72 etc. Furthermore, it was also unclear how many additional customers would sign up for a subscription because of the ability to pay by direct debit.

Further work had been undertaken to assess the cost and return of incorporating direct debits into the processes but the business case was insufficiently persuasive to progress at the time. There were concerns that significant investment was required to design, develop and implement a sign-up and collection process that was integrated with the administrative process – without any prospect that it would result in more customers or lower administration costs.

It was asked if the cost could now be investigated again and it was reported that this review was already underway.

When asked, it was noted that data was currently being collected to how many new signups there had been for the 2019 green waste subscription.

The Committee discussed the implications of channel shift and still providing a service to older and vulnerable people who may struggle with digital communications. It was felt that the only way to maximise efficiencies was to turn off analogue systems completely however this could in turn alienate some demographics. The Committee noted that either way brought risk however further options to help these older and vulnerable people could be explored including using charities to help fill in forms, develop easy to use applications, explore simple technology like text messaging and encourage other family members to support where possible. It was also agreed that some other services where there were a few vulnerable users could be offered online only including taxi licensing.

When asked, it was confirmed that specifications for systems were written with the requirement that they must integrate with other systems in use or approved. It was noted that this approach was easier now that the ICT service had been insourced and there had been a good level of engagement with relevant services.

The Innovation Task Group was discussed and it was agreed to place Councillor Smith as Chairman to replace Councillor A. Yeates who had moved from the Committee. It was felt that a technical expert could be advantageous in aiding the group as to what was possible and available and it was noted that advice of that nature was provided by suppliers and Councillor Smith had a background in the field that would be beneficial.

The Committee thanked the Officers for their work so far in delivering digitisation.

- RESOLVED:**
- 1) That the report be noted;
 - 2) That the need for ongoing input from the Innovation Task Group to test new emerging customer facing online processes be noted; and
 - 3) That the membership of the Innovation Task Group be amended to include Councillor Smith as Chairman and delete Councillor A. Yeates.

(The Meeting closed at 8.00 pm)

CHAIRMAN