

STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

19 NOVEMBER 2020

PRESENT:

Councillors Spruce (Chairman), Norman (Vice-Chair), Ball, Checkland, Grange, Greatorex, A Little, Matthews, Warfield, Westwood and White.

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

48 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Gwilt (Vice-Chairman)

49 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Grange declared a personal interest if GDPR matters were discussed as she was working with a digitec company.

50 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were circulated and subject to the inclusion of the Cabinet members in attendance, were agreed as a correct record. It was noted that matters were preceding regarding a press release to minority communities which was welcomed by the Committee. It was asked if progress had been made in contacting local MPs regarding government funding to help leisure centres and it was reported that the two MPs had been written to and the Cabinet Member for Leisure was awaiting details on how to apply for the grant made available by government.

RESOLVED: That the subject to amendments, the minutes be signed as a correct record.

51 WORK PROGRAMME

The work programme was circulated and it was noted that when discussed at the Overview & Scrutiny Coordinating Group, it was agreed for the item on LEP's to remain with Economic Growth, Environment & Development (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee. It was also noted that the Coordinating Group had agreed to split Commercialisation and the Company into two separate items. It was requested that an item on equality and diversity be added and it was agreed to look at this further. It was also agreed to consider an item on maternity//paternity leave for Members.

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

52 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2020-2025

The Committee received a report on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2020-2025 including the Revenue Budget, Capital Strategy and Capital Programme and General Reserves. It was reported that the version under consideration now reflected the approval by Council on 13 October 2020 to remove the budgets related to the ICT Cloud Project and the Property Investment Strategy. It was noted that the funding gap would be increased by the end of the Strategy and that the report presented proposals on how to reduce it. The impact

of the pandemic was noted by the Committee including the reduction of income usually raised through sales, fees and charges. The Committee also noted that the government settlement was still unknown at this point except that it would be another one year settlement for 2021/22. The Cabinet Member committed to inform all Councillors when these details were received. The Head of Finance and Procurement then gave a brief presentation on the current situation of the MTFS and any impacts. It was reported that the level of uncertainty was unprecedented this year in relation to the MTFS with the one year Spending Review and Covid-19.

The Committee then asked questions and gave comments and Members wished to give their thanks to Officers in the Finance service for their hard work in such an uncertain climate. Thanks was also given to all Officers who have been able to get support to so many residents and businesses during this pandemic.

It was asked whether there was merit in postponing the MTFS process until more information including the government settlement was known. It was reported that the current timeframe was not different to previous years and the MTFS would be considered again at O&S in January once that information was known and fed into the budget.

It was asked whether admin costs were covered by the Covid-19 related grants and it was reported that what would usually happen was a separate grant to cover these costs which were not always announced with the main grant nor released at the same time however they rarely covered the true picture of those admin costs.

Due to uncertainty for residents, it was asked if a referendum on Council Tax increases would be ruled out and it was noted that it would be wrong to fully rule out at this time without all the information but it was not the intended route to take.

It was noted that there was enough money granted to the Council for 66 applications from residents for the main category and 40 applications for the discretionary category as part of the Test and Trace Support Scheme and it was asked if this was deemed sufficient especially taking into account the size of the district. It was reported that as at 11 November 2020 there had been 40 applications on the main scheme and 15 on the discretionary scheme.

It was also asked why the sports and leisure service was being reviewed and no community benefit had been identified given there was an obesity crisis.

On the Capital programme, it was noted that there was no money from 2021 onwards under the Developing Prosperity and little under the Shaping Place heading except replacing vehicles. It was reported that nothing was built into the Capital Programme until the project was confirmed.

It was confirmed that income generated from the sale of land from Netherstowe and Leyfields was conditional of planning permission being granted.

When asked, it was reported that the uptake of Garden Waste subscription had increased due to lockdown and residents having time or wishing to garden more. It was confirmed that the charge for green waste disposal would be frozen.

- RESOLVED: (1) That the contents of the report be noted; and
- (2) That the intention to remain part of the Staffordshire and Stoke Business Rates Pool for 2021/22 subject to the outcome of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2021/22 be noted.

The Committee received a report on the draft Procurement Strategy which intended to move the Council from where it currently was to where it wanted to be in terms of procurement including more focus on local procurement. It was reported that the strategy took account of the new Strategic Plan, latest regulations and provided greater clarity regarding the role of the procurement process. It was noted that after a period of joint working with other authorities, the service had been brought back in-house and the new Procurement Manager was introduced to Members. It was reported that a new Procurement Specialist had also been recruited.

The Committee received a presentation from the Head of Finance and Procurement on the background of the procurement service, the LGA National Procurement Strategy 2018, where the Council is when assessed against that national strategy and where it was hoped to be in the future.

Environmental impact was discussed and it was asked how Officers would account for this and judge how environmental impact would be considered as part of the procurement process. It was reported that evaluating environmental impact could be done in a number of ways and the preferred approach would be a core set of basic evaluation criteria but then for the bigger, or higher risk procurement projects, there would be more tailored questions for example use of fuel and transportation or use of sustainable building products. Members were pleased to hear that this was a priority for the Procurement Manager. It was requested that the core criteria considered by Members.

It was noted that much of the procurement legislation was driven by the EU and with Brexit, these laws would be changing and it was asked how flexible the local element of the Strategy was to accommodate those national changes. It was reported that EU legislation was translated into UK legislation which was currently the Public Contract Regulations 2015 and a Statutory Instrument had just been announced to amend it and remove any reference to the EU organisations and replaced with UK ones but the majority if the regulations were not subject to change at this time but a review would be likely at some point. It was also reported that the Council's strategy was not focused on meeting the regulations specifically but set a strategic direction for procurement.

Local spend was discussed and it was noted that 10% was the average annual spend in the area (by post code) and there would be great gains in the local economy if that could be at least doubled. It was suggested that another bullet point in the strategy be added to state to increase the use of small and medium size suppliers particularly local enterprises as it would highlight the desire for local procurement. It was noted that local procurement was implied in the bullet point regarding social value however it was agreed that it could be clearer and more explicit and so wording would be reviewed.

The financial implications were considered and it was asked whether the reported savings were net after the cost of the procurement team or gross. It was confirmed that it was gross and it was then requested that a net figure be included as part of the performance indicators.

Targets and the percentage of suppliers paid within 30 days was then discussed and it was felt that it would be more important to pay within agreed contracts and not necessarily 30 days and so was requested a change in the target and split to say that 90% would have contractual terms of less than 30 days and 100% of payments would be made to those contractual arrangements. This was to take into account those very large suppliers may have terms of longer than 30 days and focus could be made to those small companies where cash flow is vital especially in a post covid climate.

It was finally noted that buying groups have more purchasing power and so the potential of entering into contracts with other local authorities or partners should be explored.

RESOLVED: That the views of the Committee be taken into account and the Draft Procurement Strategy be noted.

54 DIGITAL INNOVATION STRATEGY 2020-2024

The Committee received a report on the proposed Digital Innovation Strategy which focused on the needs of the Council's customers, and how engagement could be increased, and customer needs and expectation met, through the use of innovation, digital channels and technology. It was reported that the Strategy proposed activities under four work streams, E-Services and Engagement, Technology, Infrastructure, and Capability to deliver the Council's aims in this area.

Members requested that jargon used in the draft Strategy be reviewed as lay people may not understand and it was agreed to do this. A suggestion was made that a glossary might be helpful in this regard.

Accessibility was raised and a request made that thought be given to this especially printable forms that can be accessed and given to those who do not have access or ability to use a digital platform. It was also requested that contact numbers still be made available also.

Security was then referred to and it was suggested that the proposed Governance meetings also include this matter as well as privacy and compliance. There was a suggestion that security regarding access, processes and controls had not been defined enough and the bullet point on customer focus could include a commitment that residents data rights comes first. It was reported that the governance meetings would be to aid end to end processes and consider how technology can be used for whole tasks. It was also reported that all new technologies were investigated to ensure data security and there were separate policies to deal with that. When asked, it was confirmed that residents data would not be sold to marketing companies but used to aid access to, and improvement of, services and that GDPR was complied with. There was a suggestion that there was some guidance that would be advantageous if made available to ensure residents knew their rights.

Councillor Grange wished to have it recorded that she was not in favour of the draft Digital Innovation Strategy in its current form and required more explanation of the what the Council wish to do with residents data.

There were views that the draft Strategy was not innovative enough however it was noted that this was an overarching strategy and details of projects would lie beneath it.

RESOLVED: That subject to the comments made, Cabinet be recommended to adopt the Strategy.

55 REVIEW OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The Committee discussed the creation of a Member Task Group to review the Council's Committee structure and make recommendations for any changes. It was reported that since the review of the Constitution in 2018, which saw the current range of committees established, the Council had adopted a new more streamlined Strategic Plan. It was noted that as a result of recent adaptations due to the pandemic, the way committees operated including online meetings was fundamentally different and was more resource intensive and required additional officer support.

The Committee agreed with the approach and noted that a review would bring a more effective structure especially in Scrutiny. It was felt that performance by Members at

Committees should be considered although also recognised that some Councillors strengths are as Ward Members and this should not be forgotten.

It was agreed that the Chairman would also chair the task group.

- RESOLVED: (1) That a member task group be created to suggest improvements, potential new models for scrutiny, and to identify committees which could be combined, reduced or deleted;
- (2) That all members be sent a questionnaire to establish their views on the effectiveness of all meetings and any training requirements; and
- (3) That the task group study best practice from other authorities and report back to the January meeting where recommendations will then be put to full Council for consideration.

(The Meeting closed at 8.05 pm)

CHAIRMAN