

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday, 4th February,
2014

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor David Bush (Chair), Councillor Gay Hopkins (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Andrew Brazier, Simon Chalk, Andrew Fry, Roger Hill, Alan Mason, Yvonne Smith and Pat Witherspoon

Also Present:

Councillor Michael Braley

Officers:

S Horrobin, J Pickering, D Wheeler and J Willis

Democratic Services Officers:

J Bayley and A Scarce

96. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Carol Gandy. Councillor Roger Hill attended the meeting as her substitute.

97. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

Councillor Fry declared an other discloseable interest in item 5 the Medium Term Financial Plan due to his personal family connection to the acting Head of Community Services.

98. MINUTES

It was highlighted that there was a typographical error on page eight of the agenda pack, Appendix 1 and it was noted that the cumulative reduction for 2014/15 should read £2.389m.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9th January 2014 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

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Chair

99. LIVING WAGE REPORT

Officers provided Members with an update in respect of the Living Wage and highlighted the following areas:

- Due to the on-going Job Evaluation work there were currently 91 members of staff who were paid the minimum wage of £6.31 per hour (the living wage being £7.65 per hour).
- Following the completion of Job Evaluation there would be no staff members earning below £7.65 per hour.

It was confirmed that following discussions over the last six months with Unison a couple of issues had been raised. Officers had considered the issues in detail and were due to meet shortly with UNISON representatives to discuss the matter further. Officers explained that they were committed to arriving at a collective agreement with UNISON and would report back to members and staff as soon as possible. It was also confirmed that reserves had been set aside to cover the potential cost of Job Evaluation. Unfortunately Officers were unable to provide Members with an end target date as the negotiations continued to be carried out.

RESOLVED that

the presentation on the Living Wage be noted.

100. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Officers presented the Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/15 – 2016/17 and explained that the report would be considered by the Executive Committee at its meeting to be held on 11th February 2014 with further consideration being given, together with the setting of the Council Tax at the Executive and full Council meetings on 24th February 2014. The following areas were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- Officers confirmed that there was currently a shortfall of £97,000 in the Council's budget.
- There were additional cost pressures as a result of various reductions in and changes to Government grants, for example, a reduction in the Grant Settlement and Business Rates and the introduction of Universal Credit.
- The New Homes Bonus grant would be used to offset the pressures facing the Council.
- There was the option of the Council Tax Freeze Grant available to the local authority, though the Council would be

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asked to consider an increase in Council Tax of 1.9%. Members were advised that there was the possibility of a Government cap on any increase.

- Unavoidable budget pressures included funding from other agencies for the delivery of Council services, including Worcestershire County Council (WCC) and cuts in grant funding from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) associated with the administration of Housing Benefit.
- There had been an increase in Business Rates following revaluation of the Abbey Stadium. Officers confirmed that an appeal had been lodged in respect of this.
- The cost of borrowing, funding from reserves, bad debt provision and unidentified savings were also discussed in detail.

Members were informed that it was anticipated that the maintenance work at Threadneedle House would not now be carried out and that the building would be put up for sale within the following two weeks and would include the Post Office as a sitting tenant. Officers confirmed that there would be a reserve price on the property. Members questioned whether the loss of income from the Post Office rental charges had been taken into account within that reserve and Officers were asked to address this and the process for the sale of the building in a short report for the consideration of the Committee at a future meeting.

Officers highlighted the work which was being carried out in respect of service transformation and the need to reduce the costs associated with delivering enabling services due to focus on maintaining frontline services at an appropriate level. The suggested savings from the Democratic Services team and the affect these would have on the Committee were discussed in detail. It was confirmed that the current Task Groups would continue until their scheduled deadlines. However in future there could only be two Task Groups taking place at any one time. Whilst the Committee raised concerns about the reduction in support, the need for Members to make changes was acknowledged. It was also agreed that it was important that Members did not lose sight of the role of Overview and Scrutiny in holding the Council to account.

Members also raised concerns in respect of the reduction in Executive Committee and Council meetings as it was felt that this could lead to much lengthier meetings with much larger agendas. Officers confirmed that they were looking at different ways to report information to members that may not need specific decisions. It was

therefore not anticipated that the workload of the meetings would increase.

Members were informed that whilst the report detailed budget proposals for the following 12 months the budget process for 2015/16 would commence in six months' time, when the Council's financial position would be more clear particularly in respect of the unidentified savings. This six monthly report would be considered by Overview and Scrutiny, the Executive and full Council.

Officers explained that there was one budget bid for consideration. This was in respect of the economic development of the Eastern Gateway. A contribution of £25,000 had been requested in order to support a feasibility study. The Economic Development team hoped to complete as much of this work as possible, but consultants may be engaged for more specialist elements of the work needed. Members agreed that it was important that the Council had input and the opportunity to influence any development of this area.

RECOMMENDED that

the current position for 2014/15-2016/17 be noted and Officers be requested to review the savings that can be delivered to achieve a balanced budget.

101. FEES AND CHARGES 2014/15 REPORT

Officers presented the Fees and Charges Review 2014/15 report and in doing so highlighted the following:

- The delegated powers for the Head of Leisure and Cultural Services in order for the fees and charges to be altered by a variation of up to 30% and the circumstances under which this would be applied. Members requested a report outlining when this delegation had been exercised during the year.
- An overall average increase of 3% had been applied. Heads of Service had been encouraged to apply an increase of 2.5-3%.
- The Dial A Ride service had not had an increase for the last two years. The Older Peoples' Forum had been consulted and had been happy for an increase to be applied.
- The increase in charges for local community centres and the implications, if any, on the use of them by voluntary and community sector groups.
- The rationale behind the off peak and peak time increase for squash courts.

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- The increase in charges for swimming lessons and adult entrance fees, together with the allocation for free swimming for those aged under 16 years and over 65 years.
- Concessionary charges and the use of the Reddicard.
- The merits of the bulky waste collection service.

RESOLVED that

the Fees and Charges Review 2014/15 Report be noted.

102. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT INITIAL ESTIMATES / RENT SETTING 2014/15

Officers presented the report on Housing Revenue Account Initial Estimates and rent setting for 2014/15 and in doing so highlighted the following areas:

- This was the final year of rent restructuring to bring the process in line with the Registered Social Landlords (RSL).
- The rent increase for 2014/15 would be 5.13% with an average rent of £78.59 per week (this was for a three bedroomed property).
- The Major Repairs Reserve was briefly discussed and Members were advised that there had been budgetary transfers from the Housing Revenue Account into this account in 2011/12.
- It was confirmed that the provision for bad debts had increased due to concerns around the Universal Credit system when housing benefit would be paid directly to the householder rather than to the Council.

Members discussed concerns around some residents being unable to cope with the responsibility which would arise following the introduction of the Universal Credit system and what steps, if any, could be taken to support those residents. Officers confirmed that there were particular circumstances where the money could be paid directly to the Council and that all Benefits and Housing staff were being provided with appropriate financial training to support residents. The Citizens Advice Bureau and Two Pennies also provided support with financial issues and received funding from the Council.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) the draft 2014/2015 Estimates for the Housing Revenue account attached to the report at Appendix A, be approved;**

- 2) the actual average rent increase for 2014/015 be 5.13% (3.2% RPI plus 1.93% due to rent restructuring); and
- 3) the £3.5m be transferred to a reserve as a Revenue Contribution to Capital to fund the future Capital programme and repay borrowing.

103. EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MINUTES AND SCRUTINY OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received the minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on 14th January 2014 together with the most recent edition of the Executive Committee's Work Programme.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the Executive Committee held on 14th January 2014 and the latest edition of the Executive Committee Work Programme be noted.

104. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

There were no updates in respect of the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

RESOLVED that

the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

105. TASK GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The following updates in respect of current Task Group reviews were provided:

- a) Abbey Stadium Task Group – Chair, Councillor Carole Gandy

Officers informed Members that the group had met with both Leisure and Cultural Services and Finance Officers to discuss the feasibility and financial implications of a number of draft recommendations. Members were informed that the café at the Abbey Stadium was now open and had been visited by some members of the Group. A visit to Stratford Leisure Centre had been arranged for 12th February 2014.

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b) Football Provision within the Borough Task Group – Chair, Councillor David Bush

Councillor Bush informed Members that the group had held its first meeting and a number of further dates had been confirmed with a schedule of work being agreed. Membership of the group was confirmed as Councillors Pat Witherspoon, Andrew Fry, Pattie Hill, Carole Gandy and Andrew Brazier.

c) Joint Worcestershire Regulatory Services Scrutiny Task Group – Redditch member, Councillor Alan Mason

As Councillor Mason had been unable to attend the previous meeting of the Task Group Officers provided an update.

As the work involved in investigation had proved to be more involved than originally anticipated, Members of the Task Group had agreed to put back the completion of the final report to June 2014. Two meetings had been held since the last report and had involved interviews with a representative of the Management Board as well as with the Chief Executive and Section 151 Officer of the host authority. The Members had been grateful for the open and honest manner in which witnesses had responded to questioning. A visit to the WRS base at Wyatt House in Worcester had been arranged for the forthcoming week.

d) Landscaping Task Group – Chair, Councillor Gay Hopkins

Councillor Hopkins informed Members that the group expected to complete their investigations by their deadline. Members had recently visited the place intervention team in Winyates and had received positive feedback from three new workers to the project. The group had explored the commercial aspect from such materials as bark and logs, had reviewed the impact of tree roots on pavements and had explored the legal implications of disputes about landscaping issues involving private properties. The group had reached a stage where they were concentrating on recommendations and the final report.

e) Voluntary Sector Task Group – Chair, Councillor Pat Witherspoon

Councillor Witherspoon informed Members that the investigations of the group had been more in depth than expected. As they needed to visit two further projects she requested that an extension be granted until July 2014.

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The group had held a successful visit to The Space and planned to visit both the Sandycroft Centre and the Bromsgrove and Redditch Network (BARN). Members already had a number of potential recommendations in mind in order to make improvements. The group had noted the large number of volunteers involved in supporting Council services, the value they brought to the local authority and the benefits of this volunteering to local communities.

RESOLVED that

the update reports be noted.

106. HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor Witherspoon informed Members that the recent meeting of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) had been a very forthright one with the local County Councillors asking some very pertinent questions in relation to the hospital review.

The HOSC had received a report from the Health and Wellbeing Board in respect of its mental health and suicide plan, which had brought home some of the issues in the Borough, particularly in respect of a bridge which had unfortunately been the location for a number of suicides in recent months and the preventative work which could be carried out to address this. The financial implications were a big issue, though it was felt that the placing of a notice at the location was not a sufficient deterrent to people considering committing suicide. Following discussions the Health and Wellbeing Board had agreed to monitor suicides across the County. Whilst the bridge referred to was acknowledged as a “hot spot” Members agreed that it was disappointing that further action was not forthcoming in relation to this location.

The YMCA and housing for the vulnerable had also been discussed. Councillor Witherspoon confirmed that specific reference to people with depression and how this was dealt with by GPs had not been discussed. Instead, the debate had focused more on issues around support in the community.