



Overview and Scrutiny Committee

17th February 2015

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Jane Potter (Chair), and Councillors Joe Baker, Michael Braley, David Bush, Andrew Fry, Carole Gandy, Alan Mason, David Thain and Pat Witherspoon

Officers:

Jayne Pickering and Liz Tompkin

Democratic Services Officers:

J Bayley and A Scarce

73. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gay Hopkins and Paul Swansborough with Councillors David Thain and Michael Braley attending as substitutes respectively.

74. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any Party Whip.

75. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th January 2015, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

76. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2015/16 TO 2017/18

Officers presented the Medium Term Financial Plan 2015/16 – 2017/18 and reminded Members that any recommendations they wished to make would feed in through the Executive Committee and Council meetings to be held on 23rd February 2015. The Chair also brought Members' attention to Minute No 100 from the minutes of the Executive Committee meeting held on 3rd February where Members had made recommendations on this matter.

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Chair

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During the presentation of the report the following areas were highlighted:

- The actual reduction in the grant funding received and the forecast made for reductions in future years.
- The localised Business Rates pool and the benefits gained from being part of a pool. The Council had reached a “safety net” level whereby a payment was made to mitigate the effect of the decline in income.
- New Homes Bonus and concerns around the possible reduction or cessation of this funding.
- The methodology behind recommending an increase in Council Tax of 1.9%.
- Future savings expected to be made through the transformation work being carried out.
- The revenue bids which had been put forward. In particular the financing of the Essential Living Fund. The Committee was informed that Worcestershire County Council had agreed to match fund any monies from the Borough and had also received further funding from central government a proportion of which would be given to the Borough. This would realise a total of £168k for the Essential Living Fund for 2015/16.
- Bids had also been received in respect of Small Business Support and the spend to save funds for Energy Management support and advice
- The assumptions which had been made to reach the current summary position, including a 2.2% pay increase in relation to the National Agreement followed by 1% for future years.

Officers informed Members of the current position in respect of the draw down from reserves and in particular previous advice relating to the replacement of the Job Evaluation reserve with the capital receipt from Threadneedle House. Officers apologised that at the time of this advice they were unaware of the planning issues and therefore other capital receipts are available for replacing the reserve. Officers had discussed this issue to ensure all issues were picked up in the future. Other capital receipts were available to replace the reserve for Job Evaluation. Details were also provided in respect of the general fund balances and the capital programme, which included replacement of the fleet vehicles.

In relation to unavoidable pressures it was highlighted that with effect from April 2015 the Council would be implementing the Living Wage to staff at a cost of approximately £70k. There had also been a reduction in the income received from Car Parking Enforcement which was carried out on behalf of the local authority by Wychavon

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District Council. This was partially offset by a reduction in the costs associated with car parking enforcement.

Officers also highlighted that there were potential savings that could be delivered from a review of how Leisure Services would be delivered. It was anticipated that this would be dealt with early in the new municipal year in order for it to be in place from September to allow savings to be made for 2015/16. It was however raised that Officers were aware there was a risk of delivery of the savings in 2015/16 due to the reporting and procedures that would be involved to ensure that members had the opportunity to consider all options.

Following consideration of the report the Chair commented that she had been disappointed with the quantity, quality and consistency of the information which the Committee had been provided with and confirmed that she had spoken to Officers and was confident that this would be addressed in future years. It was important that the Committee was able to look at the budget in a timely manner in order to provide help and support to the Executive Committee in its decision making.

Officers responded to questions and points raised by Members in respect of the following areas:

- Concerns around estimated savings, as it was questioned whether monies would need to be drawn down from balances if those were not met.
- The revenue bid for Energy Management – it was confirmed that this would cover expert advice for a review of energy efficiency work and that work in respect of purchasing utilities would be picked up by property services.
- The calculation of the New Homes Bonus funding.
- The potential to receive a monthly or quarterly monitoring report in order for Members to ensure that the estimated savings were being made.
- Clarification of the use of Job Evaluation reserves, as it was understood that capital receipts could only be used for gender equality purposes.

In discussing the current year position and the impact on the future budget Members had been alarmed and disappointed to learn that the outstanding funds from the Grants Panel had been returned to balances without consultation with either the Chair of the Grants Panel or other Members. It was confirmed that this was a decision that had been made by the Executive Committee. There were concerns that some voluntary sector groups had not applied for grants as they had been unable to receive assistance from the

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Council in completing the relevant forms. The Committee questioned why the funds were not being returned to the “pot” and a further round of applications being sought. This was particularly in light of the fact that work was being carried out in respect of other funds which had unexpectedly become available and there would be a further application round. Members commented that the funds should not have been returned to balances and classed as an unidentified saving. It was important that the Council supported the voluntary sector groups to ensure they were able to continue the essential work they provided for the community.

Councillor Bush, in his capacity as the Chair of the Grants Panel, confirmed that he had not been contacted in respect of the outstanding funds being returned to balances and that in previous years, where there had been unallocated funds, these had been carried over to a further round of bids. He was also disappointed that this had not been the case on this occasion. Councillor Witherspoon, in her capacity as Chair of the Voluntary Sector Task Group, also raised concerns, particularly as the group had recommended that the application forms be made simpler in order for voluntary sector groups to more easily be able to apply for funding. She was also concerned that there had been an implication that groups had been unable to receive the appropriate support due to the unavailability of officers, as the group had recommended that an apprentice be employed to support the relevant officers. If this had been put in place it could have possibly gone some way towards easing the situation.

Councillor Gandy, in her capacity as Chair of the Abbey Stadium Task Group, raised concerns around the information provided in respect of Leisure Services moving to a leisure trust management arrangement. It was inferred from the report that this was being rushed through and used merely as a savings exercise. She commented that it was important that all options were considered as highlighted in the Task Group’s recommendation. It was accepted that money could be saved, but Members suggested it should be used to re-invest in the facilities. The trusts which the Task Group had visited were keen to highlight that it was not merely a money saving exercise, although it was acknowledged savings had been made in the long-term and services had been greatly improved from the re-investment made. This would be imperative for the Abbey Stadium in order to bring the standard of services provided up to a more competitive level. Those Members who had been involved with the Task Group supported the concerns raised and noted that the Executive Committee had been supportive of the recommendations made by the Group.

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Members questioned whether there would be a conflict of interest for senior members of the Leisure Services Team to be involved in reviewing this matter. However, Officers confirmed that a report had been compiled by an external organisation and not the Leisure Team. The Committee would have the opportunity to make comments and recommendations for consideration by the Executive Committee.

RECOMMENDED that

£45,000 is released from balances for 2014/15 for the Grants Panel to re-consider distributing; and

RESOLVED that

the Medium Term Financial Plan 2015/16 to 2017/18 be noted subject to the Executive Committee noting the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's concerns in respect of the high risks associated with the leisure trust option in the current budget plans as detailed in the pre-amble above.

77. FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT FOR THE PROVISION OF BUDGET AND DEBT ADVICE - PRESENTATION

Officers delivered a presentation on the Financial Framework Agreement. Members were advised that this had commenced on 1st July 2014 and covered four service providers; CAB, Signs of Hope, Two Pennies and Money Plan with NewStarts. The Services provided budget advice and budget training courses.

Referrals were made to these services on an individual basis and the advice provided covered negotiations with debtors, setting budget plans, income and expenditure assessments and, where appropriate, advice and applications for debt relief order or bankruptcy. It was confirmed that to date no bankruptcies had been put in place. There had been 96 referrals made from three teams (Early Help, Locality and Housing Options). Those referred also received assistance and strategies were developed to help them manage spending habits and budgets to ensure that they can keep on track in the future.

Officers also provided details of the training packages provided and explained that by delivering basic training for frontline staff they were able to assist those in need of the service at an early stage. This could prevent the need for more intense support at a later date.

Following the presentation Members discussed the following areas:

- That three of the providers were Worcester based and whether this had an impact on the service provided.
- Concerns around a number of the providers who had strong Christian ethics and whether this would deter some people from seeking help.
- The cost of the training sessions. Officers confirmed that each provider levied a slightly different charge.
- Whether there were any targets set for the providers. Officers confirmed that trained Council staff were providing early debt support and therefore only the most severe cases were dealt with through the agreement.
- Concerns around whether the closure of the CAB would compromise the other users. Officers confirmed that the referrals would be dealt with by the other providers as the funding was still available.

78. EXTENSIONS TO SOCIAL HOUSING - PRESENTATION

The Chair reminded the Committee that this presentation had been delivered at the request of Councillor Mason.

Officers provided a short presentation which covered the following areas:

- A trial had taken place at Mendip House to see how the pod system worked. This pod was still in place.
- In 2010 the Council had experimented with two pod extensions which had extended one bedroom properties into two bedrooms. One of the buildings had included adaptations for a resident with disabilities. At the time this had proved more cost effective than a brick built extension.
- Work had been carried out through the Locality teams and currently there did not appear to be a need for larger houses. There was more demand for one and two bedroomed properties.
- The Council had signed up tenants for a home swapper service in 2012 and the demand for larger properties had been met through this scheme.
- There were 40 Council tenants on the transfer list and the team were looking as to whether there was a real need or a desire amongst these tenants to move.
- In 2015 it was felt more cost effective to build brick extensions rather than use the pod system and there was no current demand for it.

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Members discussed the following areas in further detail once the presentation had been delivered:

- The need for three bedroom properties in Abbeydale and the use of prefabricated homes to meet that need.
- The use of pods and prefabricated homes in other parts of the country.
- The limitations of brick built extensions in meeting the needs of residents with physical disabilities.
- The pods that the Council owned had remained in situ and no consideration had been given to moving them to other properties.
- Brick built extensions were found to be providing added value to the property.
- The costs of undertaking the various types of extensions available.
- The planning implications from the use of pods or prefabricated extensions.

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

Members considered the Executive Committee's Minutes from the 20th January and 3rd February 2015 together with the latest edition of the Work Programme.

Officers informed Members that the recommendation in respect of additional funding from the Kingfisher Shopping Centre for the Shopmobility scheme had been approved. The appropriate Officers had been contacted with a view to taking the matter forward.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the Executive Committee held on 20th January and 3rd February 2015 and the latest edition of the Executive Committee's Work Programme be noted.

80. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme and whilst doing so Officers highlighted that as requested the future management of Redditch outdoor market had been scheduled in for the March meeting.

Councillor Baker, in his capacity as Chair of the Provision of Support Networks for the LGBT Community Task Group requested an extension to the timescale for completion of the investigation.

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He explained this was due to both the complexity of the work involved and the impending elections, which would impact on the time Members were able to devote to the Task Group.

Councillor Witherspoon, as Chair of the Proposal for Change by Tudor Grange Academy Short Sharp Review, took the opportunity to remind Members of the presentation which would be given at the Town Hall on Friday 27th February by Officers from Worcestershire County Council and encouraged Members to attend. She stressed the importance of this meeting and its content which could potentially affect all wards in the Borough.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the deadline for the Provision of Support Networks for the LGBT Community Task Group review be extended to July; and**
- 2) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme be noted.**

81. TASK GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

Provision of Support Networks for the LGBT Community – Chair, Councillor Joe Baker

Councillor Baker advised that the group were meeting regularly and had gathered a great deal of information, but had quickly become aware that there was limited support in Redditch for the LGBT community. Councillor Baker provided the example of pages on the Council's website and events for the LGBT History Month being held in Bromsgrove and explained that the LGBT community was not always aware of the support that was available.

The group had considered other authorities' task and finish reports and had found the conclusions reached by Brighton and Hove Council to be particularly useful. The group had also interviewed a number of expert witnesses and had been encouraged to learn that work was already being carried out in some local schools. It was already clear that there was more work needed to be done and funding was an issue.

Councillor Baker thanked the Committee for allowing the review to go ahead as it was vital to the local community that the appropriate support was made available.

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Tackling Obesity Task Group – Chair, Councillor Jane Potter

Councillor Potter provided Members with an update of the work of the group. At the most recent meeting the group had considered written evidence from the CCG and what areas they wished to include in the final report. The Group had been disappointed with the response from the Redditch and Bromsgrove Clinical Commissioning Group and had been concerned at what appeared to be a lack of any plan to address obesity. It was confirmed that the group's final report would be presented at the March meeting.

82. HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Councillor Pat Witherspoon, the Council's representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), informed Members that at the most recent meeting of the Committee the main issue discussed was changes to the opening hours for the Tenbury minor injuries unit. The Committee had been assured that the suggested cutbacks were not due to financial constraints, but difficulties in having to bring agency staff in to man the unit at particular times and it was conceded that the service could not continue at its current level. Comparative data in respect of attendance at all minor injury units were provided and it was clear from this information that the Tenbury unit was not sustainable. Members were advised that it was anticipated that the changes proposed would be implemented in the near future.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.53 pm

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CHAIR

