

Executive Committee

Thursday, 19 December
2019

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Matthew Dormer (Chair), Councillor David Thain (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Greg Chance, Brandon Clayton, Julian Grubb, Bill Hartnett, Mike Rouse and Craig Warhurst

Officers:

Clare Flanagan, Rebecca Green, Sue Hanley, Jayne Pickering, Guy Revans, Paul Stephenson and Judith Willis

Senior Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley

68. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

70. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader's announcements were tabled at the meeting.

71. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on Monday 11th November 2019 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

72. REDDITCH COUNCIL PLAN

The Policy Manager presented the Redditch Council Plan for Members' consideration. The Committee was informed that in the plan the number of the Council's strategic purposes had been reduced from six to five, though various elements of the previous

.....
Chair

strategic purpose “provide good things for me to do, see and visit” had been incorporated into the plan across all the priorities. There was a green thread running through the plan, which helped to demonstrate the Council’s commitment to tackling climate change. Organisational priorities which set out how the Council would deliver on each strategic purpose had been included in the plan, as had community priorities and information about how the Council would measure progress.

Members noted that the report had been subject to pre-decision scrutiny, though the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had not made any recommendations on the subject.

RECOMMENDED that

the Redditch Council Plan be approved.

73. REVIEW OF THE ONE STOP SHOPS

The Assistant Customer Support Manager presented a report which outlined proposals for the closure of the One Stop Shops in Batchley, Woodrow and Winyates. Officers were proposing that these One Stop Shops should close due to the declining number of customers using these facilities as well as the financial costs to the Council involved in maintaining the One Stop Shops. Several years previously the opening hours of the One Stop Shops had been reduced following a review so that they were now accessible on a reduced hours’ basis. Customers who currently visited the One Stop Shops to pay Council bills would be able to use Allpay facilities at other locations including local Post Offices and would also still be able to visit Redditch Town Hall to make direct payments to the Council. Prior to the closure of the One Stop Shops customers would be provided with guidance about alternative payment methods as well as other locations where payments could be made. The Council was projected to achieve savings of £65,000 following the closure of the One Stop Shops and there was the potential for the authority to receive £5,000 – £6,000 in rental income should the unit in Winyates subsequently be leased to an external organisation.

During consideration of this item reference was made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s discussion in respect of the One Stop Shops report at a meeting held on Monday 16th December 2019. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had raised a number of concerns about the impact that the closure of the One Stop Shops might have on vulnerable and elderly residents who might struggle or be reluctant to use alternative payment methods outside of a secure Council environment. The Committee had asked for their concerns to be noted by the Executive Committee.

Officers had explained that there were 70 pay points across the Borough that could be used by customers. The Council would ensure that time was spent providing advice and support to customers in advance of the closure of the One Stop Shops in April 2020 in order to minimise any potential for disruption. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also enquired about the potential staffing implications and Officers had advised that there would be no redundancies as the Council would be deleting vacant posts as a result of the closure of the One Stop Shops.

The proposals detailed in the report were subsequently debated by the Committee. On the one hand Members noted that the One Stop Shops were expensive for the Council to run. There would be alternative payment methods and support would be provided to effected customers. On the other hand concerns were raised that the closure of the One Stop Shops could impact on the viability of the district centres in Batchley, Woodrow and Winyates. Concerns were also raised about the potential impact that this could have on customers who struggled to access other venues.

RECOMMENDED that

closure of the One Stop Shops at Batchley, Winyates and Woodrow from April 2020 be approved and officers work with the public to enable a smooth transition in relation to payments and other contact requirements.

74. FEES AND CHARGES 2020/21

The report was withdrawn. The Chair confirmed that the fees and charges report would be considered in January 2020 instead.

75. FINANCE MONITORING REPORT QUARTER 2 2019/20

The Executive Director of Finance and Resources presented the Financial Monitoring report for quarter 2 of the 2019/20 financial year.

The Section 24 Notice had highlighted concerns about how the Council would achieve a balanced budget in 2019/20. Since the notice was issued senior officers had agreed that non-essential spend would not be permitted and additional income had been received for CCTV services and bulky waste collections. As a consequence an underspend of £571,000 was anticipated by the end of the financial year. A number of additional savings were proposed including from vacancies in Environmental Services and a review of the Corporate Management Team (CMT). A full review of the capital programme had also been undertaken and it was anticipated that there would be an underspend of £3.5 million in the

programme by the end of the year which would contribute to savings in borrowing costs.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was projected to be in a better position than had been assumed at the start of the year, though in order to balance the budget funding would be required from reserves and this would take the HRA below the minimum revenue position. The Housing Department was therefore only undertaking essential expenditure and Officers were aiming to achieve significant savings including in Housing Capital. A stock condition survey was in the process of being undertaken and the results of this survey would help to inform the work of the Housing Capital team moving forward.

Members discussed the report and noted that a significant amount in savings was anticipated arising from staff vacancies, particularly in Environmental Services. Officers advised that the staffing budget for Environmental Services was relatively large, at approximately £7 million. A number of vacancies had arisen in the department in recent months and a decision had been taken not to recruit to those posts. The Council also no longer employed tree officers, though the authority was separately paying external contractors to work on tree maintenance. Members noted that residents were reporting a delay of 12 to 18 months in tree maintenance work. Officers explained that there had been some initial issues in the transfer to contract use but the contractors were picking up more work and undertaking the same volume of tasks compared to working practices in previous years.

The reasons for the underspend in the capital programme were also debated by Members. The Committee was informed that a large amount of this underspend had occurred due to a review of the Council's vehicle replacement scheme. As the Borough of Redditch was relatively small geographically the Council did not need to replace vehicles as frequently as many other district Councils and there tended to be less damage incurred to those vehicles. The vehicles would still need to be replaced but the timeframes had been phased throughout the period of the capital programme.

RESOLVED that

the current financial position in relation to Revenue and Capital for the General Fund and HRA for the financial period April 2019 – September 2019 be noted; and

RECOMMENDED that

the re-profiling of the capital programme due to officers completing a full review of the Capital budget for 2019/20 – 2022/23 be approved.

76. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENT SETTING REPORT

The Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Resources presented the Housing Revenue Account Rent Setting Report for 2020/21. Members were advised that 2019/20 was the final year in the four year period in which Council had been required to reduce rents by 1% per annum. In 2020/21 the Government had clarified that authorities could increase rents for tenants by CPI + 1%. The Council was proposing to increase rents in line with this figure which would have a positive impact on the HRA.

Members discussed the report and commented that the previous requirement to reduce Council tenants' rent by 1% per annum had had a negative impact on the HRA. This had created financial difficulties for the authority and Members noted that a similar requirement had not been placed on Housing Associations.

RECOMMENDED that

the actual average rent increase for 2020/21 be set as September 2019 CPI, 1.7%, plus 1% resulting in an increase of 2.7%

77. HOUSING / HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT PLAN PROGRESS REPORT

The Deputy Chief Executive presented the Housing / Housing Revenue Account Strategic Improvement Plan Progress Report for the Committee's consideration and in doing so noted that this was the third update that had been reported to Members on this subject. A number of key issues detailed in the report were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- The Cultural Change Programme referred to in the report was being implemented across the whole of the local authority and not just in the Housing Department.
- The management structure within Housing had been reviewed and a number of appointments had been made.
- There remained one Housing manager vacancy which would be reviewed early in the New Year.
- Housing compliance remained a key area to address and Officers were providing regular updates on this subject to the Portfolio Holders.
- Over the following 12 months a number of service reviews would be taking place in the Housing Department, including reviews of the Repairs and Maintenance, Gas Safety and Locality teams.

- The Council had procured external advice to ensure that the authority was complying with best practice requirements in respect of Repairs and Maintenance.
- The stock condition survey was progressing and Officers were anticipating that it would be completed early in the New Year.
- The Council had procured a new Housing Management IT system which would be introduced on an incremental basis up to December 2021.

Members thanked Officers for their hard work on the strategic improvement plan for housing. It was noted that a number of Council Houses had been purchased to replace stock that had been sold, building on the buy back scheme and mortgage rescue scheme of previous years, and the Council was building new Council houses. Reference was also made to the difficulties that had been experienced in the Housing Department in recent years and the work that had needed to be undertaken to address these problems. The introduction of the new housing IT system was a big project for the Council to undertake but in the long-term it was envisaged that this would enable the authority to obtain greater control over the Council's housing stock. Further work was still required on compliance and the security of Council Houses.

During consideration of this item Members noted that the report had been pre-scrutinised at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16th December 2019. However, no recommendations had been proposed by the Committee on this subject.

RESOLVED that

progress with each of the items detailed in the Housing / Housing Revenue Account Strategic Improvement Plan be noted.

78. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2020/21 TO 2023/24 - UPDATE REPORT

The Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Resources presented a report updating Members on the Medium Term Financial Plan 2020/21 to 2023/24. The Council was subject to a Section 24 Notice and the recommendations made by the external auditors in that notice needed to be addressed if the notice was to be lifted. In addition, Members were asked to note that there was significant uncertainty with regard to the funding that local government would receive from central government moving forward. One concern for local government was that the revaluation of business rates might be brought forward and this could impact on income for local authorities. However, it was hoped that the Council

would benefit financially, as a member of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), from the expansion of the devolution bill.

The budget gap in the general fund in 2020/21 was £1.1 million rising to £1.5 million in 2023/24. Officers had been reviewing additional pressures and potential income. Further detail in respect of this matter would be available for Members' consideration early in the New Year. Officers were anticipating that the budget for 2020/21 would balance. However, the Council did not have the level of balances needed to balance the budget in the subsequent three years of the plan. Therefore, difficult decisions still needed to be taken by Members if the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan was to balance.

The potential funding that the Council would receive from central government was briefly discussed. Officers advised that the Council had not anticipated the New Homes Bonus funding that the government had awarded to the authority for 2020/21. The government had clarified that this funding would be for one year only and there would be no legacy payments. Therefore, Officers had not incorporated any further New Homes Bonus funding into the Medium Term Financial Plan for 2021/22 to 2023/24. The government had also announced that district Councils could only increase Council Tax by a maximum of 2% in 2020/21, though officers were anticipating that Council Tax could be increased by 2.99% in subsequent years.

There was general consensus amongst Members that district Councils were struggling financially and tended to receive less in financial settlements than County Councils and unitary authorities. It was suggested that a review of local authority funding was needed together with some clear direction from the government about the future of local government moving forward.

RESOLVED that

the current medium term financial plan gap be noted and officers continue to review the position to enable a balanced budget to be presented to Council on the 24th February 2020.

79. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee considered the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Thursday 7th November 2019. During consideration of the minutes Members noted that there was a recommendation that had been made by the Committee in respect of the Council's Concessionary Rents Policy which had not yet been considered by the Executive Committee. The Chair

observed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had stipulated that this recommendation should be presented for the consideration of the Executive Committee alongside a report on the Concessionary Rents Policy. However, as there would no longer be a report focusing only on the Concessionary Rents Policy in the New Year, Members were invited to discuss the recommendation at this meeting.

During consideration of this item Councillor Greg Chance proposed that the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which called for the Council to abolish the idea of removing concessionary rent relief and to instead identify alternative methods of funding for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) groups, should be accepted. This proposal was seconded by Councillor Bill Hartnett. In proposing the recommendation Councillor Chance suggested that many VCS groups were worried about their finances in the future. Approval of this recommendation would therefore provide reassurance to local VCS groups.

Members discussed the recommendation and in so doing noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had discussed the subject of the Concessionary Rents Policy without reference to a report. A report focusing on the support that the Council could provide to the VCS in general was due to be considered by the Executive Committee in January 2020 and Members expressed concerns that any decisions at this stage relating to funding for VCS groups would pre-empt the outcomes of the debate around that report.

On being put to the vote the recommendation was lost.

At the end of the debate about this item Members noted that there were no further recommendations in the minutes requiring a decision as they had previously been considered at earlier meetings of the Executive Committee.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7th November 2019 be noted.

80. MINUTES / REFERRALS - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, EXECUTIVE PANELS ETC.

Members were advised that during a meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group held on 2nd December 2019 Members had received a presentation from Professor Peter Latchford OBE, from Black Radley, in respect of commercialism. The group had thought that the presentation was very interesting and that all Members would find the information provided helpful. For this reason the

group had recommended that there should be a briefing for all Members on the subject of commercialism. This recommendation had received the support of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at a meeting on 5th December 2019.

There was general consensus that the action proposed in the recommendation was positive. However, concerns were raised about low levels of Councillors' attendance at recent training sessions. Members suggested that this low attendance level was unacceptable, particularly given that officers and external trainers were giving their time to provide the training. The Committee was also asked to note that the Council would be charged for a training session delivered by representatives of Black Radley. In this context Members concurred that the briefing should only go ahead if sufficient numbers of Members confirmed in advance that they would be attending the briefing. It was suggested that a confirmed attendance of fifty percent would be appropriate.

During consideration of this matter it was noted that the Member Support Steering Group was responsible for co-ordinating Member training. It was suggested that the group could investigate further the reasons why Members did not attend training and any action that could be taken to address the issue.

RESOLVED that

there should be an all Member briefing from Black Radley in respect of commercialism in January 2020, subject to a sufficient number of Members confirming attendance, in advance of the session.

81. ADVISORY PANELS - UPDATE REPORT

The following updates were provided in respect of the work of the Executive Advisory Panels:

- a) Climate Change Cross Party Working Group – Chair, Councillor Brandon Clayton

Councillor Clayton explained that a meeting of the group was due to take place in January 2020.

- b) Constitutional Review Working Party – Chair, Councillor Matthew Dormer

Councillor Dormer advised Members that a meeting of the Constitutional Review Working Party was due to take place on 13th January 2020.

c) Corporate Parenting Board – Council Representative,
Councillor Julian Grubb

Councillor Grubb noted that he had attended a Corporate Parenting Fair in the autumn. The event had been interesting and Councillor Grubb had requested further information, particularly with regard to the roles and responsibilities of District Councillors as Corporate Parents.

Unfortunately Councillor Grubb had not been able to attend the latest meeting of the board as this had clashed with a meeting of the West Mercia Police and Crime Panel. However, Councillor Grubb would be attending the following meeting of the board which was due to take place on 8th February 2020.

Councillor Grubb had received the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2018-19. The report had highlighted that a number of areas were working well. However, there were also some challenges highlighted in the report including:

- Keep in touch events, which provided an opportunity for direct experience of working with looked after children, were not well attended by Members.
- Provision of accommodation to care leavers was still considered to be inadequate.
- Performance against health assessments, Pathway Plans and PEPs, though getting better, needed to improve further.
- Having a clear understanding of children and young people in care, care leavers and the role of corporate parents.

The board had identified the following key priorities for 2020/21:

- Housing for care leavers.
- Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children and care leavers.
- The quality and timeliness of care and pathway planning for looked after children and care leavers.
- Looked after children and care leavers not in employment, education or training (NEETs).
- Bringing Corporate Parenting Priorities to District Councils
- The voice of the child.

Members discussed the points raised in the Corporate Parenting Annual Report for 2018-19. There was general

consensus that the subject of corporate parenting, looked after children and care leavers was very important. However, Members questioned whether they had received invitations to attend the keep in touch events referred to in the report. It was suggested that if officers from Worcestershire County Council sent calendar invitations to district Councillors many would attend these events. In addition, Members suggested that some of the low turnout figures might be attributable to the timing and location of the events. Members commented that these events tended to take place in Worcester during the day which meant that it was difficult for some Councillors reliant on public transport or those with work commitments to attend. As an alternative, Members suggested that short events could take place in the evenings in the north of the county and these sessions might then be better attended by elected Members from Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District.

d) Member Support Steering Group – Chair, Councillor Matthew Dormer

Councillor Dormer informed the Committee that the following meeting of the Member Support Steering Group would take place on 4th February 2020.

e) Planning Advisory Panel – Chair, Councillor Matthew Dormer

Councillor Dormer explained that the Planning Advisory Panel had no meetings scheduled.

The Meeting commenced at 6.30 pm
and closed at 7.50 pm