

Executive Committee

Tuesday, 25th July, 2023

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Matthew Dormer (Chair), Councillor Gemma Monaco (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Joe Baker, Brandon Clayton, Luke Court, Lucy Harrison, Bill Hartnett and Craig Warhurst

Officers:

Peter Carpenter, Kevin Dicks, Sue Hanley and Michelle Howell

Principal Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley-Hill

14. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor Joanne Beecham.

15. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members requested clarification as to whether those Members who owned businesses and who theoretically could submit bids in the Council's procurement process needed to declare an interest in respect of Minute Item No. 19 – Approvals to Spend Report. Officers advised that as the report did not relate to specific contracts, no conflicts of interest had been identified on this occasion.

16. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader advised that at the latest meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20th July 2023, Members had pre-scrutinised the Worcestershire Housing Strategy 2023 - 2040. The Committee had made a recommendation on the subject, which had been published in a supplementary pack for consideration at the Executive Committee meeting. Members were urged to consider the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's recommendation when discussing that item.

The Committee was also asked to note that during a meeting of the Budget Scrutiny Working Group that took place on 24th July 2023, Members had pre-scrutinised the Approval to Spend report. The

Chair

Budget Scrutiny Working Group had agreed a number of comments that they were keen for the Executive Committee to be made aware of when considering this item and those comments had been published in a second supplementary pack for the Executive Committee meeting.

17. WORCESTERSHIRE HOUSING STRATEGY 2040

The Chief Executive presented the Worcestershire Housing Strategy 2023 – 2040.

The Executive Committee was advised that the strategy had been commissioned by Worcestershire Leaders' Board in 2021 and had involved partner organisations working together. As part of the process, there had been a lot of consultation held with local stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors. The strategy was designed to provide a good evidence basis for addressing housing issues at a local level. Redditch Borough Council, like other District Councils in Worcestershire, would develop a bespoke action plan for the Borough which would address specific local housing needs. Reference was made in the report to homelessness but Members were asked to note that a detailed Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy had already been approved by Councils in Worcestershire, including Redditch Borough Council.

Following the presentation of the report, Members discussed the content of the strategy in detail and in doing so raised a number of points:

- The importance of housing to a range of issues impacting on residents, including health and well being and the local economy.
- The challenges in respect of housing provision locally, regionally and nationally and the action that could be taken by the Council in this context.
- The need for joined up thinking and for partner organisations to work together to ensure that good quality homes were available to meet the needs of local residents.
- The potential for the Council to learn from other district authorities when drafting the bespoke action plan for Redditch.
- The level of commitment from partner organisations to delivering the vision detailed in the Worcestershire Housing Strategy and the need for organisations to recognise the value of housing in terms of helping to take preventative action in respect of poor health and other factors that impacted on people's lives.

- The impact of the cost of living crisis on the extent to which partner organisations would recognise the importance of housing to local communities.
- The levels of deprivation in Redditch compared to other parts of Worcestershire and the impact that poor quality housing could have on deprived communities.
- The role of Redditch Borough Council as a social housing provider and the demand locally for Council houses.
- The extent to which public consultation would be undertaken with respect to the Redditch action plan and the forms of consultation that might be utilised.
- The financial costs involved in retrofitting existing houses and the point at which it would be more cost effective to build new homes to replace existing buildings.
- The extent to which owner occupiers would be eligible to apply for grant funding to help with retrofitting their properties.
- The grant funding available from the Government for the decarbonisation of properties and the likely level of demand for this funding for properties in the Borough. Officers explained that bids would need to be submitted and there was likely to be a lot of demand for this funding in relation to social housing units.
- The role of the local MP for Redditch as Minister of State for Housing and Planning and forthcoming meetings between the MP and Council Officers to discuss the funding available for retrofitting properties.
- The extent to which bids for grant funding would be means tested.
- The availability of skilled tradespersons across the country to deliver the retrofitting work that would be required once grant funding had been allocated.
- The potential for Act on Energy to provide useful advice to the Council in respect of retrofitting properties moving forward.
- The need to educate residents in respect of how to best manage their homes in order to minimise the potential for problems to occur with issues such as damp.

During consideration of this item, reference was made to a recommendation on the subject of the Worcestershire Housing Strategy that had been made at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20th July 2023. Members noted that this recommendation related specifically to the second recommendation in the report on the subject of the bespoke housing action plan for Redditch. The Committee had been keen to ensure that it was noted by the Executive Committee that the plans could be extended to other tenures and would not just apply in respect of the Council's housing stock. Officers had confirmed during the meeting that this would be addressed in the Redditch action plan.

Members commented that the recommendation referred to retrofitting for homeowners. Specific concerns were raised about the particular circumstances of owner occupiers and the potential for their needs to be addressed in the Redditch action plan. In this context, Members concurred that they would be happy to endorse the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee subject to the reference to homeowners being updated to refer to owner occupiers.

The Committee was advised that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also considered making a recommendation on enhancing the Council's housing stock as quality homes. However, no recommendation had been made on this subject as Members had been advised that this would already be covered as part of work on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) the Worcestershire Housing Strategy 2023 – 2040 be adopted;**
- 2) Officers be asked to develop a Borough Level Action Plan with consideration given to the proposals in this Strategy; and**
- 3) the Action Plan should include what support will be available for owner occupiers to retrofit their own property taking into account the Cost of Living Crisis.**

18. FINANCE RECOVERY PLAN - UPDATE

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling presented an update on the Finance Recovery Plan for the Executive Committee's consideration.

Members were informed that the purpose of the report was to set out the processes the Council had been following to rectify a deterioration in its financial position and processes due to the impact of the implementation of a new financial system in February 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. A finance recovery programme had been put in place from April 2022 to start to rectify the situation. This was reported through to the Executive Committee in September 2022.

The Financial Recovery Plan had built on comments from the external auditors, Grant Thornton, relating to the 2019/20 accounts, which were only approved in the autumn of 2021 and the

subsequent issuing of the Section 24 recommendations to the Council on 31st October 2022 due to non-delivery of the 2020/21 Statement of Accounts. Comments on the 2019/20 accounts had highlighted issues on working papers, which were raised as a significant issue.

The Committee was informed that the Council continued to move forward with the rectification processes required in particular:

- The Corporate Peer Challenge took place in March 2023, which was a joint review with Bromsgrove District Council, and the associated action plans had been discussed at the Executive Committee meeting held on 13th June 2023. This included a “finance action plan”, to meet the Peer Challenge’s recommendations.
- Redditch Members, at a meeting of the Executive Committee held on 13th June 2023, approved the implementation of the recommendations of the Bromsgrove Audit Task Group whose objective was to carry out a root and branch review on how and why Bromsgrove District Council received Section 24 recommendations. This Task Group met in February 2023 and its findings were initially presented to the Redditch Audit, Governance and Standards Committee at a meeting held on 23rd March 2023.
- The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee, as a standing agenda item, reviewed progress against the audit recommendations, and national and local deadlines.

In terms of closure of the 2020/21 accounts, Members were advised of the following timeframes:

- Agreement of treatment of the take on balances would take place in early July 2023 as significantly more testing was required by the external auditors.
- Provision of the draft 2020/21 accounts to the external auditors (to begin the audit) would take place in July 2023. This was dependent on the external auditor’s confirmation that they had approved both Councils’ take-on balances work. The auditors were having issues in how they needed to test the transactional data due to their “normal” models not working on the authorities’ data.
- The 2020/21 audit was due to take place between July to September 2023 (although these were estimated timeframes).
- Sign off of the 2020/21 accounts was scheduled to occur by November 2023.
- Closure of the 2021/22 accounts was planned for sign off by May 2024.
- Closure of the 2022/23 accounts was planned to be signed off by November 2024.

The Committee was asked to note that at the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Conference held in July 2023, it had been highlighted that over 500 Council audits relating to 2021/22 accounts and earlier were still to be completed by external auditors. This therefore remained a significant issue for the sector.

Subsequent to the publication of the agenda for the Executive Committee meeting, an updated paper had been issued in relation to how the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) planned to remedy this position. This would include imposed deadlines over a short period of time for delivery of reports. It would be the case that these deadlines might result in qualifications and disclaimers of opinion in the short-term for a number of local bodies. Officers believed that these steps were necessary to reset the system and to restore the assurance which was provided by timely annual audits. Further consultations and discussions were taking place over the summer recess to address this.

Of the key financial returns, in the previous two weeks, the Capital Outturn Reports for 2020/21 and 2021/22 had been submitted. The key returns that had still not been delivered were the Revenue and Capital Outturn forms for 2020/21 and 2021/22 and the VAT returns. Although the Government allowed these returns to be completed based on estimates, the level of uncertainty due to previous issues with the cash receipting part of the Council's finance system meant these could not be completed until the external auditors signed off the Council's take on balances and the Council provided the draft accounts to the auditors.

Members were also asked to note that over the second weekend in July 2023, the Council had moved to the latest version of the TechOne System 23A. This would provide improved functionality. As a consequence of this, a series of updated finance training sessions would be rolled out for staff. More financial compliance measures would come into effect soon and would be detailed in the Quarter 1 monitoring reports.

In terms of Council procurement Members were asked to note:

- The new 'No Compliance No Order' regime that had been live for a month by the date of the Executive Committee meeting. There were a few issues to resolve with the software but Officers anticipated that these would be resolved with the upgrade to the system.
- Many departments were proactively obtaining quotations for lower value works. A lot of the remaining issues for the

Council were in respect of training issues that were in the process of being resolved.

- The number of contracts in place was growing regularly and Officers were confident that this process was having a positive effect. Officers were hoping to reach a position where the number of orders coming through was minimal.
- A spreadsheet was being collated for requests received that were not connected to any contracts and these would be discussed with teams going forward. Officers anticipated that eventually the number of orders coming through in this manner would be minimal.

Once the report had been presented, Members discussed the following points:

- The progress that had been made in respect of addressing the Section 24 recommendations and the extent to which the Council was at risk of receiving further Section 24 notices. Officers clarified that as long as the Council continued to implement the Section 24 recommendations, no further notices were likely to be issued to the authority.
- The costs associated with the external audit of the Council's accounts. Members were informed that the external auditor's fee for auditing the accounts would increase because they would have to do more work than had been anticipated when the fee was set, due to the issues with the Council's finance system.
- The reasons for issues encountered by the Council in terms of staff turnover and recruiting new staff into the Finance Department. The Committee was advised that a number of experienced members of staff had retired during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, following changes to working practices during the pandemic with the increasing amount of home working, many experienced and qualified staff had been recruited to work in London. Staff employed by organisations based in the capital were eligible to receive London weighting on their wages, even if they did not live there, and authorities like Redditch Borough Council could not offer comparable remuneration.
- The difficulties experienced by other local authorities and external auditors when trying to recruit experienced and qualified staff, which were impacted by the same issues. Members were asked to note that organisations based in Birmingham also offered higher wages than authorities in Worcestershire and this similarly had an impact on the competitiveness of local Councils as recruiters.
- The arrangements in place for the recovery of debts to the Council and the level of debt recovery by the date of the meeting. Officers explained that like many Councils, the

authority recovered Council Tax at a rate of 98 per cent. Business rates recovery levels had declined across the country, following the Covid-19 pandemic and were closer to a 96 per cent recovery rate.

- The need to rectify the suspense accounts in order for the Council to chase up all debts.
- The training that had been provided to 83 members of staff in respect of the Council's finance system and the costs involved in delivering this training. Members were advised that this training had been delivered by Council officers, rather than external trainers. Further training had been postponed to take place in August and September 2023, after the latest upgrade of the Council's finance software.
- The impact of inflation on the potential costs involved in delivering Council projects and the extent to which this was taken into account when the Council calculated costs. Officers clarified that contingency figures were often incorporated into calculations to enable the authority to cover any unforeseen costs. Often, extra costs would only become apparent when bids were submitted during the procurement process and where necessary Members would be asked to consider budget bids to cover additional costs.
- The delays that had been experienced in respect of the auditing of the Council's accounts and the potential for alternative external auditors to undertake this work in the future for the Council. Members were informed that Grant Thornton were due to undertake an audit of the Council's 2022/23 accounts. Bishop Fleming was due to subsequently take over as the Council's external auditors and would audit the 2023/24 accounts.
- The impact that use of a new finance system had had on the Council's procurement processes. Whilst there had been problems experienced with the new finance system, Members were advised that for the first time the Council could link procurement to specific contracts.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **progress made on the financial recovery be noted including:**
 - a) **delivery of the Statutory Accounts**
 - b) **delivery of Statutory Financial Returns**
 - c) **improvements in the Control Environment**
- 2) **the work still under way to move back to a best practice operation and the associated timetable for completion of this work be noted.**

19. APPROVALS TO SPEND REPORT

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling presented the Approvals to Spend report for the Executive Committee's consideration.

Members were informed that the report detailed the key implications of the new Procurement Bill, which needed to be enacted by 1st April 2024. The Bill introduced a requirement for greater transparency in terms of how Councils undertook their business. The Bill would reform the UK's public procurement regime, and aimed to make it quicker, simpler, more transparent and better able to meet the UK's needs while remaining compliant with international obligations. The legislation would introduce a new regime that was based on value for money, competition and objective criteria in decision-making. The legislation required Councils to more effectively open up public procurement to new entrants such as small businesses and social enterprises so that they could compete for and win more public contracts.

The Committee was assured that, whilst this might appear daunting, the recent work that the Council had already done to put measures in place meant that the majority of the requirements under the new legislation were already being addressed with a few changes required for transparency purposes. Measures already in place included:

- The No Compliance No Order procurement regime which had been implemented on the TechOne system on the 1st April 2023. With this, an order could not be raised unless it was linked to a contract or an identifiable procurement route.
- All new suppliers had to be approved by the procurement and payments teams.
- Monthly spending of over £500 was already published on the Council's website.
- The Council had an European Professional Card (EPC) card system for small expenditure.
- The authority's contracts register was available to Officers, Members and the public to view.
- The Procurement team was available for monthly meetings with Heads of Service and this ensured the procurement team had knowledge of what service departments were procuring and that they could check that there was compliance with the No Compliance No Order regime.
- Procurement training was provided to teams on request.
- Monthly accounts payable training was being delivered.
- There was a dedicated Procurement team page on the Council's website.

Part 5 of the Council's Constitution detailed the Officer Scheme of Delegations. This scheme outlined the decisions that had been delegated to Officers by the Executive Committee and Council. The Council's Constitution clarified that key decisions with significant financial implications for the authority were Executive level decisions with a combined financial spend (either as a single item or for the length of the contract) of £50,000 or more. This included revenue, capital and Section 106 allocations.

There was a legal requirement for the Council to give notice of forthcoming key decisions and the authority did this by publishing items on the Executive Committee's Work Programme. Decisions due to be taken by the Executive Committee were actioned through a report presented for consideration at a meeting of the Committee. Decisions that were delegated to Officers were actioned via an Officer Decision Notice.

The Council's Procurement Pipeline, which was based on the contracts register, provided a forward look of potential contracting opportunities and highlighted when existing contracts were due to expire. The key task of the pipeline was to allow for the proper planning of procurement processes to ensure the Council maximised its contracting opportunities. The Council, when entering into framework contracts, relied on the governance processes of those frameworks to ensure that objectives such as "social value" were being delivered by prospective suppliers. However, feedback had been received from local businesses that Council procurement requirements acted as a barrier for them to bid for work directly. Consequently, the Council would investigate ways to encourage local suppliers to be able to bid for Council work directly. The Council would accelerate this process to ensure that Council funds were invested locally where possible, subject to the procurement process.

Members were asked to note that existing data from the contracts register revealed that the £50,000 threshold for key decisions covered many projects, particularly as lots of contracts lasted for multiple years. The Committee was advised that the majority of Councils had traditionally set the key decision limit at the EU procurement threshold level of £179,000. Locally, key decision thresholds had been set at £50,000 at Wyre Forest District Council and at £164,176 at Worcester City Council, prior to a change to the authority's governance structure. In the West Midlands region, Birmingham City Council had set their Capital expenditure threshold at £1 million and Revenue threshold at £500,000, with the threshold for Chief Officers being £200,000. Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council's threshold was £500,000 and City of Wolverhampton Council's threshold was £250,000. Some Councils did not publicise a threshold.

The Committee was informed that, should Members decide to change the threshold for key decisions with significant financial implications, Members would not be required to make any changes to the Council's existing Officer Scheme of Delegations.

Members subsequently discussed the content of the report and the proposals detailed within the report in detail and in doing so questioned whether it was appropriate for the Council to compare its financial threshold for key decisions to large authorities like Birmingham City Council. It was acknowledged that Birmingham City Council was the largest authority in the country. However, Members were advised that many Councils had set their thresholds in previous years close to the EU procurement limit of £179,000 and therefore consideration of a much higher figure than £50,000 for key decisions with significant financial implications for the Council was a valid point for discussion.

During consideration of this item, reference was made to the Budget Scrutiny Working Group's discussions in respect of this report at a meeting held on 24th July 2023. The group had made a number of comments on the content of the report that Members had been keen to highlight for the consideration of the Executive Committee and these comments had been published in a supplementary pack for the meeting. Members subsequently discussed each of the group's points in turn:

1. *"Increasing thresholds. In principle, given inflation is galloping away there is a need for some increase in key decision financial threshold but increase from £50k to £200K feels high."*

Members discussed this comment and on the one hand, some Members suggested that an increase in the threshold from £50,000 to £200,000 was too high. The suggestion was made that, instead, the threshold could be increased in line with inflation to £60,000, particularly for contracts that would last for a single year. On the other hand, Members commented that the proposed increase had been discussed in detail with the Council's Interim Section 151 Officer and the Head of Finance and Customer Services who had provided expert advice. In addition, the key decision threshold did not appear to have changed since at least 2007, and in this time costs and the pressures on local government had changed, so it was suggested that a review was timely.

- 2) *"Localism. Supporting local suppliers is important but the best way to do that is allocate extra points for local factors during an open and transparent procurement process."*

The need for the Council to have an open and transparent procurement process in place that complied with legislative requirements was discussed. Members commented that due process would remain in place. The Council would simply be giving consideration to bids from local contractors as part of this process and reference could be made to the potential social value as well as the possible benefits in terms of climate emissions associated with local suppliers. Further detail would be available in respect of the procurement process and the requirements arising from the Procurement Bill later in the year and this issue would be considered as part of that process.

- 3) *“There is a difference on reporting single year and multi year contracts. Perhaps there should be a consideration of a flexible reporting scale for one and multi year contracts. It is suggested that reporting thresholds for ACV be raised to £60K. For multi year contracts up to a threshold of £180K when receiving a change in controls.”*

Consideration was given to this comment and on the one hand, Members suggested that it would be understandable to set different thresholds for key decisions that had financial implications where the length of a contract varied between a single and multiple years. It was recognised that lengthier contracts were likely to cost more due to the length of time that they would apply and without a higher threshold in this instance the decision making and reporting process could become burdensome.

However, on the other hand, Members noted that they would continue to learn about contracts valued at between £50,000 and £199,999 as this would be reported in the quarterly financial and performance monitoring reports. The suggestion was also made that all Council contracts were important, regardless of the length of time for which they applied, and therefore distinguishing between different lengths of contract in applying financial thresholds for key decisions might not add value to the Council.

- 4) *“Any annual contract coming up for extension that is NOT on a procurement framework gets scrutinised by Councillors.”*

The Committee was asked to note that the quarterly finance and performance reports, as well as being presented for the consideration of the Executive Committee, would also be available for the Budget Scrutiny Working Group to scrutinise. The Budget Scrutiny Working Group and Overview and

Scrutiny Committee could also ask to scrutinise matters at any time and Members commented that they valued the scrutiny process.

However, the suggestion was made that scrutiny of Council contracts should be conducted in such a way as to not cause delays to the procurement process. Officers clarified that information would be included in the quarterly finance and performance monitoring reports which would highlight contracts that were due to expire over the following months and this would ensure that Members were provided with notice on any contracts that could be scrutinised in advance of decisions being taken.

Following consideration of the comments made by the Budget Scrutiny Working Group, amendments were proposed by Councillor Joe Baker to the wording of the first recommendation in respect of this item. The amended recommendation was proposed as detailed below:

“On a quarterly basis an “Approval to Spend Report” will be provided to the Executive Committee which sets out the Council’s Procurement Pipeline for approval to be included on the Executive Committee’s Work Programme and an analysis of spending over the past four years.

- a) This report will also identify spending with suppliers over *£60,000 for a one-year contract and £200,000 for a contract lasting two or three years* to ensure this spending is converted to properly contracted expenditure.”

The amendment was proposed by Councillor Baker and seconded by Councillor Bill Hartnett.

In proposing the amendment, Councillor Baker expressed concerns that increasing the financial threshold for key decisions from £50,000 to £200,000 was too great an increase. The proposed thresholds, as detailed in the amendment, would help to address these concerns as well as the Budget Scrutiny Working Group’s concerns.

Members discussed the proposed amendment to the first recommendation and in doing so commented that the proposed changes, as originally worded, were based on advice from the Interim Section 151 Officer and concerns were raised about changing the threshold in an amendment without detailed discussions with relevant Officers. Furthermore, it was noted that the fourth recommendation detailed in the report would require all procurement valued at between £50,000 and £200,000 to be listed

in future Approvals to Spend reports and therefore some Members questioned whether this amendment was necessary.

On being put to the vote, the amendment was lost.

Councillor Baker subsequently proposed the following amendment to the second recommendation in respect of this item:

“That the Council investigate and put in place processes that allow local businesses to access Council procurements more easily, following the passage of the Procurement Bill *with a fair scoring matrix put in place.*”

This amendment was proposed by Councillor Baker and seconded by Councillor Hartnett.

In proposing this amendment, Councillor Baker expressed concerns that the Executive Committee was making recommendations to Council on this subject without having first received a detailed analysis of the implications for the Council of the Procurement Bill. There would be a need to demonstrate that the Council was applying an appropriate and fair procurement system and the proposed fair scoring matrix would help to convey this point.

In seconding the amendment, Councillor Hartnett commented that there needed to be a fair scoring system in place. The proposal was being made in a context where Members had not yet been provided with detail in respect of the Procurement Bill and this approach was considered to be prudent in this context.

The proposed amendment to the second recommendation was subsequently discussed. Questions were raised about the timing of this proposal, given that officers would be reviewing the implications of the Procurement Bill for the Council and reporting to Members on this matter in due course. In addition, concerns were raised that by specifying the scoring process, the Council might agree to arrangements that might subsequently need to be changed again once the full implications of the Procurement Bill had been clarified. Members commented that the Council would always comply with procurement rules and would apply a fair system.

Following these discussions, Councillor Baker commented that he would propose amending the wording further to the following:

- 1) That the Council investigate and put in place processes that allow local businesses to access Council procurements more easily, following the passage of the Procurement Bill *with a scoring matrix put in place.*”

On being put to the vote the amendment was lost.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) on a quarterly basis an “Approval to Spend Report” will be provided to the Executive Committee which sets out the Council’s Procurement Pipeline for approval to be included on the Executive Committee’s Work Programme plan and an analysis of spending over the past four years
 - a) this report will also identify spending with suppliers over the £200,000 limit to ensure this spending is converted to properly contracted expenditure;
- 2) the Council investigate and put in place processes that allow local businesses to access Council procurements more easily, following the passage of the Procurement Bill;
- 3) the Key Decision threshold be raised to £200,000.
- 4) the “Approval to Spend Report” report also provides a list of all procurement between £50,000 and £200,000, which the Executive Committee can request further detail and subject to additional scrutiny where they see fit; and
- 5) items from the initial pipeline report at the appropriate Key Decision level are added to the Executive Committee’s Work Programme.

20. TREASURY OUTTURN REPORT 22/23

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling presented the Treasury Outturn Report 2022/23 and in doing so explained that the report presented the draft outturn position on the Council’s Capital and Treasury Management Strategies, including all prudential indicators. There was the requirement for progress in respect of this matter to be reported through the Executive Committee to Council.

The 2021 Prudential Code included a requirement for local authorities to provide a Capital Strategy, a summary document approved by full Council, covering capital expenditure and financing, treasury management and non-treasury investments. The authority’s Capital Strategy, complying with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy’s (CIPFA’s) requirement, was approved by full Council on 27th June 2022.

On 31st March 2023, the authority had a position of net borrowing of £93.3 million arising from revenue and capital income and

expenditure. The underlying need to borrow for capital purposes was measured by the Capital Financing Requirement (CFR), while usable reserves and working capital were the underlying resources available for investment. The Council was making returns in the region of 4 per cent for the balances it was investing in the short-term (working capital). In terms of the Council's borrowing position, the majority of the authority's long-term debt was not due for repayment for at least 15 years. Members were asked to note that as detailed in the report, the Council was complying with its prudential indicators.

During consideration of this item, Members commented that the report referenced a £5 million bank loan to the HRA and questions were raised about the reasons for this loan and the timeframes in which it would need to be repaid. Officers explained that the loan was for the HRA capital programme and it was agreed that further information on this subject would be provided to Members after the meeting.

RECOMMENDED that

Council note the Treasury Outturn position for 2022/23.

21. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Leader confirmed that there were no outstanding recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration on this occasion.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Thursday 8th June 2023 be noted.

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

There were no referrals for consideration on this occasion.

23. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on Tuesday 13th June 2023 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

24. ESTABLISHMENT OF A PROGRAMME OFFICE

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling presented the report in respect of the establishment of a programme office and in doing so explained that the report helped to implement proposals agreed at the previous meeting of the Executive Committee. The report detailed how a programme office would be set up at the Council and the role of key personnel in relation to managing the Council's projects.

Following the presentation of the report, Members discussed the work of the project office and questioned which projects would be managed by the new project officers. The Committee was informed that the programme officers would be required to project manage a range of existing projects as well as new projects in the future. Whilst there would be some financial implications in respect of recruiting new staff to manage this process, Officers clarified that it was anticipated that this work would help to reduce financial costs associated with project management in the long-term.

Consideration was given to the staff who could be recruited into the new posts and questions were raised about the reporting lines for these staff members. The Committee was informed that there were up to 20 members of staff employed by Redditch Borough and Bromsgrove District Councils who had a Prince2 Project Management qualification and they might be interested in applying for the positions. There was also the possibility that the lower graded post could be linked to an apprenticeship opportunity, which was a suggestion that had been raised by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The staff would be based in the Business Transformation and Organisational Development department, which was already responsible for taking a lead on co-ordinating the delivery of Council projects. Officers confirmed that it was possible that the work of the programme office could lead to a reduction in the Council's need to use external consultants for specific work in the long-term.

Reference was made to the need for Councillors to be updated on the work of the programme office and Members questioned how this would be managed. Officers explained that information on the work of the programme office and progress with the implementation of projects would be included in the quarterly finance and performance monitoring reports, that were presented for the consideration of the Executive Committee during the year.

In concluding their discussions in respect of this matter, Members questioned whether the officers employed to manage the programme office would be required to attend programme board meetings for all of the Council's projects. The Committee was

advised that Officers employed in this service would be expected to attend board meetings. This would be necessary as many of the projects that were delivered by the Council had implications for other Council projects and there therefore needed to be strategic oversight of their co-ordination. In addition, the officers would be helping to manage scarce resources at the Council and would need to ensure that the work that was undertaken was timetabled appropriately.

RESOLVED that

- 4) formal reporting of all projects be undertaken on a monthly basis by Officers and this information be fed into the Quarterly Finance and Performance Reports for Members; and**
- 5) a compliance structure be put in place to ensure delivery of projects and management of the multiple interdependencies across projects. This includes:**
 - a. a council programme office be established to provide oversight and validation of the delivery of projects across the organisation; and**
 - b. the roles of a programme manager and a programme officer be established to provide support for the delivery of this oversight, especially for ICT and Organisational Change projects across the organisation.**

The Meeting commenced at 6.31 pm
and closed at 8.23 pm