

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 25th June, 2012

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Juliet Brunner (Chair), Councillor Simon Chalk (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Joe Baker (substituting for Councillor Andrew Fry), Andrew Brazier, David Bush, John Fisher, Pattie Hill, Gay Hopkins and Pat Witherspoon.

Also Present:

Councillors Michael Braley, Carole Gandy, Yvonne Smith and Derek Taylor.

Officers:

J Godwin, T Kristunas, J Pickering and J Willis

Democratic Services Officers:

J Bayley and M Craggs

28. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

An apology was received on behalf of Councillor Fry and Councillor Joe Baker was confirmed as his substitute.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

30. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN - PRE-SCRUTINY

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised the proposed *Revisions to the Medium Term Financial Plan 2012/13 – 2014/15*, completing a scrutiny process that had been launched during the previous meeting of the Committee. As part of this process written responses to questions that had been proposed on this subject by the Committee were provided for Members' consideration (Appendix A). In addition, the Committee noted the budget

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settlement that had been agreed by the Executive Committee on 20th February 2012, as detailed in the *Initial Estimates Report 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15*, for comparative purposes.

The following issues were considered during discussions about the proposed revision to the Medium Term Financial Plan:

- Officers had met with representatives of Worcestershire County Council that day to discuss the proposed introduction of pre 09.30 concessionary bus travel. During this meeting it had been confirmed that new card passes and reader equipment on vehicles would not be required in order to enable eligible passengers to pay concessionary rates as had originally been envisaged. Instead, stickers would be devised that could be displayed on existing passes, at a limited financial cost.
- Questions were raised about what actions would be taken to ensure that these stickers could not be easily duplicated for use by people who were not eligible for concessionary travel. It was suggested that consideration should be given to stamping the stickers using a distinctive mark.
- Access to concessionary travel and the remit of the system was also discussed. Officers advised that eligibility would apply only to journeys departing from Redditch prior to 09:30, though could involve accessing destinations outside the Borough. However, eligibility would not extend to individuals living outside the Borough.
- Currently Worcestershire County Council estimated that there were 15,000 – 20,000 card holders resident in Redditch who would be eligible to receive pre 09.30 travel concessions. Eligible residents could apply for a bus pass throughout the year, and these cards were updated every five years. Following introduction of the concessionary scheme consideration would need to be given to how to ensure that existing card holders could update their cards to demonstrate proof of eligibility.
- Members were advised that the final arrangements for the operation of the pre 09:30 concessionary travel system would be subject to the outcomes of ongoing negotiations with Worcestershire County Council and the bus companies that operated services in the Borough. A final deadline had not been established for completing these negotiations, though it was estimated that the system could become operational by January 2013.
- Officers noted that originally it had been anticipated that it might be possible to implement the scheme from September 2012. For this reason it had been estimated in the report that

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the cost for delivering the concessionary travel scheme in 2012/13 would be £43,000 for a six month period.

- Different options were being considered to support bus operators with the introduction and delivery of pre 09.30 concessionary travel. This included the potential to pay bus operators a specific fee for each journey that was undertaken by an eligible passenger using the concession, though there was also the option to pay the bus companies a single sum each year to support the process. As part of the negotiations arrangements that were in place in other parts of the country where concessionary travel was already available would be considered by Officers.
- The implementation of pre 09:30 concessionary travel would be monitored every 12 months. There was the possibility that the contract(s) with bus operators would be reviewed as part of this process, together with the impact, if any, of pre 09:30 concessionary travel on other journeys.
- A further report would be presented to the Executive Committee in due course outlining the outcomes of negotiations with the bus companies and Worcestershire County Council and the implications for the Borough Council.
- Officers advised that an additional category would be added to the Reddicard to enable people aged under 16 and over 60 years to access free swimming opportunities in the Borough. Residents would be required to provide identification demonstrating proof of their eligibility in order to access free swimming using a Reddicard.
- Concerns were expressed about the capacity of swimming pools at the Abbey Stadium and Kingsley Sport Centre to accommodate an increase in the number of swimmers that might occur as a result of an offer of free swimming to eligible residents. However, Officers noted that the swimming pools were not currently utilised at maximum capacity and would have the potential to accommodate an increase in demand. Furthermore, residents of different ages tended to utilise the swimming pool at different times of the day.
- The potential for customers to be provided with arm wrist bands to regulate use of the swimming pool facilities was discussed by the Committee. It was noted that through using these bands Officers could manage demand, though there would need to be careful supervision of the system to ensure that it operated effectively. One Member suggested that free swimming could be confined to a single sports centre, though it was acknowledged that there were numerous alternative options that could be implemented to restrict demand.
- The impact of free swimming on gym membership was also discussed. Officers noted that it was not anticipated that free

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swimming would have a detrimental impact on gym membership. In fact, Members were advised that there was the possibility that an increase in people participating in swimming could have a positive impact on awareness of and participation in other sporting activities provided by the Council.

- The Reddicard could be utilised to monitor the level of demand for free swimming. However, the system would not enable the Council to identify how many different people were taking advantage of the opportunity to participate in free swimming.
- The training that would be provided for the new apprenticeship position was discussed. Additional information was requested about the type of training that would be made available to the apprentice and it was noted that training costs had not been incorporated into the estimated figure for the cost of supporting the new position. The cost of pension contributions and insurance cover for the apprenticeship had, however, been taken into account.
- Questions were raised about the opportunity that would be made available to an individual through the apprenticeship placement. There was the possibility that the apprenticeship could be for three years to enable an apprentice to train to become a qualified electrician, though there was also the possibility that an apprentice would be trained for one year in PAT testing.
- The apprentice was due to be supervised by a qualified electrician. The Council employed a number of electricians who could assume this responsibility. However, the Property Services team would retain oversight of specific requirements for PAT testing.
- Concerns were raised about the reduction in the budget that would be allocated to installing security fencing at Crossgates depot. However, Members were advised that this reduction had occurred following an internal review of the budget by Officers and it was anticipated that the works could be completed despite the reduction in funding.
- Members questioned the capacity of the Communications Team to support changing approaches to communications following reductions to the advertising budget. Officers explained, however, that it was likely that internal working groups would be established to enable Officers to share understanding of best practice and to maintain effective communications.

During concluding remarks concerns were expressed in particular about the potential risks involved with the proposed reduction to the budget allocated to capital repairs in 2012/13. Some Members

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noted that this could, in the long-term, have a detrimental impact on the ongoing maintenance of public buildings in the Borough and have a knock on effect on expenditure in future years. Furthermore, there were a number of concerns about the timing of a decision being made about pre 09.30 concessionary bus travel at a stage when negotiations with bus operators remained ongoing. Under these circumstances the majority of Members concluded that additional time was needed to enable Officers to produce a comprehensive financial statement for the proposed revisions to the budget.

Members therefore determined that it was not possible at this stage for the Committee to endorse the five recommendations outlined in the report: *Revisions to the Medium Term Financial Plan 2012/13 – 2014/15*. However, it was noted that this decision did not receive unanimous support from all members of the Committee.

RECOMMENDED that

- 1) **the £50,000 of funding for the capital repairs of public buildings, identified as a potential saving to fund the revised budget proposals as detailed in 3.7.1 of the report, be retained as part of the capital programme; and**
- 2) **further time be allocated to developing a comprehensive financial statement on the proposals to revise the Medium Term Financial Plan 2012/13 – 2014/14 prior to any decision being made on the subject.**

The Meeting commenced at 6.33 pm
and closed at 8.03 pm