

TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 10th December, 2012

Present:- Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Shenton – in the Chair

Councillors Mrs Burgess, Jones, Stringer and Waring

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Howells, Cllr Mrs Hambleton, Cllr Hambleton, Cllr Mrs Heames, Cllr Lawton and Cllr Mrs Peers.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 November be agreed as a correct record.

4. THE BUDGET CONSULTATION PROCESS

A report was submitted to update the Committee on the six-week budget consultation process that had been held during October and November 2012. This was the first major budget consultation for a number of years and the responses and comments from the public would help the borough council as it considered spending pressures and priorities over the next two financial years. The consultation exercise had included many different approaches in an attempt to reach as many residents as possible including face to face consultation, public meetings and a budget questionnaire. The process was still not completed as there would be a debriefing session with the Head of Communications, The Council Leader and the Portfolio Holder for Budget and Finance following which a more detailed breakdown of the responses could be provided to Members. All costs associated with the consultation exercise had been met from the existing budget.

Members stated that they were pleased to see the consultation being carried out but requested that consideration be given to starting the process earlier in the future. A question was raised regarding the age range of the people approached to participate in the consultation. Officers stated that those approached had been Council Tax payers which therefore covered a broad range and that a consultation event had been held at Keele University so as not to exclude students.

Members also suggested that in the future the consultation exercise could be undertaken in 2 stages as well as being started earlier, with the first stage commencing in June. Officers agreed that this could be built into future plans.

The Committee thanked the Communications Team for its hard work on the consultation exercise.

Resolved: That the comments of this Committee be fed back to Cabinet at its meeting on 12th December 2012.

5. **CAPITAL STRATEGY 2013-2016**

A report was submitted to allow the Committee to consider the Capital Strategy for 2031 to 2016.

The purpose of the Capital Strategy was to set out how the Council proposed to deploy its capital resources in order to assist it to achieve its corporate and service objectives. It took into account other relevant Council strategies, policies and plans and the views of partners and stakeholders with whom the Council was involved. It also took account of the resources which were likely to be available to the Council to fund capital investment and the effect of that investment on the Council's revenue budget. It covered the period 2013 to 2016 and served as a useful point of reference when determining or reviewing the Council's Capital Programme. Following consideration by Cabinet on 16 January 2013, the Strategy would be submitted to Council on 27 February 2013 for final approval.

Officers stated that the Council was further ahead in the process than had been the case in previous years which would allow Members to comment in more depth on the proposals. The Autumn Statement was still awaited from Central Government and there would be a lot of work required when this was published but at the moment it was thought that there would be no further reductions in the coming year and no more than the already expected 2% the year after.

Members requested additional information with regards to the Revenue Investment Fund. It was stated that options were being investigated regarding invest to save options but nothing had been formalised yet. Ideas had been put forward by Heads of Services to make savings and where possible these savings would start to be made as soon as possible to help bridge the budget gap for the current year.

Clarification was sought regarding the staffing efficiencies referred to in the report. There was an assumption across the public sector that there would be a cap of 1% on pay increases which had been built into the Medium Term Financial Strategy for the next 2 years. The Council would also be proposing to pay the living wage which was also reflected and accounted for in the budget proposals.

Members questioned whether income from advertising was being considered and whether car parking was still being looked into. It was stated that advertising was still an ongoing consideration and that a working group had been set up by the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee to look at car parking in depth.

A question was raised regarding Community Chest Grants and whether every budget would be cut by 7.1% or if there could be a sliding scale depending upon whether previous grants had been utilised and spent. There was concern about losing these grants where they were currently being used and needed. Officers agreed that this could be looked into.

The review of terms and conditions referred to at S9 was still in the negotiation stage and regular meetings were being held with Trade Unions and staff. Council Tax reforms would be discussed as a separate item at the Cabinet meeting in January.

Resolved: That the comments of this Committee be fed back to Cabinet at its meeting on 12th December.

6. **REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS 2013/14**

A report was submitted to inform the Committee of the current proposals being considered to balance the 2013/14 revenue budget.

Members requested that for future reports it be made clear where the current document differed from the existing Capital Strategy. Officers stated that the general principles were the same with the main changes being to the resources available. The original document was available on the internet.

The Committee thanked the Finance Team.

Resolved: (a) That a link be sent to Members of the Committee regarding the current Capital Strategy.

(b) That the covering report highlight the changes made from the previous Strategy.

7. **ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2012-2015**

A report was submitted requested the Committee's views on the Council's Asset Management Strategy before its submission to Cabinet in January.

The Council's Capital Strategy and Asset Management Strategy were key documents evidencing the Council's approach to its Use of Resources. This Strategy provided a clear framework for understanding the value and condition of property owned by the Council so that, in turn, investment decisions could be taken to optimise the use of the said land/property to meet the needs of the Borough's residents, businesses and visitors. This Strategy along with the Council's Capital Strategy sought to demonstrate alignment with, and delivery of, the Council's ambitions as set out in the Corporate Plan.

Members requested assurance that planning was in place for maintenance of Council assets to help prevent future unexpected costs. Officers confirmed that this was covered in pages 65 to 66 of the draft strategy and that the starting point would be to ascertain the scale of any problem, then devise a strategy to deal with it and prevent it re-occurring in the future. The aim was to be more proactive and less reactive. At the moment there was a separate Repairs and Renewal Fund to deal with this. Members requested that Officers investigate the possibility of a sinking fund for this matter.

Resolved: That the comments of the Committee be fed back to Cabinet at its meeting in January 2013.

8. **URGENT BUSINESS**

The Chair reminded Members that the next meeting of the Committee would take the form of a Scrutiny Café and would be open to all elected members.

COUNCILLOR MRS ELIZABETH SHENTON
Chair