

TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 22nd July, 2013

- Present:** Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Shenton – in the Chair
- Councillors:** Bannister, D Becket, Mrs Burgess, Fear, Hambleton, Mrs Hambleton, Howells, Jones, Taylor.J and Waring
- Officers:** Dave Adams – Executive Director, Operational Services
Louise Beeby – Property Manager
Phil Jones – Head of Communications
Louise Stevenson – Scrutiny Officer
Kelvin Turner – Executive Director, Resources and Support Services
- Also in Attendance:** Cllr Snell – Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Communications, Policy and Partnerships

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

The Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources sent his apologies to the Committee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

There was a Member request that an amendment be made to agenda item four of the minutes from 20 May 2013. It was requested that Member comments regarding changes in global media and the decline of the printed media, made during the discussion of The Reporter, should be included in the minutes. It was agreed that these comments be added.

The Leader of the Council provided an update regarding actions from the previous meeting. There had been no full meeting of the Budget Review Group and as a result there was no update to provide. However, he was happy to provide future updates.

With regard to the decline in the performance on litter and detritus that had been noted by Members at the previous meeting, the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Recycling had commissioned a report to ascertain the reason for the most recent increase in litter and detritus levels, which would include an action plan. This report and action plan would be circulated to all Members and would be discussed by the relevant scrutiny committee when appropriate.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 May 2013 be agreed as a correct record with the addition of the comments detailed above regarding global media and the decline of the printed media.

4. BUDGET CONSULTATION PROPOSALS 2013/14

The Head of Communications introduced a briefing note detailing the proposals for the budget consultation for 2013/2014. The proposals sought to capture the lessons learned from the 2012/2013 consultation and it was hoped that greater resident involvement would be encouraged.

Evening meetings were not well attended during the 2012/13 consultation, and as a result the 2013/14 consultation would focus on where conversations were already happening, rather than to set meetings. It was important that residents were aware of meetings that were taking place, and Members wished to see detailed information regarding the consultation in The Reporter's August edition. The deadline for the August edition was effectively one month before publication, and the location of public meetings may not be known in time. The August edition would inform residents that the budget consultation would run again and to afterwards there would be promotion of the finer details through local media, the Council's website and social media.

Members had been pleased with the efficiency savings offered by Officers in previous years and felt it would be beneficial if there was an indication in September 2013 of what efficiency savings were to be proposed and other savings that were still required. Members considered it important that the options being considered were clear to residents and that the public were given an idea of the scope for savings in September. The Leader responded that nine areas had been identified through the responses received during the last consultation; three areas were very important to residents, three areas were of interest but not as important and three areas did not interest residents. The Head of Communications had been asked to drill down into the data to establish the areas where there were strong feelings of interest or disinterest. The previous year's budget had laid the foundation for this year, and the intention was to attach the budget figures to the areas that had been identified as of interest or not to residents.

Members questioned what other local authorities did and whether there was anything the Council could do to improve its consultation. Officers had looked at other Councils and would use online initiatives to engage residents. There was an online tool that used a sliding scale to allow residents to see the effect of putting more funds into an area, and the impact of this on other services, but this was not something the Council planned to implement due to it being very sophisticated and a £5,000 cost. The Leader noted that where the sliding scale had been used by other authorities, it had shown residents to be more interested in spending rather than saving money.

Members felt it was important to ask residents what was not important, as well as what was important. They suggested a box be included in the consultation document which should detail the services offered by the Borough Council and services offered by the County Council. This would help to make the consultation more effective as residents would focus their comments and criticism on what was relevant.

There was no specific target for how many residents the Council wished to engage; the aim was to engage more residents than the previous year and as many people as possible. The Leader did not think setting a target would improve the budget consultation process as it could make Members and Officers complacent when the target had been reached. The Leader was, however, happy to receive any suggestion from Members as to what a target should be. A Member disagreed and felt that targets were required and the good feedback communicated after the 2012/13 consultation was not supported by the number of residents who engaged.

Members noted a presentation on budget issues would be organised by the Head of Business Improvements and Partnerships to the Newcastle Strategic Board, and questioned whether there would be formal comment from the Newcastle Strategic Board. The Leader advised that the proposed budget figures had been presented line by line to the Newcastle Partnership board during the previous consultation and the members of the Board had been asked to take the budget figures back to their organisations to consider the impact of the proposals on their services. The responses received had been non-committal, and for the current budget consultation it could be ensured that there was a mechanism to record formal representations. The Leader welcomed Members to advise him or the Head of Communications of any organisations or groups in their area that could be attended by Cabinet as part of the consultation and all Members would be asked what events they had in their calendars that could be attended by Cabinet. The formal meeting element of the consultation would be conducted over a one week period, and if there was a location that was not covered as part of the formal meetings, Cabinet would still go and talk to residents in that area.

A Member suggested using the Community Centre Management Committees to distribute information regarding the budget consultation process. The centres had not been used for the previous year's consultation, but the Head of Communications welcomed any suggestions that were inclusive and would engage residents.

The Committee requested that a further update be received at their next meeting on 2 September 2013, which should include more detail regarding the location of public meetings.

RESOLVED: That the information be received.

5. **KEELE GOLF COURSE**

The Executive Director Resources and Support Services introduced a report outlining the financial position at Keele Golf Course. At the Committee's meeting on 20 May 2013 there had been a Member suggestion that the junior rate for players should be applicable to under 18s rather than to under 16s. This had been approved by Cabinet in May and was now in place at the course.

There had been a net cost to the Council of just over £13,000 to keep the course open, with some one off costs incurred. The figures had suffered from the uncertainty at the course over the previous twelve to eighteen months, and income was slightly down. However, the country was experiencing a spell of good weather and it was hoped the July figures would show an improvement. Nearly £13,000 had been taken in the first two weeks of July and good figures for the month were expected.

The need for an annual golf course report was questioned by Members. This was a full report from the Sports Turf Research Institute which the Council had used for many years. It was a nationally recognised report which made recommendations based on a very close inspection of the golf course. The results of the report gave confidence that the course was being maintained properly.

A Member expressed concern that the Council was losing money each month from subsidising the course and questioned the Leader as to when the Council's support for the course would cease. The Leader responded that at its May meeting Cabinet had approved that officers be instructed to proceed with a formal, competitive, two-

stage marketing process with the aim of securing a tenant. There had been three expressions of interest which were being considered now the period for submitting expressions of interest had closed, and the aim was to have a tenant by the winter. The benefit of the golf course report was that it informed the expressions of interest of the areas that required attention.

Members questioned the degree of variable cost associated with grounds maintenance and operational costs. The Executive Director, Operational Services advised that the quality of the course would be affected by a decrease in income for grounds maintenance and that the costs for this were predominantly fixed, although there may be a small increase in expenditure if there was significant use of the course. With regard to operational costs, the cost of staffing the golf shop and running the marketing of the course was again predominantly fixed. Greater demand and increased use of the course should reduce the Council's subsidy. There would be no costs incurred by the Council when a when a tenant was secured and the interim provider no longer needed. Glendale Managed Services had priced for a fixed term to manage the course and were fully aware that it was an interim arrangement.

There were positive effects of the Council intervening in the running of the course, most significantly a 400% increase in the sale of season tickets. Although this was a small amount financially, it illustrated that a lot of people were being attracted back.

The Leader noted golf course closures in Cheshire and assured the Committee that the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources would be driving any offer from the expressions of interest to be competitive in the market. There would be meetings with the potential tenants where they would be questioned on what they could provide that was different. The intention was to have a course that was self-generating and would look after itself, with no risk of being handed back to the Council in a few years time.

Members requested that further detailed financial reports continue to be submitted to the Committee.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That further financial reports be received by the Committee.

6. **DISCLOSURE OF EXEMPT INFORMATION**

RESOLVED: That the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following report regarding The Square, High Street, Newcastle, because it is likely that there will be disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 in Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

7. **THE SQUARE, HIGH STREET, NEWCASTLE**

The Council's Property Manager introduced a report to the Committee regarding The Square, High Street, Newcastle.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That the Property Manager investigate the queries raised by Members.

8. **URGENT BUSINESS**

An urgent item was accepted within the meaning of Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

A Member had requested that UK Mail be added to the Committee's work programme due to the poor level of service that the company appeared to be providing. The Member noted a letter that had been sent to him on 26 June 2013 containing an invitation to a meeting on 18 July 2013, and which had only been received three days before on 15 July 2013. This was considered unacceptable and the service to the public was also of concern to Members.

The Executive Director, Resources and Support Services advised that there had been some issues, but if Members provided Officers with the envelopes of letters that had encountered problems, they would be able to trace at which point in the process the problem had occurred. Other local authorities had had problems in the first few months of using UK Mail, but the problems had settled down after around six months. It was also important to note that £40,000 worth of savings had been built into the budget through the use of UK Mail.

There would be a six month review of the UK Mail service in August, which would tie in with the Committee considering the UK Mail service as an item at its meeting on 2 September 2013.

RESOLVED: That UK Mail be added to the Committee's work programme and considered at its next meeting on 2 September 2013.

COUNCILLOR MRS ELIZABETH SHENTON
Chair