

FINANCE, ASSETS & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16th January, 2025
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

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Present:	Councillor Mark Holland (Chair)		
Councillors:	Bryan J Tagg	P Waring Bettley-Smith	Stubbs Crisp
Apologies:	Councillor(s) Parker, Allport, Lewis and Lawley		
Substitutes:	Councillor David Grocott (In place of Councillor David Allport) Councillor Jill Waring		
Officers:	Simon McEneny Georgina Evans-Stadward Craig Turner	Deputy Chief Executive Service Director - Strategy, People and Performance Finance Manager / Deputy S151 Officer	
Also in attendance:	Councillor Stephen Sweeney	Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder - Finance, Town Centres and Growth	

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were shared as listed above.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 5th December 2024 be agreed as a true and accurate record.

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4. **DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS AND STRATEGIES 2025/26**

The Deputy Leader / Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth introduced the report on the Draft Revenue and Capital Budget for the year 2025-26 and 5-year Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025-30.

The Chair thanked officers for considering comments raised by members at the previous meeting of the Committee.

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Cllr Stubbs asked what was the basis of Appendix 1 Income I2 figure in relation to increased demand, pricing and permits for the new car park.

The Deputy Leader advised that the new car park would be much better than the previous one and the Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) confirmed that the figures had been agreed to ensure the feasibility of the project. The budget was required for a safe car park open 24 hours a day which would likely bring more people in and attract more business around.

Cllr Stubbs raised the case of the new car park in Stoke-on-Trent which costed a lot of money and did not attract as many people as expected.

The Deputy Chief Executive responded that the car park referred to had been built as an additional facility without closing existing ones. The situation was different in Newcastle where the closure of the Midway would prompt people to use the new car park instead. Charges would be paid in the afternoon and into the evening to cover running costs.

Cllr Stubbs asked what was the basis of Appendix 1 Income I6 figure in relation to fix penalty notice for fly tipping.

The Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) advised that this was based on actual money currently received – the target of £5,000 being indeed largely met with a current income of over £10,000. Revisiting the target to a higher figure would be worth considering in the coming year.

Cllr Stubbs enquired about the Staffing Related Efficiency S2 vacancy factor figure and how come this was even considered in a funding strategy.

The Deputy Leader expressed his support to the Finance team and their thorough work in taking into account existing sources of savings.

The Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) stated that vacancies had been measured and ranged from 7% to 10%. The 3.5 to 4% retained was a low estimate of what to be expected for the year ahead.

Cllr Stubbs appreciated the response although reiterated his feeling of discomfort at vacancies being taken for granted.

Cllr Stubbs asked if the G5 item on the replacement of the Council Tax Support Grant with demand led contributions for parish councils would be in place at the start of the new financial year.

The Deputy Leader referred to the civic pride which was rolled out in October 2024 giving an opportunity for local councils to start delivering their own civic pride projects. The fund would provide a flexible resource for activity which enhancing the local area under the Civic Pride outcomes of making places cleaner, friendlier and safer. It was designed as an annual process to ensure that the Borough Council could direct funds to activities which met local needs and it would be based on a per Ward member allocation of £500. It was expected that Ward members would be consulted when groups develop their plans and was similar to the two schemes run by the County Council.

Cllr Stubbs felt that anyone having the opportunity to apply for those fundings meant a direct loss for parish councils passed on to tax payers.

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The Deputy Leader said a guidance would be provided defining who and which projects would be eligible.

Cllr Waring wondered if it would be required to apply through Civic Pride to access the funds or if there would be other opportunities later in the year.

The Deputy Leader confirmed it would be for civic pride projects and that further information would come by the time the budget would be submitted.

Cllr Stubbs commented that parish councils were currently in the process of setting their budget and not having access to the information yet may be problematic.

The Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) advised that parish councils had been informed in December that the Council Tax Support Grant would not be payable and that a new scheme would be communicated in due course.

Cllr Stubbs commented that the scheme seemed to have changed since the letter was sent and asked on a separate note about the £30,000 Borough wide review of the claimant's discount.

The Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) responded that this was a single person discount review for the Council Tax undertaken every four or five years to identify people who were claiming the discount.

Cllr Stubbs wondered if this shouldn't be submitted to the Committee for it had the potential to be intrusive.

The Finance Business Manager (Deputy S151 Officer) advised that it was a County wide review and would be monitored by the Council regardless.

The Chair commented that most of the lines items in appendix 1 had been presented to the Committee at the previous meeting and there were talks of the government abolishing the single person discount across the board.

Cllr Crisp said the parish councils were in the process of adopting their own budget for the year ahead and had noted the removal of the Council Tax support grant.

The Chair confirmed that while the scheme would no longer be available there would be a competitive process in place to allocate the related fundings which had been doubled up. This would benefit non parishes areas but also meant parish councils may end up getting as much money as they were expecting to. The Committee would be scrutinizing how it operate and have the opportunity to assess the situation.

Cllr Waring reiterated the need for the information as early as possible so that parish councils could apply in good time and asked if the new scheme was intended to go forward on a yearly basis.

The Deputy Leader answered that the scheme was still being worked on but could potentially go on long term.

The Chair thanked officers for the work put into preparing the report.

Resolved: 1. That the progress on the completion of the Revenue (Appendix 1) and Capital Budgets (Appendix 4) be noted.

2. That the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2029/30 (Appendix 2) be noted.
3. That the strategy for ensuring a balanced revenue outturn position for 2024/25 be noted.
4. That the calculation of the Council Tax base and the Council Tax increase to be proposed for 2025/26 of 1.99% per Band D equivalent property be noted.
5. That the risk assessment at Appendix 3 and the Section 151 Officer's recommendation on the level of reserves and contingencies provisionally required to be maintained in 2025/26 be noted.
6. That the draft Capital Strategy (Appendix 5) for 2025/35 be noted.
7. That the draft Treasury Management Strategy (Appendix 6) for 2025/26 be noted.
8. That the draft Investment Strategy (Appendix 7) for 2025/26 be noted.
9. That the draft Commercial Strategy (Appendix 8) for 2025/26 be noted.
10. That the Asset Management Strategy (Appendix 9) for 2023/28 be noted.

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5. SCALE OF FEES AND CHARGES 2025/26

The Deputy Leader / Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth introduced the report on the proposed fees and charges for 2025-26 in relation to services provided by the Council.

The Chair referred to the car parking provisions discussed in the previous item, recalling that the increase would allow for a more flexible and better offer as explained by the Deputy Chief Executive.

The Deputy Leader reiterated his comment that the charges had always been kept to the minimum and confirmed his overall support to the report.

Cllr Grocott passed on a comment from Cllr Lawley who wished for the fees to stay the same given the current economic situation.

The Deputy Leader responded that everyone would probably want the same thing and himself certainly did.

The Chair stated that all fees had been kept to the minimum.

Resolved: 1. Note the proposed fees and charges proposed to apply from 1 April 2025, as set out in Appendix 1.

2. Note the Charging Policy as set out in Appendix 2.

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6. TOWN DEAL AND FUTURE HIGH STREET FUNDS UPDATE

The Deputy Leader / Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth introduced the Town Deal and Future High Street Fund update.

The Deputy Chief Executive presented the report which showed that all works were progressing well in the town centre in relation to the various schemes.

Cllr Stubbs asked if confirmation had been received that the Shared Service Hub and Kidsgrove Station deadlines for using the fundings would be extended and why the ground works around the station hadn't been undertaken earlier.

The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that the deadlines to undertake the works had been extended and advised that the Council had not been able to carry out the survey earlier as permits were required from Network Rail and East Midlands Railway which were different from the ones needed when the bridge was done. The insurance issue had taken 10 months to sort out due to the level of liability requested by Network Rail.

Cllr Stubbs asked if other major projects scheduled would go through strategic planning.

The Deputy Chief Executive responded that they already had and that all schemes on the Ryecroft, Astley Place and the Midway would likely be taken to the Planning Committee so that interactions and parallels could be assessed.

Resolved: That the report on the delivery of the Town Deal and Future High Street Funds projects be noted.

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7. ONE COUNCIL REVIEW AND NEXT STEPS

The Deputy Leader / Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth introduced the report on the One Council Programme.

The Service Director for Strategy, People and Performance presented the report including lessons learned and achievements as well as the staff survey that had been requested.

Cllr Waring commented that the amount of savings should not be underestimated.

Cllr Stubbs asked about the staff survey's data tables in relation to the positive versus neutral impact perceived of the One Council programme.

The Service Director for Strategy, People and Performance confirmed the data could be shared with members after the meeting.

The Chair requested that the data be circulated and include the split between positive and neutral.

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Cllr Waring commented that a neutral opinion meant no negative impact of the programme i.e. the savings had not made the matter worse and was therefore to be interpreted as a positive outcome.

Cllr Bryan argued that it also meant the savings had not made things better.

The Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive report.

Cllr Grocott asked about the 38% saying the workload had gone up and if there had been a follow up in term of both health and performance.

The Service Director for Strategy, People and Performance advised that the survey was anonymous and so this could not be tracked however team managers would be checking in with members of staff as part of the appraisal process to ensure the workload was manageable.

The Deputy Leader confirmed that the staff wellbeing was a priority and the Leader and himself would be meeting with the Unions shortly in the context of the Local Government reorganization and report back to full Council.

- Resolved:**
1. That the report and the successes evidenced be acknowledged.
 2. That the lessons learned and the need to continuously improve as the One Council programme closed be further acknowledged.
 3. That service level change and delivery of improvement would move into business as usual as teams used the skills they had learned through this process to challenge themselves and others to continue to make positive change, be noted.
 4. That the significant efforts of Council teams involved in the transformation be celebrated and endorsed.
 5. That the inclusion of Staff feedback and the intent to review aspects of service Delivery be noted.

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8. WORK PROGRAMME

Resolved: That the work programme be noted.

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9. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions received from members of the public.

10. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved: That the next meeting be held on 27th March 2025.

12. DISCLOSURE OF EXEMPT INFORMATION

Resolved: That the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following matter because it was likely that there would be disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs contained within Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972.

13. TRADE REFUSE FEES AND CHARGES 2025/26

This item was not discussed.

**Councillor Mark Holland
Chair**

Meeting concluded at 8.06 pm