

FINANCE, ASSETS & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 8th December, 2022
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

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- Present:** Councillor Mark Holland (Chair)
- Councillors:** Bryan P Waring Talbot
J Tagg Stubbs Lawley
- Apologies:** Councillor(s) Parker, Bettley-Smith, Brockie and Allport
- Substitutes:** Councillor Joan Whieldon (In place of Councillor Robert Bettley-Smith)
Councillor Rupert Adcock (In place of Councillor Andrew Parker)
Councillor David Grocott (In place of Councillor Wendy Brockie)
- Officers:** Denise French Democratic Services Team Leader
Sarah Wilkes Head of Finance / S151 Officer
Simon McEneny Executive Director - Growth and Development
Craig Turner Finance Manager
Georgina Evans Head of Strategy, People and Performance
- Also in attendance:** Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres & Growth

59. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made.

60. **MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING**

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 June 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

61. **UPDATE FROM CABINET**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth updated on 2 points raised at the previous meeting:

- A request had been made to include a running total alongside the quarterly financial position in the quarterly Finance and Performance Review reports and this had now been implemented.
- The symbols used in the above reports be reviewed. This had been done and the next quarterly report would have amended symbols and a training session would be held before the meeting to explain the symbols.

Resolved: that the update be noted and welcomed.

62. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET 2023/24 - FIRST DRAFT SAVINGS PLANS

The committee considered a report on the refreshed Medium Term Financial Strategy including the first draft budget proposals being considered to balance the revenue budget and the proposed capital programme for 2023/24.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth outlined how a number of savings and funding strategies had been identified to enable a balanced financial position to be proposed for 2023/24. There had been a number of impacts on the council's finances including inflationary pressures and a pay award above the figure budgeted for. The budget proposals would enable a contribution to continue to be made to the Borough Growth Fund and a Council Tax increase of 1.99% per Band D property.

Members raised the following queries and issues:

- The report identified £376,000 savings through the One Council programme – could further detail be supplied and a breakdown of the individual savings? Members were advised the details for the support services restructure were currently being worked through and some savings had been identified. There were also savings through digitisation of a number of workstreams within the Multi Mobile Functional Team. There would be a more detailed update to a future meeting.
- The report identified a review of charges in Bereavement Services, would this mean an across the board impact? The committee was informed that work had been carried out to compare the council's charges with other local authorities and the proposed changes would bring the council more into alignment with other areas. A report on fees and charges would be submitted to the January cycle of meetings.
- Further details were sought on the Life-Saving Detection system – this was explained as a drowning detection system which took photos above and below the water which would sound an alarm if necessary which meant fewer lifeguards were needed at poolside.
- What was meant by museum commercialisation and would charges be introduced? Members were informed the museum would remain free of charge but the commercial element referred to the events that were held and room hire charges.
- The garden waste scheme ran from January each year, when would the new charges be implemented from? This was confirmed as being from January 2023.
- The demographic information in section 4 of the MTFs showed a decrease in population overall but an increase in people of pensionable age. Was there any concern that those of working age were leaving the Borough? The committee was informed that this information was from the Census and there was a national issue with the Census data arising from the time when it was carried out. The Census had taken place during the pandemic and many UK students were at home rather than at university which had impacted the data for university towns. It was noted that there were around 20k students at Keele University during term time.

Resolved: that

- (a) The first draft proposals as set out in Appendix A and Appendix B be noted.
- (b) The amendment to the Medium Term Financial Strategy funding gap as a result of revisions to capital financing and inflationary assumptions be noted.
- (c) The refreshed Medium Term Financial Strategy be noted.
- (d) The next meeting include more detail on the fees and charges review.
- (e) An update on the One Council programme, with further detail around how the savings will be achieved, be submitted to a future meeting.

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63. COMMERCIAL STRATEGY

The committee considered an update on the Commercial Strategy which had been approved in 2019. The council received around £400k in revenue per year from the current property portfolio.

The report outlined a number of income generation opportunities that were being explored. The council had bid for Levelling Up funding but would fund schemes by borrowing if necessary.

Members raised the following queries and points:

- Were any proposals in place to address the waiting list for swimming lessons? Members were informed that there was a programme for swimming lessons that included lessons during the school day. This helped with freeing up time outside school hours for general lessons but there were challenges for schools around providing transport to the pool for lessons. Members also noted Kidsgrove swimming pool offered lessons.
- The Chatterley Valley project would involve a facility currently based in Stoke on Trent, moving to the Borough. Would this see the creation of any new jobs? The committee was advised that a company called Lucideon was relocating but their facilities would be increased including a new headquarters and manufacturing facility as well as a Research and Development building and nationwide centre of excellence. There were also new units which had already attracted interest. The overall facility was expected to deliver 1700 new jobs.
- Was there any risk to the scale of York Place arising from the current financial situation? Members were advised that the scheme had been value engineered to ensure it maintained the original scope and remained value for money.

Resolved: that the update be received.

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64. FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT - FIRST QUARTER (APRIL - JUNE 2022)

The committee received the Quarter 1 finance and performance review; the Quarter 2 review was also on the agenda which provided more up to date information.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

65. FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT - SECOND QUARTER (JULY - SEPTEMBER 2022)

The committee considered the financial and performance review report for the second quarter – July – September 2022. The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Town Centres and Growth outlined the financial position at Q2 which showed an adverse variance of £0.105m but a balanced position was forecast at year end. Members queried how this variance would relate to a balanced position by year end and were advised that there had been loss of income at the start of the year but this was now recovering, the council would also use the Cost of Living reserve and Budget Support reserve to achieve a balanced outturn.

Members discussed sickness absence and accident reporting. The committee was informed that one accident had been reported late which made it difficult to investigate. It was thought that some sickness absence had been masked during the pandemic when staff were working from home and may not have taken sick leave. There was a lot of support available for staff in regards to mental health. Some staff were being trained as mental health first aiders.

The next round of performance reports would include new symbols including a gradient system to show the direction of travel.

RESOLVED: that the report be received.

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66. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the work programme. Members agreed to consider an update on the Commercial Strategy at the June meeting.

RESOLVED: that work programme be received.

67. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present.

68. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

69. DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 19 JANUARY 2023

**Councillor Mark Holland
Chair**

Meeting concluded at 8.00 pm