

FINANCE, ASSETS & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 13th December, 2023

Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

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

1. **APOLOGIES**

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Leader and Deputy Leader's attendance appeared to be missing from the minutes of the previous meeting.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 9th November 2023 be agreed as accurate record provided that the Leader and Deputy Leader's attendance be recorded.

4. **REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET 2024/25 - FIRST DRAFT SAVINGS PLANS**

The Deputy Leader presented the First Draft Saving Plans for the Revenue and Capital Budget 2024-25.

Members commented as follows:

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- Cllr Brockie expressed concerns about staff mental health and sickness absences in the context of making the Council financial situation “everyone’s responsibility” as referred to in paragraph 2.2. – Time and resources were allocated to support people’s health and wellbeing and the right training would be provided to maximize individual capability. Very positive responses had been received following the staff survey and efforts were put in to ensure everyone was happy.
- Cllr Stubbs enquired about paragraph 9.2 and the opinion of robustness. – The savings plans were still at a draft stage and would be confirmed in the Revenue and Capital Budgets as well as Council Tax 2024/25 reports to Cabinet and Council in February 2024.
- Cllr Grocott asked about the Pay Awards and Capital Receipts estimates. – The pay awards had been increased from 3% to 3.5% after benchmarking had been carried out. Capital Receipts figures were based on current assumptions for 2023-24 onwards.
- Cllr Stubbs wondered about the figures shown in Appendix A:
 - o Item I1: how many minor and major planning applications should be processed to sustain the planning costs uplift? – The figures were based on a standing still of applications.
 - o Item I6: could the finance officer elaborate on VAT relating to leisure income? – Following a change in regulation VAT no longer applied to a number of leisure fees including gym memberships.
 - o Item I8: what was the average percentage increase of property rent? – Based on what had been achieved this year this was about 7%.
 - o Item I10: what was the car parking figure based on? – This was based on a small increased usage and a small increased fee.
 - o Item O1: could a breakdown of the further efficiencies referred to be provided? – This was about ensuring that roles and responsibilities were designed to maximise their impact in the organisation.
 - o Item S5: could an explanation and a breakdown be given about the capitalization of professional fees? – Capitalisation of salaries in respect of professional fees was permitted for new builds, purchases and enhancements.
 - o Item G6: how could the increase be justified with regard to the vacancy factor? – An explanation of the calculation was provided.
- Cllr Stubbs asked if the borrowing costs in Appendix C were viable. – These had been prepared by the finance team and were realistic figures.

The Deputy Leader commended the work of the Finance team and responses provided to the challenging questions raised by members. The draft budget had been presented to members well in advance and not all authorities were currently in a position to do so.

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- Resolved:**
1. That the first draft proposals as set out in Appendix A and Appendix B to the report be noted.
 2. That the amendment to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) funding gap as a result of revisions to capital financing and inflationary assumptions be noted (Appendix C).
 3. That the refreshed Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) (Appendix D) be noted.
 4. That any areas where further information is required for consideration be identified.
 5. That any further areas of savings that should be considered be suggested.

[Watch the debate here](#)

5. FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW REPORT - 2ND QUARTER 2023-24

The Deputy Leader introduced the Financial & Performance review report for the 2nd quarter of 2023-24.

Members asked questions and responses were provided as follows:

- Cllr Stubbs asked about the adverse variances observed with regard to housing benefits subsidy and temporary accommodations. – The Council had reached out to the government and working groups were meeting every two months to address the issue.
- Cllr Stubbs asked if letters to the Government could be published. – This could be included in the documents shared for the next meeting.
- Cllr Stubbs asked about the Pay Awards and benchmarking information against other authorities. – The 3.5% increase provided for future years is in line with that provided by other authorities.
- Cllr Grocott asked about Chatterley Valley West which award had all been spent. – The work had to be done through Staffordshire County Council highways an upfront payment had been requested.
- Cllr Brockie wondered about the performance indicators accuracy and at what stage a commitment from developers could be identified with regard to Priority 4. – The performance indicators were not estimates but an overview of what had actually be recorded, as for the process towards implementing redevelopment projects this implied a lot of stages and dialogue going back and forth to ensure efficiency of costs and design.
- Cllr Waring asked about Kidsgrove and whether the budget would be sufficient to bring the project to completion. – Most of the Town deal projects had been handed over to other organisations such as Network Rail and there was now only the Shared Service Hub to be delivered for which the budget was sufficient.

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- Cllr Stubbs asked if the issue of the station bridge had been sorted. – The costs were being reviewed by Network Rail.
- Cllr Waring commented that he thought the bridge had already been strengthened and outstanding issues were about different matters. – An update would be sent out to members.

The Chair suggested to go through the Performance indicators and members commented as follows:

- Cllr Stubbs asked that the plan to tackle sickness absences be implemented at the earliest opportunity. – The team was working towards it and progresses were being noticed.
- The Deputy Leader noted the trend with regards to the Digital Online Transactions. – This was following up on the installation of a new module within the systems access.

Resolved: That the contents of the report and appendices be noted and that members continue to monitor and challenge the Council's service and financial performance for this period.

[Watch the debate here](#)

6. TOWN DEAL AND FUTURE HIGH STREET FUNDS UPDATE

The Deputy Leader introduced the report on Town Deal and Future High Street Funds which had been presented to the Economy and Place Scrutiny the previous week.

Members asked questions and responses were provided as follows:

- Cllr Waring asked how far behind was the project likely to be. – There was a four months delay on the road works. As another contractor had to be called in by the developers it was expected that the project would be delayed by approximately six months.
- Cllr Brockie wondered if there was any contingency plans to build universal unit with diversity of purposes if the Chatterley Valley project didn't come up. – While the Council was investing in the infrastructure it wasn't putting money into the platform and road themselves which were funded at County level and included several plots.
- Cllr Stubbs asked for clarification about plot D funding. – A £ 2.3 Million contribution was put in by the County and would be paid back in business rates.
- Cllr Waring commented on building relationships, see what opportunities they had, and then contribute to those opportunities. – This was indeed the right strategy.

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

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7. TECHNOLOGY STRATEGY 2023-28 REPORT

The Deputy Leader introduced the new Technology Strategy.

Cllr Stubbs commented that the Committee was not consulted during the drafting stage of the Strategy. – There would be opportunities to amend the Strategy if flaws or opportunities for improvement were to be noticed.

Resolved: That the Strategy be considered and feedback be provided to the Portfolio Holder for One Council, People and Partnerships.

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8. WORK PROGRAMME

Resolved: That the work programme be noted.

9. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions 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 18th January 2024

**Councillor Mark Holland
Chair**

Meeting concluded at 8.22 pm