

FINANCE, ASSETS & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 18th January, 2024
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

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Present:	Councillor Mark Holland (Chair)		
Councillors:	Parker J Tagg P Waring	Bettley-Smith Brockie Allport	Lewis
Apologies:	Councillor(s) Bryan, Stubbs and Lawley		
Substitutes:	Councillor David Grocott (In place of Councillor Annabel Lawley) Councillor Nicholas Crisp (In place of Councillor Amy Bryan) Councillor Dave Jones (In place of Councillor Mike Stubbs)		
Officers:	Sarah Wilkes Craig Turner	Service Director - Finance / S151 Officer 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**

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Chair informed members that a copy of the letter sent to the Prime Minister as referred to under item 5 of the minutes was now available. Members confirmed having received it.

Kidsgrove Town Deal had also been raised under the same item and officers had been in touch with Cllrs Waring and Stubbs to provide further details.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13th December 2023 be agreed as accurate record.

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4. **DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS AND STRATEGIES 2024/25**

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The Deputy Leader introduced the review on progress made on the completion of the Revenue and Capital Budgets for 2024/25 and the 5 year Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2024-29.

The drafts of the Capital Strategy for 2024-34, the Treasury Management Strategy for 2024-25, the Investment Strategy for 2024-25 and the Commercial Strategy for 2024-25 were also submitted for consideration.

Members asked questions and responses were provided as follows:

- Cllr Bettley-Smith wondered about the National insurance figures uprated in accordance with the proposed pay increase even though it had actually been reduced by the government and asked if the documents were based on the worst case scenario. – Accountants had to be cautious and draft budgets and strategy were done accordingly. The Pay Awards had been increased in concertation with other Staffordshire authorities and the related budget required was the best estimate the finance team could currently provide.
- Cllr Crisp felt that having managed to keep the Council Tax increase under 2% i.e. well below the rate of inflation and lower than other government bodies was encouraging. – This was consistent with the commitments taken by the current administration.
- Cllr Jones asked about Appendix 1 and where the evidence came for figures relating to planning applications, commercial property rates and car parking. – Planning applications fees were based on the actual budget and estimate in light of the last three years of applications actually received. The fees would be uplifted by 25% for minor cases and 35% for major ones. The property rent of £70,000 had already been achieved by the Commercial Property Team and the rents for industrial units had not been touched since pre-Covid. Finally the £91,000 for car parking took into account the different scenarios around the new car park and assumed a small amount of increase in both usage and fees. Details would be shared by email with Cllr Jones.
- Cllr Grocott asked about staff efficiencies. – Staff related efficiencies were detailed in Appendix 1. There were five lines, the first one being a review of the planning service structure and the second one a reduction in hours of environmental health officers spent, then a restructuring of the licensing service following a drop off in the number of licenses being processed; the housing and vulnerability structure was also being funded a little more from some grants received and finally the capitalisation of some professional fees.
- Cllr Waring was pleased with the balanced budget and wondered if there were any figures for an increase in business rates and percentage terms. – Business rates were referred to in Appendix 2 assuming the CPI increase. The funding through business rates came via the financial settlement and the CPI increase of September last

year against applied to it i.e. 6.7%. Details of the business rates multipliers would be checked by officers.

- Cllr Brockie asked about developing opportunities to commercialise existing and new services. More specifically where was the advice and training coming from to bring about this commercialisation and how to ensure neutrality. – The current focus was to look at services internally and how to improve things and whilst horizon scanning and looking into opportunities around industrial units and sustainable energy.
- Cllr Bettley-Smith, seconded by the Chair wished to thank the finance team for their hard work.
- Cllr Lewis suggested that reducing the car park hourly rate would bring more visitors and ultimately more revenue. – The budget calculated was a big chunk of the Council's income and it was the first time in twelve year that there were an increase in car park charges.
- Cllr Grocott wondered where the money for Walleys Quarry was coming from and where it was allocated. – The operator was paying back £12,000 a month and internal transfer between reserves would make it possible to increase the dedicated reserve to £300,000 from 1 April 2024.

The Chair concluded that members all seem to be in agreement regarding supporting the budget which was boding well for its approval at Full Council.

The Deputy Leader added that all draft savings produced by officers were sensible and realistic and wouldn't be presented to members otherwise.

- 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 2024/25 to 2028/29 (Appendix 2) be noted.
 3. That the strategy for ensuring a balanced revenue outturn position for 2023/24 be noted.
 4. That the calculation of the Council Tax base and the Council Tax increase to be proposed for 2024/25 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 2024/25 be noted.
 6. That the draft Capital Strategy (Appendix 5) for 2024/34 be noted.
 7. That the draft Treasury Management Strategy (Appendix 6) for 2024/25 be noted.

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8. That the draft Investment Strategy (Appendix 7) for 2024/25 be noted.

9. That the draft Commercial Strategy (Appendix 8) for 2024/25 be noted.

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5. SCHEDULE OF FEES AND CHARGES 2024/25

The Deputy Leader introduced the proposed scale of fees and charges to apply from 1 April 2024. Except for the market stalls for which there would be no increase everything else was as presented in the report.

There were no questions about the schedule and the Chair expressed his satisfaction at seeing that everyone was on board.

Resolved: 1. That the proposed fees and charges to apply from 1 April 2024 as set out in Appendix 1, be noted.

2. That the Charging Policy, as set out in Appendix 2, be noted.

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6. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair went through the work programme.

Resolved: That the work programme be noted.

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7. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no questions from members of the public.

8. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved: That the next meeting be scheduled on 14 March 2024.

10. TRADE REFUSE SCALE OF FEES AND CHARGES - CONFIDENTIAL APPENDIX

**Councillor Mark Holland
Chair**

Meeting concluded at 7.37 pm