

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 4th February 2019

Present: Cllr Lythgoe (Chair)
Cllrs L. Barnes, Gill, Haworth, Johnson, Kempson, Morris,
Procter and Robertson

In attendance: Sam Plum, Director of Communities
Phil Seddon, Head of Finance
Clare Law, HR Manager
Jenni Cook, Committee and Member Services Officer
Rachel Whippy, Citizens Advice
Nick Pilling, Citizens Advice

Also Present: Cllrs Ashworth, Essex and Walmsley
0 press
3 public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE & SUBSTITUTIONS

- 1.1 Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Kenyon and Councillor Janet Eaton (Councillor Haworth substituting).

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2019 be approved as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- 3.1 Councillors Procter and Robertson declared a non-pecuniary interest in Item 7, due to their appointments to the Citizens Advice.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

- 4.1 The Chair confirmed that there were no urgent items of business.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

- 5.1 The Chair noted that he would allow questions to be asked on each item as it was discussed.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

- 6.1 There was no update from the Chair.

7. CITIZENS ADVICE ANNUAL UPDATE

7.1 The Citizens Advice (CA) provided their annual update to the O&S Committee as follows:-

- During 2017/18 the CA had advised 1761 on 9383 issues, using 19 staff and 35 volunteers working in 10 locations. On a national level the CA had dealt with 6.2 million issues.
- The clients assisted by the CA had experienced stress, depression, mental health issues, disadvantages and disabilities and the CA's advice and assistance had improved their situations.
- When compared to the national average, 38% of the CA's clients were in work, 39% were disabled or had a long term health problem and 26% owned their own homes.
- A case study was outlined, which showed how one problem escalated to bigger financial problems, and how the CA had helped.
- The CA undertook policy research, locally and nationally to effect changes where possible.
- Debt advice was provided and the CA offered finance capability checks.
- Benefits and tax credits advice was offered and 1004 clients had been assisted with 4,621 benefit or tax credit problems.
- Housing advice was provided and advice provided at an early stage helped to prevent larger problems such as homelessness.
- Employment advice was offered and this had resulted in 2 out of 3 clients having their employment problem resolved.
- Other advice was available including consumer, tax and inheritance advice.
- The CA also undertook education which included financial capability, budgeting and training of front-line workers.
- Local projects were outlined which included:-
 - Rossendale Crisis Support
 - Welfare Rights Advice
 - Equality and Welfare
 - Money Mentoring
 - Poverty Prevention
 - Building Better Opportunities
- Research and campaigns were outlined and it was noted that the CA had worked to help change council tax collection protocols.
- Digital access was noted and the impact of 'digital by default' was discussed.
- The CA represented value for money and for every £1 of funding provided by the council, this resulted in £1.86 in fiscal benefits, £9.87 in public value and £15.03 in benefits to individuals.
- The council provided around 20% of the funding for the CA and this funding was essential as it was unrestricted and allowed for the back-office functions to be funded.

7.2 Members and members of the public commented on the update:-

- The CA carried out vital work and were thanked for this.
- Digital access was discussed further and the Blue Badge procedures by LCC were used as an example. A telephone number was available, but online applications were preferred. However, not everyone had this access.

Universal credit would also have an impact as this required digital access. Literacy issues would also have an impact.

- The impact of the CA's campaigning on Universal Credit was noted.
- The role of volunteers and their impact on the CA was essential and the act of volunteering had a positive effect on them.
- The Council provided £35,000 to the CA.
- Government funding was being provided to the CA for specific work on "help to claim" and this did not provide a conflict of interest. This was around £87k.
- Clients often did not engage with the council until debt and bailiff involvement was serious and although the signposting and relationship with the council was good, people cannot be forced to engage with the CA.
- The CA was a registered charity and limited company.
- The CA had a positive relationship with the council.
- Immigration advice was only generally available on level 1, which was very basic and specialist advice would need to be sought for complex issues. Translators were available via Language Line.
- More detailed data was available in the CA's annual report which was available around October/November.

Resolved:

The update was noted and the Citizens Advice was thanked for their attendance.

8. 2019/20 CORPORATE PRIORITIES, BUDGET, COUNCIL TAX AND THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Note: Cllrs Ashworth and Walmsley entered the meeting during this item.

8.1 The Head of Finance introduced the report which asked the committee to note the report, appendices, and recommendations and then consider any further recommendations to the Cabinet. The report was outlined as follows:-

- Risks were outlined, including:-
 - Council tax and the risks of not increasing.
 - New Homes Bonus (NHB) – there was uncertainty around if or when this would be replaced by the 'housing delivery test' and there was no confirmed end-date for NHB.
 - The funding gap had reduced and was now £700k, this was due to internal efficiencies and initiatives like green waste charges.
 - NNDR pooling and gains made remained an issue and although this had been successful for the council, this arrangement would come to an end but the full impact of this was as yet unknown.
 - Pay – the national pay agreement of 2% per annum had been further assumed.
- Members were legally required to set a balanced budget and reserves were finite.
- The budget estimates at 5.3 of the report were outlined and based on the assumptions and risks, the surplus/further savings required were highlighted.
- Potential future changes were outlined which included grants to organisations, CLAW, the Leisure Trust, Spinning Point, Internal Audit fees and digital transformation.

- The core budget changes were outlined and it was noted that for every £1 collected in council tax, the council retained only 14.7pence of this. This share could decrease if LCC and the Police chose to increase their share of Council Tax to the maximum allowed –
- Based on 31,800 properties the average household bill for Rossendale Borough Council's share of Council Tax was £3.29 per week.
- The appendices to the report were outlined and 'Pest Control' had been included in the fees and charges in error. This would be removed going forward to Cabinet and Council.

8.2 Members and members of the public commented on the report as follows:-

- The Council provided very few discretionary services and this would include grants to organisations such as the Citizens Advice and credit unions. The Council had assessed its statutory and discretionary services around 8 years ago. Although the Council had statutory services to provide, there was no actual definition of the level of the service provision required.
- Reserves were outlined and the budget assumptions were reiterated.
- Pension contributions were clarified and staff contributions were a sliding scale based on their salaries.
- Some legal challenges remained from the empty homes scheme which could prove a potential risk. The HCA settlement was noted which had been set aside and covered in the budget.
- The loss of potential income from the windfarm was noted.
- The 90 jobs to be provided at the Futures Park development was noted and welcomed.
- Consultation on the budget would take place with members and the public. O&S formed part of the consultation process and the information would be on the website very soon.
- Digital transformation was noted and this would be outlined during another agenda item.
- The Industrial Land item that went to Full Council on 30th January 2019 was discussed.
- Green waste targets and contributions were discussed.
- The empty homes obligations were discussed further and some properties remained the council's responsibility at present.
- The impact on the decreasing revenue support grant on the council was noted.

Resolved:

The Committee noted the recommendations as follows:-

1. That the Cabinet recommend to Council a 2019/20 Council Tax rate for Band D of £274.12, being a 2.99% increase.
2. That the Cabinet recommends the Council the use of £511k (subject to any final Member decisions) from the Transitional Reserve, £nil from the Council Tax collection fund and £1.2m from the Business Rates Retention reserve to support the 2019/20 annual budget.
3. That the Cabinet recommends to Council a net revenue budget for 2019/20 of £9,931,000 (subject to any final approval of costs and savings).

4. That Cabinet considers the Fees and Charges as noted in Appendix 1 and makes any further recommendation to Council.
5. That the Head of Finance be instructed to prepare the technical resolutions necessary to give effect to these proposals.

9. CAPITAL STRATEGY AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2019/20 TO 2021/22

- 9.1 The Head of Finance introduced the report which provided members with the Capital Strategy for the coming three years and outlined the strategy as follows:-
- The revenue contributions required for the strategy were noted.
 - Spinning Point Phase 2 remained a key part of the strategy.
 - The council had a small asset disposal programme.
 - Investment in commercial acquisition was taking place (subject to due diligence).
 - The capital maintenance programme was outlined which included keeping on top of health and safety issues, maintaining the infrastructure and rectifying issues such as pot holes in parks.
- 9.2 Members and members of the public commented on the report as follows:-
- The viability of the Spa at Spinning Point Phase 2 was discussed and it was noted that this had been approved by Full Council.
 - The Council's borrowing position was outlined and the PWLB remained the best source for local authority borrowing.
 - Money from the sale of the bus depot would be included in future year's budgets.
 - A full summary of borrowing was available in the Treasury Management Strategy which was approved annually by Full Council.

Resolved:

The recommendations to Full Council were noted as follows:-

1. That members consider the Capital Strategy for 2019/20 and the medium terms as set out in Appendix 1.
2. That members consider the affordable capital programme for 2019/20 as set out on page 9 of Appendix 1 and recommend the new capital expenditure projects totalling £1,273 to Full Council for approval.
3. That members agree to delegate any minor amendments to the capital programme throughout the 2019/20 financial year as a result of new grant-funded community projects, to the Head of Finance in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Resources. Amendments will then be reported to Cabinet through the regular Financial Monitoring Reports.

10. QUARTER 3 PERFORMANCE REPORT (OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2018)

- 10.1 The HR Manager introduced the report which outlined the levels of performance for October-December 2018 as follows:-
- Summaries from the Director of Economic Development and the Director of Communities were included within the report which outlined milestones and achievements.

- In terms of the RAG (red/amber/green) status, at the end of quarter 3, one action was in red, which was 'ensure effective multi-agency working with the police and other partners to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour'. Much of this was outside the council's control and it was noted that crime had risen nationally.
- Corporate projects were noted and overseen by the Programme Board which met monthly.
- In terms of the performance report, the following was noted:-
 - Priority 2.2 – time taken to process housing benefit change in circumstances and council tax benefit change in circumstances was red. This was due to staffing issues and ICT issues and work had been undertaken with Capita and with the Head of Customer Services and ICT to mitigate this temporary issue.
 - Compliments had risen with the highest category being for 'staff member/team'.
 - The highest complaint category was 'action/response/communication'.
- Risks were not included in the quarter 3 report. These were being reviewed and would be reported in quarter 4.

10.2 Members and members of the public commented on the report as follows:-

- A typo was noted on Appendix 1.
- Priority 2.7 – 'potential savings identified' was noted and this was based on estimates and green west collection and PPU work.
- CORP1 – payment of undisputed invoices within 30 days – the Head of Finance noted members' concerns regarding this.
- Priority 3.2 – number of licensed premises visited and impacted annual monitored – this was due to a member of staff leaving the council and recruitment had now taken place.
- The format of the report was easy to read.
- Recycling was discussed and the impact of the end of the cost-share agreement with LCC was noted. Education and awareness was being carried out around recycling to reduce the contamination of the recycling bins.
- Priority 2.4-2 – the green status of the Local Plan was queried.
- It was confirmed that the Programme Board was an officer meeting with no political representation. Oversight of the Programme Board took place via the performance reports.
- Planning performance indicators were discussed. It was noted that the Development Control Committee received regular reports regarding appeals and enforcement. The HR Manager would consider future reporting.
- Priority 3-4-2 – the success of the Syrian Refugee programme was noted.

Resolved:

The report was noted.

11. CUSTOMER AND DIGITAL STRATEGY

11.1 The Director of Communities introduced the report which outlined the new Customer and Digital Strategy and the delivery plan as follows:-

- This was a 3-year strategy which would be taken to Cabinet in March for approval.
- The delivery plan was outlined which was split into themes, action, lead officer, target dates and status/comment.
- The Strategy's vision was outlined which was:
Putting customers at the heart of everything we do, designing easily accessible services for all, that respond to our customers current and future needs.

It will be delivered through five themes, as outlined in the national Customer Service Excellence standard:

- *Understanding our customer*
- *Customer focussed organisation*
- *Information and access*
- *Delivery*
- *Timeliness and quality of service*
- A project team had been established to deliver the strategy.
- The action plan, centered around the five themes outlined previously was highlighted:-
- Understanding our customer – development and publication of neighbourhood profiles, customer satisfaction survey using the eCitizen panel, good use of customer information and feedback and rationalisation of ICT systems.
- Customer Focus – development of an organisational plan including staff skills, tools and experience. A communication plan and staff suggestion scheme to be implemented and expectations would be managed.
- Information and access – the digital by default approach would be developed further, with regard to assisted digital access, the new website was in place but would be continually reviewed and updated, telephony services would be improved and work would be undertaken to implement the new Revenues and Benefits contract.
- Delivery – processes would be redesigned with targets introduced. Customer Service standards would be refreshed. Call data and monitoring would be looked at. New ways of working including use of tablets for some staff would be considered, e.g. Refuse workers having access to tablets to provide real-time data and updates.
- Timeliness and quality – as noted previously, customer service standards would be refreshed. Data would be kept safe and security with regard to GDPR and cyber security. Openness and transparency would be promoted.

11.2 Members and members of the public commented on the report as follows:-

- There were 108 people signed up to the eCitizen panel and more promotion of this would take place.
- A member of the public noted that the council was a council and not a business.

- The information and access statistics in the report were read out and discussed.
- The Council had an extensive business continuity plan.

Resolved:

1. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends the new Customer and Digital Strategy 2019-22 to Cabinet.
2. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that all future minor amendments are delegated to the Director of Communities in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

12. THE FORWARD PLAN

12.1 The Committee and Member Services Officer noted that the Forward Plan had been re-published since publication of the O&S agenda. An update was given on items coming to O&S in March:-

- Transdev – this was agreed last year and the Committee & Member Services Officer was confirming they still intended to come.
- East Lancs CCG – to update on the Excess Winter Deaths
- Adoption of a Temporary Accommodation Policy
- IT policies
- Pennine Lancashire Community Safety Plan.

12.2 Queries regarding the Forward Plan and the Industrial Land report that went to Full Council on 30th January 2019 would be looked into and responded to.

The meeting started at 6.30pm and finished at 9pm

Signed: _____

Date: _____