

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Tuesday, 25 January 2022
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor R. Child (Chair)

Councillors J. Wilkinson (Vice-Chair) P. Chandler
J. Douglas C. Evans
M. Glancy E. Holmes
J. Illingworth M. Steadman

In Attendance Councillor R. Bindloss Councillor R. Browne
Councillor R. de Burle Councillor M. Graham MBE
Councillor J. Orson

Officers Chief Executive
Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive)
Director for Corporate Services
Director for Growth and Regeneration
Assistant Director for Governance and Democracy (via remote link)
Corporate Services Manager
Senior Democratic Services and Scrutiny Officer (via remote link)
Democratic Services Officer (HA)
Democratic Services Officer (SE)

Minute No.	Minute
43	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</p> <p>An apology for absence was received from Councillor Posnett.</p> <p><i>(At 6:32pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Holmes entered the meeting.)</i></p>
44	<p>MINUTES</p> <p>The Minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2021 were approved.</p>
45	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</p> <p>No declarations of interest were received.</p>
46	<p>GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2022/23 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2023/24 TO 2025/26</p> <p>The Chair informed Members that the report is due to be presented to Cabinet on 9 February 2022. Currently the report and appendices are in draft and subject to amendments.</p> <p>Following an introduction by the Chief Executive, the Director for Corporate Services gave a presentation on the budget proposals for 2022/23 and the medium term financial strategy.</p> <p>During the introduction, Members noted that the Budget Scrutiny Workshop was conducted before the provisional financial settlement was known. As a result of the favourable settlement, some of the suggestions made at the workshop have not been carried forward and therefore the savings have been scaled back.</p> <p>With regards to the provisional financial settlement, the Council received £493k more than anticipated from the new homes bonus, a one-off payment of £60k from the lower tier services grant which wasn't expected and a one-off payment of £92k from the 2022/23 services grant which wasn't expected. This results in a surplus of £384k on the draft revenue budget.</p> <p>In covering the medium-term financial strategy, the Director for Corporate Services stated that forward projection was difficult due to the uncertainty of future financial settlements.</p> <p>The Chair stated that it was pleasing to see a consultant was due to be appointed to assist in the development of plans for a cemetery but questioned how a new cemetery was to be funded, especially as there is only £284k in the special expenses reserve. Members were informed that the cost of a reasonably sized cemetery is estimated to be £1m, although there is a considerable amount of work to be done before options and proposals were due to be considered. It was also confirmed that a new cemetery is not in the local plan but that a feasibility needs to</p>

be developed.

There was a discussion on how the ongoing maintenance of the cemetery in Melton Mowbray is paid for, it was confirmed that these come from special expense funds charged to residents living in Melton Mowbray. It was clarified that this does not preclude non-Melton Mowbray residents from choosing to be buried there but that they will face higher burial costs than a Melton Mowbray resident.

A discussion ensued regarding a crematorium for the Borough. It was noted that the issue was reviewed a decade ago but that with more growth this would need reconsidering and the assumptions regarding viability rechecked. In response, it was confirmed that there was an opportunity to include a review of the original business case in the specification for the consultant procured to support the cemetery development.

The query was raised why the £384k budget surplus was being transferred to regeneration and innovation reserve and what projects was it likely to be used for. In response, the Committee was informed that the reserve would be ringfenced for projects that are categorised as spend to save or invest to save and they would have a business case to proceed. The funds will enable the Council to ensure that the activities it wants to proceed, happens at the pace that is required. Supporting the Asset Development Programme was an example of the kind of project which could be supported through this fund.

In response to the query why is Council Tax being raised in light of the favourable financial settlement and the revenue budget surplus, Members were informed that due to the financial uncertainty of future finance settlements, then there is a need to maximise income. If council tax is not raised it would be lost each year going forward due to referendum restrictions. In addition to this, the Local Government Association review stated that the Council had a low level of reserves, therefore there is a need to bolster the reserves.

When reviewing Council Tax in special expense areas, the question was raised as to why there is a substantive variation. The Committee were told that in some special expense areas, the tax base is low so therefore a small change could have a greater impact.

With regard to vacancy savings, a comment was made that the Project Officer post should not be removed as it is important that the Council has in-house project expertise in order to support colleagues with their projects. The justification for the removal of the post was that the post could not provide the specialist support that is currently required and that additional support is funded via the relevant project budget. The team that this post sits within in the council would be the subject of a review in year as a result of an impending retirement and leaving the post vacant would assist with this.

In response to a query on the saving identified in the elections service, Members were reassured that the capacity remains in the service but that the saving relates

to unused funding this financial year.

Concern was raised over the vacancy saving proposed in the Community Safety Team. It was noted that the team are already stretched and it was believed that additional capacity within the team would help.

A discussion ensued regarding staff vacancies and it was confirmed that SLT review every vacancy and the work of the section where the vacancy is. Every vacancy that arises is managed and monitored and that a decision might be taken, based on workload, not to recruit straight away but appoint on an interim basis. It is important that roles and structures are reviewed regularly to ensure resources are supporting current needs most effectively.

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CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2021-2026 - GENERAL FUND AND CAPITAL STRATEGY 2022/23

The Chair informed Members that the report is due to be presented to Cabinet on 9 February 2022. Currently the report and appendices are in draft and subject to amendments.

The Director for Corporate Services outlined the capital programme to the Committee.

In response to a query raised on the lifeline digital switchover scheme and the fact that there is currently no business case, it was confirmed that the basis for the upgrade is to continue the provision of the service. The analogue equipment will become obsolete and therefore transition is required. The matter had been considered at Cabinet on 12 January 2022 and Cabinet had agreed a two stage approach, with the initial investment supporting the digital switchover, pending a wider review of the service to ensure it was customer-focussed and commercially viable.

Concern was raised that there is not a strategy for managing the Council's assets and that there should be a strategy outlining what assets the Council has and what can be done with those assets in order to achieve the Council's aims and objectives. In response, Members were assured that an asset development plan is being developed and that there will be a Scrutiny Workshop in order to obtain the views of Scrutiny Members. In addition, it was made clear to Members that there are currently assets that are not being utilised and that can be disposed of to reinvestment in order to support the aims of the Council. Officers are planning to bring an update on the Asset Development Plan, including any additional resource requirements, to the Council meeting in March.

The comment was made that previously a decision was made to dispose of the car park at the Cattle Market but that it did not happen and that if the Council has an asset to dispose of in order to reinvest, then that is what should be happening. Members were reminded that the Council had disposed of a number of assets recently and that the decision to establish the Corporate Assets team two years ago was now delivering.

A query was raised regarding the potential for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to move to the Borough. The Chief Executive stated that Officers are ready to find the appropriate space within the Borough to facilitate a move but things had not progressed to that stage yet.

(At 8:04pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Bindloss left the meeting and did not return.)

(At 8:06pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Browne left the meeting.)

(At 8:07pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor Browne returned to the meeting.)

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REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2022/23 - HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA)

The Chair informed Members that the report is due to be presented to Cabinet on 9 February 2022. Currently the report and appendices are in draft and subject to amendments.

The Director for Corporate Services outlined the 2022/23 revenue budget proposals for Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

Following the introduction by the Director for Corporate Services, the Chair informed Members that the HRA Business Plan was due to be presented to the Scrutiny Committee at the meeting scheduled for 22 February 2022, however it will no longer be presented then. The Business Plan will be presented to Cabinet at their meeting scheduled for 13 April 2022, however it will be presented to Scrutiny, either at a Committee meeting or a Workshop before that date.

It was commented that the capital budget for 2021/22 was £4m, however only £2m was spent and that over the last six years there had been an underspend of £22m. Members sought reassurance that the budget would be spent in 2022/23. In response the Portfolio Holder for Council Homes and Landlord Services informed Members that the Council needed the stock condition survey to identify where the budget needs to be spent and confirmed that £4.6m is to be spent in 2022/23. It was noted that the Council are facing the nationwide issue of a lack of labour but that the expectation is that the budget will be spent.

In respect to the stock condition survey, the Committee was informed that 1461 surveys have been carried out and that this represents 81.1% of the stock. The survey outlines what the Council needs to spend each year in order to keep the stock well maintained. A Member commented that it was surprising that access had not been achieved in respect to 19% of Council homes, however the Committee was informed that there is a process that the Council has to follow in order to achieve access.

After a comment was raised on the issue, it was confirmed that homelessness remains an important issue and that the Council will prioritise resources to help the most vulnerable in the Borough.

In response to a question about tenant engagement, it was confirmed that the Tenants Forum Executive Committee (TFEC) would be disbanded due to declining membership and will cease to exist but that the Council will be supporting the development of enhanced tenancy engagement forums, as part of the recently approved framework.

The £100k for Fairmead regeneration was raised, however the Portfolio Holder for Council Homes and Landlord Services stated that he wanted to review whether what was originally planned was now appropriate and whether it should still be a priority. The Portfolio Holder intends to speak to Ward Councillors and Officers and establish what is required.

A Member questioned whether HRA resources could fund youth services, however it was clarified that HRA monies are ringfenced and can only be used for specific purposes.

49	URGENT BUSINESS There was no urgent business.
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The meeting closed at: 8.45 pm

Chair