

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Tuesday, 26 January 2021
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	By remote video conference

Present:

Chair Councillor P. Cumbers (Chair)

Councillors	R. Bindloss (Vice-Chair)	R. Browne
	R. Child	J. Douglas
	C. Evans	C. Fisher
	J. Wilkinson	

Also in attendance:

Councillors	S. Carter	P. Chandler
	R. de Burle	P. Faulkner
	A. Freer-Jones	M. Glancy
	M. Graham MBE	A. Hewson
	L. Higgins	J. Orson
	A. Pearson	P. Posnett MBE

Officers

- Chief Executive
- Director for Corporate Services
- Director for Housing and Communities
- Director for Growth and Regeneration
- Assistant Director for Planning and Delivery
- Assistant Director for Governance & Democratic Services
- Democratic Services Manager
- Democratic Services Officer (SE)
- Corporate Services Manager

Minute No.	Minute
84	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</p> <p>Apologies for absence from Committee Members were received from Councillors Holmes and Smith.</p> <p>All Councillors were invited to attend the meeting and Councillors Bains, Illingworth, Lumley, Pritchett, Steadman and Wood were not in attendance.</p>
85	<p>MINUTES</p> <p>The Chair requested the following two amendments to the minutes:</p> <p>(a) Minute 82 - Portfolio Holder for Climate Access and Engagement Annual Presentation - Page 6 - the following sentence be deleted (3rd bullet point from the bottom) :</p> <p><i>‘Any decisions that were to be made about changes to any committee or a specific part of the Council then the Chairs’ of the Committees or the Members under impact would be consulted in advance.’</i></p> <p>The following to be added to what was the 4th bullet point from the bottom and is now the 3rd bullet point from the bottom :</p> <p><i>‘Members would be consulted regarding any changes to the way in which meetings were convened and broadcast.’</i></p> <p>(b) Minute 82 - Portfolio Holder for Climate Access and Engagement Annual Presentation - Page 7 - the following be deleted (3rd bullet point from the top) :</p> <p><i>‘there had only been 55 sold’</i></p> <p>and replaced by the following :</p> <p><i>‘there had only been an in year increase of 55 tickets sold currently.’</i></p> <p>Subject to the foregoing, the minutes of the meeting held on 22 December 2020 were confirmed and authorised to be signed by the Chair.</p>
86	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST</p> <p>A personal interest in respect of County Councillors Orson, Pearson and Posnett was noted as being on record for any matters which related to the Leicestershire County Council.</p> <p>Councillor Browne declared a personal interest in any matters involving debate on staffing in the community safety section due to his wife being a part of that team. Should this be raised, he would not take part in the debate nor vote.</p>

SCRUTINY OF THE BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Following an introduction by Councillor de Burle, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Resources, the Director for Corporate Services gave a presentation on the Budget and the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

It was noted that

- the reports listed at (a)-(c) below that were previously circulated to the Committee were due to be presented to Cabinet on 9 February 2021 and were in draft format as further amendments may be necessary upon receipt of the final finance settlement
- Cabinet had requested that the Scrutiny Committee and all Members review and provide comment on the proposals. All Members had been invited to the meeting for this purpose
- The final reports would be presented to Full Council for approval on 24 February 2021

(a) Revenue Budget 2021/22 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021/25

(b) Capital Programme 2021-22

(c) Revenue Budget Proposals 2021-22 - Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

The following points were raised and responded to (as required) by the relevant Portfolio Holder or Officer, all of which would be passed to the Cabinet to form part of their deliberations in finalising the budget for 2021/22:

- Not supportive of freezing Project Officer post as it was felt the post should be filled to ensure programmes could be delivered.
- How much would it cost the Council for empty properties and what measures would be taken to ensure voids were reduced and properties were not empty for long periods and were brought to modern standards so that tenants remained – this had an impact on Council Tax Exemption and on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).
Response: Properties had been neglected for several years causing an increase in voids due to the condition of properties. There was a Housing Improvement Plan in place to correct this although there was some hold up in repairs due to Covid. In the next 12 months it was believed the Council would address the issues working alongside TFEC. There was an annual plan and the 30 year long term HRA business plan is being developed. The condition of the properties was constantly reviewed and there was no overnight fix. The 2019/20 costs attributed to voids totalled £15.5k and this exercise would be repeated to understand the costs this year.
- There had been significant swing away from Special Expenses to boost General Expenses (up 4.2%) and what was the justification? Why was the Council spending less on the town this year than last year? Also rural wards had seen no evidence of expenditure on their areas but there had been a rise in Council tax.

Response: Expenditure on Special Expenses had reduced and levelled off in part due to less growth proposals or investment proposals coming forward. Also there were some increases on income to Special Expenses. An increase in houses built increased the yield too, even if Council Tax was not increased, more properties would mean higher Council Tax income therefore inflationary increase was covered and had not suffered from cost pressures experienced in the General Fund. So rather than increase Special Expenses moved to General Fund to avoid having to cut services for whole Borough.

- It was requested that the £1K underspend on the Mayoral Budget for 2020/21 be carried forward to the new budget year.

Response The Mayoral budget had been increased by £600 this year for Remembrance activities but it was agreed that the underspend should be carried forward.

- People valued the Mayor especially children, the Mayoralty provided a good link with the community and should be encouraged. The Mayor raised £35K for his charity, Rainbows, which could only be achieved under the umbrella of the Mayoralty.
- On the Corporate Costs Finance Budget, Audit Fees increased by £20k what was the rationale behind the increase?

Response: This was an estimate and the 2019/20 accounts had not yet been closed. The Council paid more for 2018/19, it was understood the auditors had spent considerably more time and also the recent Government commissioned report on the Quality of External Audit had recommended the need for more resource to audit. The Council was awaiting possible additional funding in response to Sir Tony Redmond's report and the budget would be revised up or down accordingly.

- The small investment in the town centre (£50k) was good but what else could the Council do to help business? Could there be cuts elsewhere to pump more money in across whole Borough, mainly the Town, to help businesses come out of the pandemic? It was considered rural business grants were greatly needed to help businesses and give them the best chance of surviving.

Response: Referred to economic development (page 41 of the agenda pack) and the recovery grants available for businesses; the role of the new Tourism Officer to increase the footfall of the whole Borough; working with stakeholders for the town centre including the Town Estate and BID and they contributed financially too; significant investment in the Cattle Market site; working with Brooksby Melton College and bringing the town and rural areas together; Government's budget on 3 March may provide more funding for businesses. The Rural Pub Grant had been set aside and the pubs had been closed due to Covid. More bed space/overnight accommodation was needed and the new Tourism Officer would contribute towards a Town Centre Vision and Masterplan. It was noted that being prepared for the future was important and there were other funding streams in the pipeline being the UK prosperity fund and the levelling up fund, the Council would prepare to bid for these opportunities by developing a Masterplan.

- People needed reasons to come to Melton and somewhere to stay, so perhaps the Council should encourage more people to provide bed and breakfast facilities to offer more choice of accommodation.

- Expenditure on town improvements was welcomed but it was noted in the report that these may not go ahead until finances became stable. Improving the town centre would improve tourism and car parking and benefit everyone in the Borough.

Response: This programme was expected to start last year but then Covid hit which caused a lack of confidence in the economy. The Council was committed to the project but needed to see the true impact of the pandemic first to know whether it would undermine the budget and essential services had to keep going. It had been questioned whether the town centre improvements could be funded by government grants, but this was uncertain so the costs would then need to come from the general fund. The Council was still committed to this project but had to exercise caution.

- There was concern at the vacant Economic Development post and the potential positive impact it could have on rebuilding the local economy so why would it be left vacant?

Response: The post was frozen for one year only in response to Covid as the resources were needed to process grant applications. The post would be reinstated in 12 months.

- What information did the Council intend to gain from the Place Survey and was the £15K cost an estimate?

Response: The survey was carried out every 2 years to gather information from a range of consultees, seen as part of the Melton Deal. The estimated cost was based on the cost of previous surveys. The survey informed the direction of travel, last time it informed the new Corporate Strategy and ascertained resident satisfaction levels. It built on scrutiny surveys, checking people's needs and aspirations. Following Covid it would be a useful tool to understand the changes in people's lives since previous surveys. It also helped to inform efficiencies and gave an indication of how popular or important services were to people and informed the direction of the Council. It would also be useful to the new Council in 2 years time.

- It was noted that Priority 6 on the Corporate Strategy explained the value of the survey.
- With regard to Community Service Grants, over the last few years the budget had reduced from a high of £74K in 2018/19 to an estimate of £44K for next year. Should the Council be budgeting to increase support to community grants, could this be reviewed and a list which grants were available be provided.

Response: There was a new process since 2018/19 and applications were received each year and the new scheme allowed a more wide reaching method of contributing to the community. Scrutiny had previously received a presentation on how this worked and a report would be considered at Cabinet. The scheme was not just about the money but also provided training support for volunteers, how to be sustainable and directed groups to different funding streams too. It was felt important for the funding to not cover overheads but to ensure the funding benefitted the people who needed it. It was considered that more funding would not necessarily add more value. Charities and community groups could also be eligible for business grants and apply for up to £7K of

funding. Officers were promoting the opportunities for grants and this type of support.

- In the past organisations asking for funding were asked to follow an SLA and targets so that organisations helped the Council as well or complemented what the Council was doing. SLAs seemed to work well but they were abandoned.

Response: Grants were now issued in a different way using an application form that required financial information and asked for the group to identify benefits, applications were then assessed on this information and SLAs were not necessary under the new scheme.

- There had been good work on the HRA service charges income which had resulted in £100k of extra revenue income. Cabinet was asked to be proactive in continuing to look at other ways that income could be increased including innovative and new ways of how the Council used its own resources to support those who needed help.

Response: The Cabinet would continue searching for new opportunities and had a financial sustainability programme which would be reviewed. The asset development programme would also be key as well as maximising income through chargeable services like lifeline and new assistive technology. The Cabinet was keen to receive ideas from Members and Officers and a plan would be in place for next year's budget.

- More benches were needed in the town and these could be sponsored.
- On the budget for responsive repairs and planned maintenance, why was there no stock condition survey on place?

Response: The Council was currently in the process of a stocktake as previously there was no record of stock condition and this needed to be resolved. There was a plan in place to establish a stock condition survey and build up a database to also include how tenants felt about their properties as well as including financial information. When this work was completed there would be more clarity in terms of budget setting and capital programmes required to reduce responsive repairs which would also create better value for money.

- Under Christmas lights there was £6.5k allocated – was this an increase in operating costs?

Response: Details of cost to be supplied to Members following the meeting.

(Councillor de Burle left the meeting during this item.)

The Leader thanked Members who had contributed at the meeting, he also thanked the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee for hosting and for the input of officers.

The Chair thanked all involved in the meeting as well those who had facilitated the arrangements.

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URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at: 8.46 pm

Chair

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