

Minutes

Meeting name	Scrutiny Committee
Date	Thursday, 25 January 2024
Start time	6.30 pm
Venue	Parkside, Station Approach, Burton Street, Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire. LE13 1GH

Present:

Chair Councillor M. Brown (Chair)

Councillors

A. Thwaites (Vice-Chair)	S. Atherton
R. Child	H. Cliff
M. Gordon	S. Lumley
R. Sharp	T. Webster

Observers

Portfolio Holder for Governance, Environment and Regulatory Services (Deputy Leader), Councillor M. Glancy
 Portfolio Holder for Town Centre, Growth and Prosperity, Councillor S. Butcher
 Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance, Property and Resources, Councillor S. Cox
 Portfolio Holder for Customers, Communities and Neighbourhoods, Councillor P. Cumbers
 Councillor J. Mason
 Councillor D. Pritchett

Officers

Chief Executive
 Director for Housing and Communities (Deputy Chief Executive)
 Director for Corporate Services (Section 151 Officer)
 Director for Growth and Regeneration (via remote link)
 Assistant Director for Resources (Deputy Section 151 Officer)
 Assistant Director for Governance and Democracy (Monitoring Officer)
 Senior Corporate Policy Officer
 Senior Democratic Services & Scrutiny Officer
 Democratic Services Officer (CB)

Minute No.	Minute
31	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Evans.</p>
32	<p>MINUTES The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 November were approved.</p>
33	<p>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST Councillor M Gordon declared an interest as a Council tenant and the Monitoring Officer confirmed this would preclude her from taking part in any debate relating to Council rents. She also declared she is a member of Waterfield Leisure Centre.</p>
34	<p>REVIEW OF THE FORWARD PLAN The Chairman introduced the Cabinet Forward Plan and invited Members to comment.</p>
35	<p>REVIEW OF THE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24 The Chairman introduced the Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24 and invited Members to comment upon the document. He also reminded Members of the Housing Support Review Workshop on 14 February 2024.</p>
36	<p>NEW CORPORATE STRATEGY: VISION 2036 AND CORPORATE DELIVERY PLAN The Chief Executive, Edd de Coverly, introduced the report with a presentation.</p> <p>In relation to the business case being developed with the Integrated Care Board for the GP Practice to be located at Parkside, Members asked where the funding was coming from. In response, they were advised the total cost is expected to be £150k, with the Council contributing £75k, which is to be funded by the Asset Development Programme which is part funded by the Business Rates Pool.</p> <p>It was asked why there is no budget allocated for the Town Centre Co-ordinator role. Members were advised it is currently a concept that is being considered so no budget has been allocated at this point.</p> <p>A comment was made regarding Statement 3 on whether the MMDR should be recognised as an enabler of sustainable homes. It was felt that a reference to this should remain within the Strategy.</p> <p>The question was asked about the MMDR South and whether if no funding is found is there an alternative plan. Members were informed that if this scheme does not go ahead, then the local plan would have to be redeveloped.</p> <p>It was asked if the Statement 4 related to Council homes or all home types. It was confirmed that it does relate to all housing.</p>

Members wanted to know how the Council are going to measure what has been delivered. The Council has a corporate performance framework that has measurable targets and which will be reported quarterly to Cabinet in 2024/25 and increase over the current 6 monthly reporting.

The query was raised regarding the Right to Buy process, as it was felt the Council sells these properties too cheaply. It was explained the policy is a National Scheme and the Council have no control over the discounts given however, any receipts from this process are used to purchase more affordable homes.

A comment was made in relation to Statement 8 and the phrase 'net zero', and whether it was a phrase that was understood by the public.

Members wanted to know how we are going to engage with young people and what approaches are we making. It was recognised that this is a challenge and officers are developing a young person's strategy in partnership with stakeholders.

The comment was made that the consultation that was carried out over the Christmas and New Year, was perhaps not the best time. It could be why there was a low engagement rate. A further comment was made in relation to the consultation, in that the questions would lead to people commenting on things they want, as opposed to identifying what activities should be a priority. It was acknowledged that consultations through surveys will always have limitations, and that within the corporate delivery plan, there were commitments to improve engagement and some additional resource allocated in the budget.

The comment was made that there is a mismatch between improving engagement and then a reference to reducing the amount of polling stations. It was explained that the polling station review is a statutory process, against set criteria and that whilst ensuring efficiency is important, access to the democracy process is of paramount importance. It was confirmed that the reference in the strategy would be updated to reflect this. The comment regarding polling stations is a reference to the upcoming polling station review and boundary changes.

Members would like the Council to campaign for an increase in the uptake of postal votes. In response, Members were informed that the Council already does this but would continue to promote it and welcomed any further suggestions for how this could be done.

A query was raised what the practical implication is of having young people discharged from care as being a protected characteristic. It was explained that the rationale is that people from that background are at a significant disadvantage and by giving them this status, the Council would give due consideration to that group of people when developing a policy or strategy.

Members wanted the Council to ensure consideration of value for money in everything it does and the reference to this in the strategy was welcomed.

The comment was made, even though transport links are important, the Council should not project the impression that it has more power than it does over this area, though it was recognised the Council had an important role in lobbying partners.

The Chair thanked the officers for the reports and presentation.

RESOLVED

That Members' comments are presented to Cabinet at the next Cabinet meeting.

37

GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET 2024/25 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2025/26 TO 2027/28

The Director for Corporate Services (Section 151 Officer), Dawn Garton, introduced the report with a presentation.

A concern was raised that as there is a lot of information in the paper for Members to consider, the job of Scrutiny is difficult. Members recognised the link between the Corporate Strategy and Budget, but it would be better if they were done separately. It was explained that it was time to renew the Corporate Strategy and that it usually wouldn't be presented every year. In addition, Officers take Members through the budget process throughout the year and that it is discussed at the State of Melton Debate and there is the Budget Scrutiny Workshop in December as well. Members were also provided the opportunity to raise any further queries with the Director for Corporate Services outside of the meeting.

Members Allowances was raised. It was explained that there is due to be an independent review in 2024/25 but that the annual uplift had been provided for in the budget.

The backlog of service charging at Pheonix House and the concern over whether the occupiers know it is coming was raised. It was explained that Officers have discussed the issue with occupiers and that they are aware of the process. The building has been surveyed and the charges will be divided accurately. Officers confirmed that there will be an accrual at year end, and it will go in the current year accounts. It was also highlighted that the Council will also be considering the new Asset Management Plan which demonstrates the significant progress that the Corporate Asset team has made over the last year.

A concern was raised in relation to the increasing charges at Thorpe Road Cemetery, as well as the repairs that need doing and the remaining number of plots. It was clarified that work preparing to increase capacity at the current cemetery has progressed, but the work has not yet been undertaken. It was noted that the Special Expenses Budget is a small budget and that the increase in fees is necessary to help mitigate the rising costs.

Concern was raised over the spend on consultants around projects. The Chief Executive clarified there was not significant use of consultants but confirmed that there will be occasions where using external technical expertise is necessary, especially in areas the Council doesn't have in-house expertise.

Members raised the issues of the car parking assessment and whether external resources were required for that. It was explained that this was a legacy commitment and that there is no proposed budget allocated to the task. What there is, is a commitment to review options for new car parking technology which does not require additional resources.

A Member raised concern that there is a lot of red on the risk register. In response it was explained that finance is a high risk, especially post covid, with rising inflation, reduced income and decreasing government grants but that the Council's finances are under control and there had not been a deterioration from previous years. That said, Members were informed that local government finances as a whole remain fragile and that the SLT maintain constant oversight on the financial position and that the Council can in no way be complacent. It was also highlighted that while the current budget was not proposing any significant cuts, there was no guarantee that this may not be required in 12 months' time.

Parking charges on evenings and Sundays was raised and the concern that this would conflict with the objective of getting more people into the town centre. It was explained that fees and charges were due to be approved under delegation and that no other car parking charges had been increased.

Members gave thanks to Officers on the work done during the budget setting process.

RESOLVED

That Members' comments are presented to Cabinet at the next Cabinet meeting.

38

CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023-2028 - GENERAL FUND AND CAPITAL STRATEGY 2024/25

The Director for Corporate Services (Section 151 Officer), Dawn Garton introduced the report with a presentation.

Concern was raised that the underspend was misleading and could it be phased across the different years instead. In response, it was explained that the underspend relates to the Levelling Up Fund monies and at the point the budget was set last year it wasn't possible to meaningfully profile. As the plans develop this will become easier and can be looked at when the budget is carried forward.

RESOLVED

That Members' comments are presented to Cabinet at the next Cabinet meeting.

39

REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2024/25 - HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA)

The Director for Corporate Services (Section 151 Officer), Dawn Garton introduced the report with a presentation.

The comment was made that it is good to see current tenant rent arrears coming down but there are costs to consider, e.g. staffing cost, and legal capacity. It was explained that the expertise is employed on a temporary basis in order to work through the backlog but that the expertise is the correct expertise. It was confirmed that there is an exit plan and that there will be a continued resource of 1 full time officer. The issue of rent arrears does remain a high-risk area for the Council and remains under review.

A concern was raised on 'no win, no fee' claims. In response, it was explained that it is important for the Council to know the stock and its condition and be able to evidence proactive action to any issues or repairs, so that claims can be defended, and the work can be evidenced. The Council has a solicitor responsible for defending those claims.

Members were surprised at the £340k overspend on gas costs. It was explained that not recognising this earlier was an administrative error which has had to be corrected. Colleagues across the Council are looking at understanding some of these increases with expectation of meeting the relevant account manager.

Concern was raised that there had been a lot of fires within the housing stock. It was explained that the Council had worked with its insurer, and it was established that none of the fires have been the fault of the Council. They have either been accidental or a result of a failure of technology. It was recommended, by the insurer, that the Council should continue educating their residents in order to minimise the fire risk.

As the discussion was regarding the rent increase, Cllr Gordon left the meeting at 8:23pm and did not return.

The rent increase was discussed and it was commented that this could add to the pressure of arrears. It was explained that as the Council's costs had increased, the rise has become a necessity but that the council will continue to support tenants and identify quickly if tenants are struggling to pay their rent so that they can be supported. Examples of support were provided.

Members queried whether expenses per property are logged and whether trends are assessed and acted upon. It was explained that capital improvements and revenue repairs per property are logged. It was explained that the Council are due

to implement a recharge policy whereby it will charge tenants where they have intentionally caused damage. It was also explained that sometimes works for specific property types are undertaken in response to particular issues (for example, non-traditional homes).

It was noted that the replacement of kitchens and bathrooms will peak in 2025/26. In response it was stated that this would have been profiled on age and condition of stock.

RESOLVED

That Members' comments are presented to Cabinet at the next Cabinet meeting

40	URGENT BUSINESS There was no urgent business.
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The meeting closed at: 8.34 pm

Chair