

Overview and Scrutiny Committee
13 January 2021

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on
Wednesday 13 January 2021 at 7.30 pm via Zoom

PRESENT: Councillors S.Wrenn (Chairman)
L.Chesterman (Vice-Chairman) and S.Elam (Vice-Chairman)

M.Birleson, M.Cowan, B.Fitzsimon, G.Hayes,
M.Holloway, R.Lass, D.Richardson, P.Smith,
P.Zukowskyj and J.Cragg

D.Bell (Executive Member for Resources)

OFFICIALS K.Ng, Interim Chief Executive
PRESENT: N.Long, Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance)
S.Russell, Corporate Director (Housing and Communities)
R.Baker, Head of Resources
J.Harding, Head of Public Health and Protection
S.Saunders, Legal Services Manager
H.O'Keeffe, Service Manager (Financial Services)
J.Anthony, Principal Governance Officer

24. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS

The following substitution was made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules:

Councillor J.Cragg for Councillor S.Thusu

25. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S.Thusu and F.Thomson (Executive Member for Governance, Public Health and Climate Change)

26. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11 November 2020 (previously circulated) were approved as a correct record.

It was noted that the Minutes of the meeting held on 2 September 2020 had yet to be approved. Outstanding issues would be resolved ahead of the Committee's meeting in March.

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

Councillors L.Chesterman and P.Zukowskyj both declared a non-pecuniary interest by virtue of them being Hertfordshire County Councillors.

28. SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS PROGRESS REPORTS AND/OR RECOMMENDATIONS

Members received an update from the Chair of the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Panel. The Panel had been tasked to review the proposed budget and make appropriate recommendation for the Committee to consider. The Chair of the Panel confirmed that there was one Recommendation being put forward concerning the management of reserves.

The Panel had considered the Council Tax Hardship Fund, in the expectation that there would likely be more applicants in subsequent years. The Panel asked officers to investigate whether other preceptors could contribute to the council tax hardship fund. It was noted that Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council funds 100% of the hardship fund, even though it receives only 12% of the council tax revenue. The Panel therefore asked the Executive Member for Resources and the Chief Executive to approach their counter parts at the county council level to ask if Hertfordshire County Council could share the cost of the hardship fund. Officers confirmed that an approach was made. Unfortunately colleagues at Hertfordshire County Council declined the suggestion, citing the following reasons. The first reason was that it was not unusual for individual borough councils to fund their own hardship schemes. The second reason was that if county did agree to contribute to Welwyn Hatfield's hardship fund scheme, similar requests would likely be received from other borough councils, leading to substantial costs.

The Panel recorded eleven proposals they wished to be considered as part of this process. One proposal was an increase on a charge already included in the budget; two were classed as savings or redistribution of funds; four were centred on long term future projects; and the remaining proposals concerned relatively small wellbeing projects for the community.

Suggestion put forward by the Panel included:

- setting aside money for a determined future event, subject to Covid-19 restrictions being lifted;
- a project to improve communal gardens around sheltered accommodation and bungalows;
- grants for minority groups to access;
- increasing the hardship fund for renters;
- amending the corporate project budget, with a view to increasing savings and/or alleviating budget pressures;
- decarbonising the housing stock and the council's own facilities;
- carrying out review of non-housing assets, particularly land holding;

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- comparing the council's Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) rates with other councils;
- reviewing use of Council offices and space in a post-Covid world;
- reviewing the Brown Bin charge (which had not increased since its introduction);
- explore other uses for Campus West as a community asset;

A number of the proposals linked to wellbeing in the community, such as the communal garden project and grants for minority group were already explored as part of the budget setting process. Longer term proposals would be considered in due course by the Cabinet and/or appropriate committee.

The Panel also considered the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), in particular whether some funds should be used to protect front line services given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and uncertainty surrounding central government funding in future years. This has led the Panel to recommend a review being undertaken of the reserves to ensure funds were being used effectively, and avoid multiple reserves being kept for overlapping purposes. The Executive Member for Resources, Councillor D.Bell, agreed that this was a good idea and could be carried out without requiring changes to the current budget proposal.

The Panel queried the proposed changes to leisure prices, which seemed to rise by a higher percentage than other fees and prices. The Panel were informed that some charges were statutory and the leisure fees, even with the proposed increased, would remain lower than comparable prices in other parts of Hertfordshire.

The Chair of the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Panel advised the Committee that the Panel, whilst not agreeing with all the decisions taken in the proposed budget, believe it to be, from a scrutiny perspective, a sound budget.

Members agreed that the new process for scrutinising the budget should be reviewed to ensure lesson learned could be incorporated into the process next year. It was noted that the process had facilitated the sharing of more information in a managed framework, allowing Members to review and consider different aspects in a sensible timeframe. Members recognised a specific need to scrutinise the budget proposal being presented to them and not attempt to propose an alternative package (which would not be classified as a budget). It was suggested that the Committee may wish to review how effectively the scrutiny process has worked by assessing how the budget has helped the council deliver on its corporate objectives six months after the budget has come into effect.

Members noted the four substantive discussion points highlighted in the report. Two were associated with reserve management as discussed above. Of the remaining two one concerned council home targets, and the other concerned the proposed 1.97% Council Tax increase.

Members were informed that the issues around the 9,000 council home figure, and whether this number could be raised, would be discussed and taken forward by the Cabinet Housing Panel as it was judged to be outside of the scope of the Task and Finish Panel. Members briefly discussed whether there should be greater emphasis on ensuring the council's property portfolio was being fully utilised to either provide additional revenue and/or provide suitable sites for development. Specifically Members considered whether an opportunity was being missed. Officers confirmed that new opportunities were being explored and an update on the affordable housing programme would be provided at the next Cabinet Housing Panel on 2 March 2021.

Members were also informed that the decision to limit the percentage rise in Council Tax to 1.97% as oppose to the opportunity to increase it by £5 was queried by the Panel. It was confirmed that this was a political decision.

RESOLVED: The Panel's recommendation to investigate potential overlaps between the reserves, in order to ascertain whether there are any risks that had been covered multiple times, was accepted. The recommendation would be put to the Special Cabinet at their meeting on 19 January 2021.

29. DATE AND TIME OF UPCOMING SCRUTINY TASK AND FINISH PANELS

The Committee noted that the Housing Maintenance and Repairs Task And Finish Panel is to have an initial scoping meeting on Monday 18 January (4pm); and the Budget Setting and Corporate Plan Task and Finish Panel will next meet on 25 January 2021 (6pm) to consider the Corporate Plan.

30. HEALTH UPDATE 2019/20

Members received a report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance), which provided an annual update on work undertaken by the council in partnership with colleagues in the wider health system. The report also detailed work undertaken at County level through the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Health Scrutiny Committee. It was noted that Minutes from these County level meetings were available on the Hertfordshire County Council website.

Members noted that the main areas of focus for 2020 had been in response to the Covid pandemic. A greater level of partnership working had been achieved using the statutory Local Resilience Forum and cells which sit below the forum such as the Community Reassurance cell, Accommodation cell, Communication cells and the Strategic Coordination Group. The authority was also represented on the Health Protection Board, Herts District Outbreak Management Group, Business Support Groups and the Outbreak Tactical Control Group.

Members asked whether the County level groups had considered the impact Covid-19 pandemic may be having on other healthcare areas, such as cancer treatments. It was confirmed that Covid-19 was being discussed in more

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regular meetings, but the Health Scrutiny Committee tended to focus on longer term issues. Going forward the Health Scrutiny Committee may begin to consider the longer term impact of Covid-19.

Members noted paragraph 10.1 of the report which outlined the struggle the Council had experienced in recruiting Environmental Health Officers and other Environmental Health staff. Officers confirmed that this was a nationwide problem and was a problem shared with other local authorities.

RESOLVED: That the contents of the report be noted

31. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2020/21

Members considered the Committee's work programme. The work programme enabled forward planning of items to be considered to take place. In addition, the Forward Plan was attached to assist members in considering items for scrutiny.

Officers confirmed that topics covered by the new Housing Maintenance and Repairs Task And Finish Panel would be added to the work programme once the Panel had agreed their scope and timetable.

Members briefly discussed the ability to scrutinise the performance of the housing service. Member would usually receive updates at the Cabinet Housing Panel, but due to no decisions being required, the scheduled meetings in November and January had not taken place. Members were reminded that regular reports and performance data was available on the Member Hub. Members were invited to contact the relevant Director should they have any questions or wanted to explore a particular issue further.

Officers agreed to provide Members with background information on the Decision referenced FP1023 (Council Budget for Aids and adaptations in the Private Sector) on the Forward Plan. Officers confirmed that the Decision was no longer being taken to the February Cabinet meeting and as such there was time for clarification of the point before the decision went to Cabinet for approval.

Members noted that the ban on evictions had been extended by the Government until 21 February 2021.

Meeting ended at 8.22 pm
JA