

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH) held in Civic Suite, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon PE29 3TN on Wednesday, 31 January 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor C M Gleadow – Chair.

Councillors A Blackwell, S Cawley,
S J Corney, I D Gardener, J E Harvey,
S A Howell, A R Jennings, R Martin,
Dr M Pickering and N Wells.

APOLOGIES: An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor R A Slade.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors B A Mickelburgh and S W Ferguson.

59. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3rd January 2024 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

60. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

61. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel received and noted the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme and the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which had been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st February 2024 to 31st May 2024.

62. FINAL 2024/25 REVENUE BUDGET AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (2025/26 TO 2028/29) INCLUDING THE CAPITAL PROGRAMME

By means of a report by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book) the Final 2024/25 Budget and Medium-term Financial Strategy (2025/26 to 2028/29) including Capital Programme was presented to the Panel.

Following a question from Councillor Gleadow regarding the introduction of the garden waste subscription service, the Panel heard that this was introduced due to jeopardy in future budgets, there was a commitment to progress this service and to delay this would result in a considerable operational deficit

alongside costs incurred by the project implementation and refunds to those who had already paid.

Councillor Martin enquired about the reasons for a 668% increase on the previous budget under the Head of Service Strategic Insights and Delivery line, following which the Panel heard that the reasons for this would be sought and brought back to the Panel at a later date.

In response to a further question from Councillor Martin, the Panel heard that in order to achieve good energy prices over the last couple of years, the Council had joined a framework agreement where energy was purchased in advance, resulting in the Council benefitting from lower rates when prices were rising but that consumption will continue at higher rates initially, due to the commitment, even though the market price are starting to decrease. In addition it was noted that the Council's recent decarbonisation works had moved the Council's energy usage from gas to electricity which has a higher monetary cost.

Following a question from Councillor Harvey, the Panel heard that the increase in the Finance and Resources figure in Table 21 included the creation of the new reserves going forward as well as other costs such as MRP calculations.

Councillor Pickering enquired why there were lines within the Fees and

Charges document which were showing a 0% increase. The Panel heard that some of these were outside of the Council's control as they were statutory fees, that some fees such as One Leisure fees had increased but that all fees had been discussed with relevant portfolio holders and decisions made based on those.

Councillor Jennings highlighted a discrepancy between figures quoted as being in the MTFS for the Garden Waste Subscription Service and figures which had been presented to the Panel last year. The Panel heard that there had been a cost included in the business case relating to possible additional charges from the County Council. There has been no advisement of any additional costs that will be payable, so these figures have not been reflected through the MTFS.

The Panel heard, following a further question from Councillor Jennings on the decrease in the number of Council Tax properties compared to last year's MTFS, that the Council Tax team had undertaken work to ensure a more accurate figure in this year's budget rather than an estimation which had been used in previous years, therefore the team were fully confident on the figures given within the Council Tax base.

Detail was given to the Panel after a question from Councillor Jennings relating to the growth bids in Table 2B. That the growth bids within;

- Corporate Services related to assessments on rents on Commercial investment strategy, improving Civic Suite streaming, facility management remedial works on non-compliant fire doors, implementation of workforce Strategy.
- Finance & Resources related to additional resource to assist with reporting
- And that detail would be sought and reported back to the Panel for growth bids within Planning and Regeneration & Growth.

Following a question from Councillor Wells relating to the detail in Table 7 surrounding supplies and services, communications and computing, the Panel heard that again the detail would be sought and relayed to the Panel after the meeting.

Councillor Cawley enquired about the growth shown under Leisure, Waste and Street Scene in Table 2, and the Panel were advised that this was due to an anticipated increase in wages in line with the planned national minimum wage increases and increased energy costs following the conversion to electricity from gas. The Panel also heard that the £900,000 in the report relating to the MRF contract was not yet confirmed but this was consistent with the information provided by the County Council to date.

Councillor Gardener advised the Panel that as a County Councillor, he had been advised that the County Council intended to charge the District Council for the anticipated reduction in waste disposal following the implementation of the Garden Waste Subscription Service and expressed surprise that this cost had not been accounted for within the budget.

It was observed by Councillor Gardener that tables 14 and 24 did not show any planned training budget for either Leisure & Health or Planning Services whereas other services did show this. The Panel heard that there was a centrally held budget for training but that some services had put specific training costs into their budgets in addition to this.

Councillor Cawley enquired about the £2.5m budgeted for the Workforce Strategy and asked for clarity on what this would cover. The Panel heard that this Strategy was still being developed and therefore the detail was not yet available however this was the amount which had been reserved for the work.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations contained within the report.

63. 2024/25 TREASURY MANAGEMENT, CAPITAL AND INVESTMENT STRATEGIES

By means of a report by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the 2024/25 Treasury Management, Capital and Investment Strategies Report was presented to the Panel.

Councillor Blackwell commented that the forecasting by the Link Group contained within the report was much appreciated as was the detail surrounding the Council's property investments. Councillor Blackwell also commented that references in the report to interest rates being high, should be taken in the context that in the past these rates would not actually have been seen as high.

Councillor Gleadow enquired whether Treasury training would be made available to Overview and Scrutiny members, following which the Panel were advised that the mechanics for this were being put in place and details would be communicated to the Panel after training providers (potentially Link Group and others) are contacted for their offer, and following this, a discussion at Treasury and Capital Management Group. It was anticipated that the training would also be provided to members of the Corporate Governance Committee.

Following an enquiry from Councillor Howell about the management of the properties within the CIS Strategy located outside the district, the Panel were assured that the team managed these long term investments and took into account a variety of risk factors to ensure both best value and protection for the Council.

In response to a question from Councillor Jennings surrounding the increase of values at the Rowley Arts Centre, the Panel heard that this was due to rents returning to more normal levels following the reduction that had been enforced during the COVID period. As rent levels are a key component in calculating the property valuations, the higher rents led to increased property valuations.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations contained within the report.

64. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24 QUARTER 3

By means of a report by the Business Intelligence & Performance Manager and the Performance & Data Analyst (a copy of which was appended in the Minute Book), the Corporate Performance Report 2023/24 Quarter 3 was presented to the Panel.

Having heard about the concerns highlighted by the report in relation to Disabled Facilities Grants, Councillor Harvey enquired whether this subject could be investigated by the relevant Scrutiny Panel. It was confirmed that this would be progressed by the Democratic Services Team and relevant Officers.

Councillor Gleadow expressed concerns that the Market Towns project was marked as amber when updates to the Panel had suggested this was on track. The Panel was assured that the St Neots project was on track and that the overall project included many additional projects which had resulted in the amber status.

Councillor Jennings expressed concern that the Priory Centre project was due to commence in 2028 within the report, the Panel were assured that this was an error within the report and that the project was due to begin imminently.

Councillor Martin observed that the reports were much improved on previous years but requested that some context to the number of Disabled Facilities Grants completed, such as the size of the backlog, would be helpful in understanding how this was being addressed. Councillor Pickering agreed with the improvements to the format and asked if it would be possible to adjust the layout to enable a one page view rather than viewing multiple documents side by side.

Following an enquiry by Councillor Pickering on the wearehuntingdonshire website, the Panel heard that an update on the project would be sought and relayed back to the Panel.

Councillor Cawley observed that there were many green statuses throughout the report and whilst this was good enquired if it had been considered for an independent body to review the targets and provide more challenge. The Panel

heard that a planned independent Peer Review would assist with this as would Oflog measures which allowed benchmarking against data sets of comparable authorities.

In response to a concern expressed by Councillor Blackwell about staff sickness, the Panel heard that the Council were in line with national averages for similar authorities. However work was also being done to look at separating short and long term sickness reporting within the report to give a more solid understanding of this area. It was also noted that more detailed information is available in the Workforce Report which is published for Employment Committee and publicly available.

The Panel heard that household waste collections had some seasonality, especially with garden waste and it was anticipated that the service was on track for the year.

Following a question from Councillor Pickering, the Panel heard that delays included when processing Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support claims were due to evidence requested from customers and the consequential delays for that as well as seasonality in the volume of work.

In response to a question from Councillor Gleadow regarding procurement rules, the Panel heard that the detail on this would be reported back to the Panel following the meeting.

Following a question from Councillor Pickering regarding funding for a Problem Solving Officer, the Panel heard that a grant had been secured to fund the role which would connect multiple agencies with Council services and that recruitment would be underway once it was established how best to progress this.

Following the discussion, it was

RESOLVED

that the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel be passed to Cabinet for their consideration when making a decision upon the recommendations contained within the report.

Chair