

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH) held in Civic Suite 0.1A, Pathfinder House, St Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN on Tuesday, 8th January 2019.

PRESENT: Councillor J Neish – Vice-Chairman in the Chair.

Councillors L A Besley, J C Cooper-Marsh, S J Corney, Dr P L R Gaskin, D A Giles, M S Grice, K P Gulson, and S Wakeford.

APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors D B Dew and J P Morris.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors G J Bull, Mrs S Conboy, J A Gray and T D Sanderson.

43. MINUTES

Subject to the proposed amendment, the Minutes of the meeting held on 4th December 2018 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

44. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations of interest were received.

45. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel received and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which has been appended in the Minute Book) which has been prepared by the Executive Leader for the period 1st January 2019 to 30th April 2019.

46. DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET 2019/20 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2020/21 TO 2023/24

With the aid of a report by the Head of Resources (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Draft Revenue Budget 2019/20 and the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2020/21 to 2023/24 was presented to the Panel.

The Head of Resources highlighted the key aspects of the budget and in doing so informed the Panel that there are pending developments regarding government funding (revenue support grant, new homes bonus, business rates). In addition, the Council will have a surplus budget in 2019/20 meaning that a contribution is made to the surplus fund in order to cover deficits in following years.

A Member expressed concern that the Council would overspend the budgets for Leisure and Health and Operations as happened in

2018/19. However, it was confirmed that the issue with the 2018/19 budgets for those areas was that income was not as high as anticipated and therefore the income target has been revised to reflect this.

A question was raised as to whether leaving the European Union (EU) had been factored into the budget. The Panel was informed that the budget has been managed as much as possible to reflect the impact that leaving the EU would have, however there are still a number of unknowns which can only be dealt with once they happen.

Reassurance was given, following a query, that the fact that additional employee costs have been budgeted for, this would not predetermine any employee pay negotiations.

Support was expressed for the continuance of the Commercial Investment Strategy, although some Members stated a preference for greater investment within the District's boundaries. The Executive Councillor for Resources explained that the Council should not limit investment to within the boundary of the District.

Following a question on why not many purchases have been made, the Executive Councillor stated that the strategy requires a yield close to 6% and that there are not many commercial properties that would produce that yield.

It was explained to Members that the New Homes Bonus would move into Commercial Investment Fund. Following a question as to why it wouldn't be used to mitigate other budget issues, the Panel was informed it was due to unpredictability over New Homes Bonus.

Regarding the most challenging savings proposals, the Executive Councillor stated that the income growth proposals are most challenging and the Council are not certain how the public will react to them.

In response to concerns expressed about the litter bin removal programme, Members were informed that the programme is about finding efficiencies and removing bins that are rarely used.

Concern was expressed that residents would have to pay for a number of additional bin charges, however it was explained that the increases for the green bin only relates to residents who have a second green bin. The replacement bin charge does not cover the full economic cost of replacing a bin and the service will still be subsidised. The bulky waste charge is currently a subsidised service and with the charge will no longer be subsidised.

The Panel was reassured that, although the budget for the apprenticeship scheme will be removed, the Council will continue to invest in the workforce by concentrating on upskilling or reskilling existing members of staff.

Following a query, the Executive Councillor explained that postage and printing savings on Members' post will be encouraged as savings could be made.

In summary, the Panel agreed that Overview and Scrutiny Members need to closely scrutinise quarterly update reports to ensure that savings targets are being met. The Panel expressed concerns over unknown variables but recognised that limited action could be taken at this stage. The budget was supported by the Panel.

(At 7.08pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor L A Besley entered the meeting.)

(At 8.23pm, the Chairman of the Panel adjourned the meeting for a break.)

(At 8.29pm, the meeting resumed.)

47. ALTERNATIVE PROPOSALS FOR THE COUNCIL BUDGET 2019/20

With the aid of a report by the Independent Group Leader (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the alternative proposals for the Council budget 2019/20 were presented to the Panel.

In introducing the proposals the Independent Group Leader informed the Panel that the emphasis was on the priorities of community chest, ground maintenance, play facilities for young people and local highways improvement scheme for Huntingdonshire. In addition, it was proposed that Council Tax should rise by 3% instead of 2.6%.

In expanding on the proposals, the Panel was informed that the proposal is to transfer funds from Active Lifestyles to the Community Chest. Regarding ground maintenance, the aim is to explore what collaboration could be done with Parish and Town Councils and, if required, transfer responsibility and some resource if it can deliver an overall saving.

The Independent Group Leader explained to Members that the local highways improvement scheme for Huntingdonshire will allow the Council to build highway infrastructure which is deemed to be important but has not made the County Council's list.

Members received a summary explaining that the ethos behind the alternative proposals is to encourage joint funding and collaborative work between each authority and not place the emphasis on a single authority.

A Member expressed concern that adding £100k to the Community Chest budget would be too much as the existing chest of £60k is not completely spent. It was suggested that the Community Chest could benefit from better advertising to make groups more aware of the scheme. Another Member expressed concern that by taking £100k from Active Lifestyles for the Community Chest would render Active Lifestyles unviable.

Further to this, the Independent Group Leader confirmed that if the Community Chest was not fully spent then it would remain a surplus and not necessarily reallocated to other budgets.

Support was expressed for the idea of Parish and Town Councils

adopting all grounds maintenance work within their area and Members stated that the idea should be explored. There were concerns that even with additional funds some Parish and Town Councils won't be able to afford the required man-power or additional equipment. In addition, concern was expressed that by transferring grounds maintenance responsibilities over to Parish and Town Council would result in some District Council staff being made redundant.

Members understood the principle of Local Highway Improvement Scheme run by the Council, however some Members were not clear about the practicalities of the proposed scheme and how it would work alongside Cambridgeshire County Council's scheme. It was explained that by adopting a locally run scheme it would enable the Council to assist communities develop.

When questioned on the Council Tax increase, the Independent Group Leader stated that he would consider proposing an increase of £5 which equates to 3.6%.

The Panel agreed that the Cabinet should discuss the alternative proposals put forward by the Independent Group Leader; however the Panel could not support the proposals themselves.

48. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

With the aid of a report by the Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Panel.

The Panel reviewed and agreed the scoping document for the task and finish group work on accelerating the delivery of affordable housing.

(At 9.02pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor J A Gray left the meeting.)

(At 9.04pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillor J A Gray entered the meeting.)

(At 9.05pm, during the consideration of this item, Councillors G J Bull and J A Gray left the meeting and did not return.)

Chairman