

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MONDAY, 9 JANUARY 2017

PRESENT:- Councillors Robert Wright (Chair), Emma Bushell, Mark Dempsey, Claire Ellis (Vice-Chair), Emma Faramarzi, Cathy Martyn, Gemma McCracken, Des Moffatt, Kevin Parry, Vera Tomlinson, Chris Watts and Steve Weisinger

An apology for absence was received from Councillor James Robbins.

51. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Kevin Parry made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 7 “Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session – Cabinet Member for Communities”, as he was a Nythe Parish Councillor and a Trustee of Covingham Parish Council.

Councillor Gemma McCracken made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 6 “Leader of the Council Update”, on the grounds that she and her husband are tenants of a commercial unit in the Town Centre.

52. Public Question Time

Mr Brian Cockbill, a local resident, asked questions about the administrative operations of Nythe Parish Council. Mr Cockbill received a written response at the meeting.

Mr Cockbill, asked an additional question about the standard of service provided by the Public Health Department. The Cabinet Member for Adults’ Health and Social Care responded at the meeting.

Mr Cockbill, asked a further additional question about a response he had received from the Public Health Department regarding his reporting of rats in Fleming Way. The Cabinet Member for Adults’ Health and Social Care agreed to investigate the issue and provide a written response.

Mr Roy Worman, a local resident, asked a question about the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership funding bid for the Thamesdown Drive extension. The Leader of the Council responded at the meeting.

Mr Worman asked a supplementary question about the possibility of a further funding bid being submitted. The Leader of the Council responded at the meeting.

Mr Worman asked a further question about the Cabinet Member Advisory Group being re-established. The Leader of the Council responded at the meeting.

Mr Worman asked a further question about the problems experienced by some residents in relation to recycling collections and the length of time for Council officers to respond to queries about the collections. The Leader of the Council agreed to provide a written response.

53.

Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th December 2016, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

54.

Budget Setting Process 2017/18

The Committee received a report of the Director of Law and Democratic Services about the Budget setting process 2017/18.

Members were reminded of their specific responsibility under the Committees terms of reference, and under the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules, to fulfil the Council's Budget Scrutiny Function. The report provided members with the opportunity to better understand the strategic context and framing for the direction of travel of the organisation to deliver the Vision for Swindon over the next four years. This was within the expected financial context, and the particular processes the Council had adopted to ensure a balanced budget for 2017/18 and a sustainable financial position moving forward.

The Chair welcomed Councillor David Renard, Leader of the Council and Chair of Cabinet, and Councillor Russell Holland, Deputy Leader of the Council, Vice-Chair of Cabinet and Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services to the meeting.

The Leader and Cabinet Member responded to the following observations and questions from the Chair and Councillors Des Moffatt, Vera Tomlinson, Chris Watts, Mark Dempsey and Emma Faramarzi:

- The Council making representations to the Government about the New Homes Bonus.
- Timing of the budget consultation with the Scrutiny Committee and conversations with opposition Councillors.
- Closure of the toilet block in Moredon.
- The impact of the transfer of garages from the Housing Revenue Account to the General Fund.
- Proposed savings between 2017 and 2020 from place based services and how these will be delivered.
- Business Rates devolution and the financial impact on services provided by the Council.
- The action being taken to secure a better deal for Swindon in national funding negotiations.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services for their full and open responses to members' questions and observations on the issues raised.

Resolved – (1) That the Budget Position Update report be noted.
(2) That the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services be invited to speak with the Labour spokesperson for Resources about the 2017/18 budget proposals.

Further to Minute 5/2016 and in accordance with the Council's Constitution, Councillor David Renard, the Leader of the Council attended the meeting to report to the Committee on the Authority's performance in the first half of the 2016/17 Municipal Year in progressing the Council's priorities and targets, as outlined in his Annual presentation to the Committee at its June meeting.

Councillor Renard introduced his report, commenting on the Council's achievements so far in 2016/17 and highlighting the challenges for the remainder of the year and outlined how the Authority had performed in the first half of 2016/17 Municipal Year.

The Leader responded to the following observations and questions from the Chair and Councillors Cathy Martyn, Des Moffatt, Vera Tomlinson, Chris Watts and Mark Dempsey:

- The role of large retail parks in Swindon can encourage growth in the number of small and medium size business locating to the town centre.
- Opportunities for the Council to work proactively with school Academy Trusts to promote Swindon schools in a positive light.
- The new secondary free school opening on a phased basis in Wichelstowe and its impact on surrounding schools.
- The ability of Councils to manage school places.
- The unsuccessful funding bid made by Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) for the Thamesdown Drive extension, the potential for future bids and examination of how other LEPs function.
- Town centre retail offer and reasons why other similar sized regional towns/cities retail centres were growing more rapidly than Swindon.
- The lessons that might be learned from previous decisions about selecting development partners, the need for due diligence and the potential to consider self-development.
- The need to improve and drive up education standards in Swindon schools.
- The number of subscribers to UK Broadband.
- The new Secondary School Learning Campus for the Eastern Villages and its impact on other schools in the area.
- The creation of new parishes being a new form of taxation on residents.
- To revive and re-invest in redundant industrial estates to encourage the production of goods and services.
- The financial cost to Swindon of the additional responsibility of providing shelter for those caught up in the refugee crises in Europe.
- Progress being made on the Bus Exchange.
- Bruce Street Bridges and the impact on new businesses.
- Measures to improve the image of Swindon and the role of new Parish Council's in achieving this.
- The continuing development of Higher Education provision within Swindon and the work to secure a new University.
- The need for information about the strategic framework and commitment that underpins the Council's Vision.

Resolved – That Councillor Renard, the Leader of the Council, be thanked for his informative presentation of his half-year update report and for his full and open responses to members' questions on the issues raised.

56. Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for Communities

Councillor Mary Martin, Cabinet Member for Communities, was in attendance and presented to the Committee a detailed report summarising progress and performance in respect of each of the following service areas within his portfolio of responsibility:

- Localities and Community Development
- Capacity Building – Promoting and developing community-based alternatives to traditional public services
- Leading Parish and Town Councils/Community Engagement implementation
- Community Engagement Strategies
- Community Assets – Libraries, Community Centres
- Community Governance review
- Leisure (residual services e.g. Highworth, County Ground etc., contact with GLL excluding Oasis)

At the request of the Chair, Councillor Martin, in her presentation of the report, commented specifically on those elements within her portfolio which she felt had been most successful, those where a different approach might have produced better results and the lessons that might have been learned as a consequence, and the challenges she expected to be faced by the Council in relation to these service areas in the coming year and beyond, particularly in relation to on-going budgetary constraints.

Councillor Martin responded to the following observations and questions from the Chair and Councillors Des Moffatt, Vera Tomlinson, Steve Weisinger, Gemma McCracken, Kevin Parry, Emma Bushell, Chris Watts, Mark Dempsey and Emma Faramarzi:

- The calculation of new Parish Council precept.
- The function of external auditors in relation to the new Parish Councils' finances.
- A review of Section 106 monies and how they could contribute towards offsetting and proposed increases in Parish Council precepts.
- The awareness of Councillors about how Section 106 monies had been and were proposed to be used to finance schemes in their wards.
- The support available to Parish Council in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans.
- Future operating models for community libraries.
- Members' concern at the limited time available and associated difficulties for new Parish Councils to prepare and determine their precepts for 2017/18.
- Parish Council elections and amendments to the original timescales.

- The conduct of the Community Governance Review and how the Council's experience of the review might be shared with other Local Authorities who were considering creating new parishes.
- The financial cost of the Community Governance Review.
- The challenges facing new Parish Councils and the need for asset surveys and condition surveys.
- The allocation of transition funding for new Parish Councils.
- The transfer of allotments to new Parish Councils.

Resolved – That Councillor Martin be thanked for attending the meeting to present her performance report and for her full and open responses to members' questions and observations on the issues raised.

57. Work Programme 2016/17

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Law and Democratic Services setting out the topics for inclusion in the 2016/17 Scrutiny Work Programme as agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 20th June 2016.

The Chair observed that the Question and Answer Session for the Cabinet Member for Streetsmart, was due to be considered at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee in February 2017. He suggested that, and highlighted the opportunity for Members to advise the Cabinet Member of those issues they would like addressed in his Scrutiny report.

Resolved – That the work programme 2016/17 be noted.

58. Status of Requests for Action and/or Information

The Committee received an updated report advising on the status of outstanding issues and member requests for information.

Resolved – That the report on the status of outstanding issues and member requests for information be noted.