

SCRUTINY

MONDAY, 14 JANUARY 2019

PRESENT:- Councillors Robert Wright (Chair), Emma Faramarzi (Vice-Chair), Emma Bushell, Fionuala Foley, Brian Mattock, Jane Milner-Barry, Barbara Parry, James Robbins, Timothy Swinyard, Vera Tomlinson, Chris Watts and Steve Weisinger.

Also in attendance were: Councillor David Renard (Leader of the Council), Councillor Russell Holland (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance), Councillor Oliver Donachie (Cabinet Member for Economic Prosperity), Councillor Dale Heenan (Cabinet Member for the Town Centre) and Councillor Maureen Penny (Cabinet Member for Highways and the Environment).

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Des Moffatt.

54. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. No declarations of interest were made.

55. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th December 2018 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

56. Public Question Time

Mr Roy Worman sought clarification regarding discussions between Swindon Borough Council and Parish Council in respect of the installation of charging points for electric vehicles throughout the Borough. The Leader of the Council responded at the meeting.

Mr Roy Worman asked a supplementary question regarding the role of petrol stations in the installation of charging points for electric vehicles throughout the Borough. The Leader of the Council responded at the meeting.

The Chair sought clarification as to the Council's development plan for the installation of electric vehicle charging points across the Borough. The Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Prosperity responded at the meeting.

Mr Roy Worman asked a public question regarding the management of the volumes of telephone calls to the Council's call centre during peak demand times. The Cabinet Member for Corporate and Customer Services responded at the meeting.

Mr Roy Worman asked a supplementary question regarding the public's continued use of the call centre despite online communication options being available. The Cabinet Member for Corporate and Customer Services responded at the meeting.

The Committee received a report of the Interim Director of Law about the Budget setting process for 2019/20.

Members were reminded of their specific responsibility under the Committee's 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 Council's priorities and specific objectives over the next two years. This was within the expected financial context, and the particular processes the Council had adopted to ensure a balanced budget for 2019/20 and achieving a sustainable financial position moving forward.

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

Councillor Holland introduced the report, advising that the final Local Government Finance Settlement for 2019/20 had yet to be published and so the current funding assumptions contained levels of uncertainty. He commented that an annual increase in basic council tax of 2.99% had been assumed for the financial period to 2019/20, and that the adult social care precept would be an assumed 1% in 2019/20. It was also assumed that fees chargeable by the Council would be increased by 5%.

The Cabinet Member responded to observations and questions from the Chair and Councillors Brian Mattock, Jane Milner-Barry and Chris Watts on the following matters:

- The process for determining the 5% rise in charges levied by the Council and how this would impact both service delivery, service demand and service users.
- The role of service departments in setting service charges and feedback received from service departments in the setting of the proposed increases in charges.
- The need to consider increased charges should they be likely to lead to additional work or cost to the Council and in particular in respect of a potential increase in fly-tipping and funeral costs.
- How the Council's estimated share of the surplus on the Council Tax element of the Collection Fund was constituted and the information on which the figure of £1.393m was based.
- The regulations for sharing any surplus or deficit on the Council Tax element of the Collection Fund between the main precept bodies (Swindon Borough Council, Wiltshire Police and Dorset and Wiltshire Fire Authority) and which did not include Parish Councils.
- Future funding provision for the Dial-A-Ride Service and the forth-coming contract negotiations and the tender process.
- The effectiveness in bringing empty properties back into use through the current 150% Council Tax Charge on Empty Properties within the Borough.
- The funding of electoral registration services which whilst tapered over a two year period had been fully funded.
- The Council's anticipated share of the £84 million extra Government funding for Children's Social Care.

- The formula for budgeting for the Council's costs associated with homelessness within the Borough.
- The £500 million additional money allocated by the Government to the Housing Infrastructure Fund announced in the budget which Councils could bid for in addition to the funding already secured for projects.
- The current status of monies from the Swindon and Wiltshire LEP allocated towards the provision of a new museum in Swindon and how current work on this project was funded.
- The additional costs associated with the project to develop a 3G pitch at the County Ground as an example of unintentional costs incurred following the grant of planning permission.

Resolved – (1) That the budget position update be noted.

(2) That Cabinet Member for Finance and officers be thanked for their attendance at the meeting to present the report and for their detailed responses to Members questions and observations on the issues raised.

58. Cabinet Member Question and Answer Session - Cabinet Member for Corporate and Customer Services

Councillor Keith Williams (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Customer Services), was in attendance and presented to the Committee a report summarising progress and performance in respect of each of the following service areas within his portfolio of responsibility:

- Performance and Risk
- Human Resources and Organisational Development
- Communications
- Health and Safety
- Customer Services
- Information Technology
- Digitalisation
- Lydiard House and Park

Councillor Williams responded to the observations and questions put by the Chair and Councillors Emma Bushell, Emma Faramarzi, Jim Robbins, Tim Swinyard and Chris Watts on the following matters:

- The language and terminology within the report which might make it difficult for members of the public to understand.
- The successful use of social media by the Council to engage the public and the benefits arising to both the Council and the public.
- The benefits of adding a subject line to the My Account Portal to make it more user friendly for Councillors.
- Potential upgrades to Mod.Gov and the need to ensure Councillors are trained in the use of the My Portal System to make it more efficient.
- Planned maintenance, refurbishment work and structural work scheduled for Lydiard House and works carried out to the house and grounds over the previous year.
- Work to Lydiard to make it more widely accessible to all members of the public including conference facilities in the old swimming pool area rather than the previous plan to install a lift which would have proven difficult in a Grade 1 listed property which included the historical building as well as the 1960's extension to the rear of the building.

- Continued public disquiet at the online reporting of housing repairs and the waiting times for reporting repairs through the Council's call centre.
- The current call centre capacity, volume of calls received and number of abandoned calls and how this compare to last year.
- A breakdown of telephone calls to the Council's call centre and the mitigating measures that had been put into place to reduce this volume, especially those related to abandoned calls.
- The current staffing structure in the Council's call centre together with staff responsibilities, training and measures in place to retain customer service staff.
- Current statistics for staff sickness and how these could be adversely affected by long-term sickness and the nature of occupation.
- How reporting of staff sickness figures could be enhanced to provide a more robust picture to understand the Council's staffing situation.
- The monitoring and reporting of accidents and near misses, the Council's strategy to reduce these and how these informed Health and Safety practices.
- Measures to support staff in returning to work following illness.
- The success in improving the finances, including car parking revenue, of Lydiard House since the Council took over its management and continuing work to improve its management including best practice of other providers.
- Work to improve the range of services offered at Lydiard House including weddings, conference facilities, improved catering, increasing car parking capacity and accommodation and the reinvestment of profits back into the facility.
- The loss on income at Lydiard Park and Coate Water Country Park following damage to payment machines and changes to machines and CCTV to prevent a reoccurrence.
- The potential use of alternative payment methods for car parking at venues such as Lydiard and Coate Water Country Park.
- The loss of car parking revenue at Lydiard House and Coate Water Country Park during the previous year whilst payment machines were out of operation.
- The Council's future investment plans for the Coate Water Country Park.
- Maintenance of the Council's property portfolio including where a property is transferred to another organisation as part of a service contract or a tenancy given to organisations.
- The effect on day to day maintenance budgets during the Council's current financial situation and whether a backlog of repair and maintenance work is being built-up as a result.
- The transfer of assets to Parish Councils and whether some delays are the result of outstanding work required prior to transfer.
- The need to consider modernising all committee rooms and the Council Chamber to allow recharging points for hand held devices required to allow Councillors to conduct their business through electronic means.
- The benefits and drawbacks of contracts issued by the Council being sub-contracted out to other companies and whether such practices could be prevented, where required, as part of the tendering process.
- The auditing of equipment in libraries within the Borough to ensure replacement parts are available without undue delay.
- The need for Members have a sufficient understanding of current systems, or to be provided with comparator information, to be able to judge the value and benefits of any perceived improvements or efficiencies.

- Changes to the way in which the Council employs temporary or casual staff.
- The recruitment of staff in roles that are hard to recruit to on a national basis or where neighbouring authorities offer better remuneration.
- Management changes that have resulted in improvements to Health and Safety and the reduction and reporting of accidents.
- Ways to reduce and eliminate any disconnect between the Council and local residents.

Resolved – (1) That Councillor Williams be thanked for attending the meeting to present his performance report and for his full and open responses to members' questions and observations on the issues raised.

(2) That information requested by members during the course of the Committee's consideration of this item be forwarded to them via the Committee Clerk.

59. Work Programme 2018/2019

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Law and Democratic Services setting out the topics for inclusion in the 2018/2019 Scrutiny Work Programme, as agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 18th June 2018, and updated during the course of the Municipal Year.

60. 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.