

## **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MONDAY, 4 MARCH 2013**

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Small (Chair), Peter Heaton-Jones (Vice-Chair), John Ballman, Toby Elliott, Claire Ellis, Brian Ford, Richard Hurley, Colin Lovell, Des Moffatt, Maureen Penny, James Robbins, Robert Wright and Stan Pajak

Councillors Mark Edwards and Keith Williams, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Strategic Transport, were in attendance.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor David Wood

### **59. Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

### **60. Public Question Time**

Mr Brian Cockbill referred to a question he had put to the Council meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2013, regarding the accuracy of some information in the report to the Corporate Governance Working Party on the Community Governance Review of Swindon, and enquired about the status of his formal complaint about this and other matters relating to the review. At the invitation of the Chair, the Director of Law and Corporate Governance responded to Mr Cockbill's question and agreed to provide him with a copy of the relevant updated information, after it had been presented to the Corporate Governance Working Party later in the week. In response to Mr Cockbill's contention that his formal complaint remained outstanding, the Director agreed to progress the matter to conclusion.

### **61. Minutes**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2013, be confirmed and signed.

### **62. Question and Answer - Cabinet Member for Finance**

Councillor Mark Edwards, Cabinet Member for Finance, was in attendance. Following a position statement, in which he (i) placed the report in the context of the major local and national issues impacting on service delivery in relation to his portfolio responsibilities, and (ii) summarised performance in respect of the various service areas within his portfolio of responsibility, including his assessment of what he felt had been done well, what might have been done differently and the challenges facing his portfolio over the next year, Councillor Edwards responded to members' specific questions and observations on the following topics:

- the Council Tax freeze grant and the likelihood that a zero per cent council tax increase can be sustained beyond 2014/15

- community engagement regarding the key financial challenges facing the Council and the disappointing level of public participation in the budget setting process
- the scope for discretion in relation to the levels of council tax payable by persons owning more than a single domicile
  - the intention, and likely effectiveness, of the policy of returning empty properties to occupation
- the loss on recompense for paying council tax grant and the ability of central government to make further cuts to the amount of the Council's recompense
- the Council's use of the new homes bonus to support the base budget in the current year
- the potential for revenue savings in relation to the Council's democratic process
- the sustainability of Forward Swindon in its current role and the opportunity for the function to be managed effectively "in-house"
- the level of consultancy work that might be taken back "in-house"
- recognition of the hard work undertaken by the Council's finance team in delivering the 2012/13 budget
- the level and management of the Council's overall debt position
- issues around the Council's debate and challenge of the 2013/14 budget proposals, particularly in relation to collaborative working with the minority political groups on the Council
- community engagement and measures to raise awareness and promote debate around the detail of the Council's budget expenditure
- the Cabinet Member's assessment of the effectiveness of partnership working and the application of Pareto analysis to public services dealing with, and supporting, disenfranchised individuals in the community
- the localisation of business rates (the Business Rates retention scheme)
  - local opportunity to benefit from growth in business rates
  - recognition of the increased income risk
- the cost of interest payments on loans and the Council's monitoring and review of these charges
- council tax collection rates and debt recovery and the importance of working with people to facilitate the repayment of outstanding debts
- the Cabinet Member's reservations regarding the proposed loan to Swindon Commercial Services Ltd to fund the build costs of a refuse derived fuel plant
- the attraction of investment in the town centre and the viability of the suggested canal project

Resolved – That Councillor Mark Edwards, Cabinet Member for Finance, be thanked for attending the meeting and for his full and open responses to Members' questions on service areas and issues within his portfolio of responsibility.