

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,
on Thursday, 17th February, 2022 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor Andrew Harding in the Chair;
Councillors Chris Baron, Jim Blagden,
Will Bostock, David Walters and Lee Waters.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Dale Grounds.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Joanne Froggatt, Peter Hudson,
Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

OS.7 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.8 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 December 2021,
be received and approved as a correct record.

OS.9 Annual Budget Update

The Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) attended the meeting to provide a presentation on the 2022/23 Annual Budget and an update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

Members were advised that the 2022/23 Annual Budget would be fully considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 22 February 2022 in readiness for its final approval at the Extraordinary Council (Tax Setting) meeting on 3 March 2022.

General Fund

In relation to the General Fund, £805k of savings had been identified from the following areas:

Base Budget Review
Neighbourhood Services – deletion of post
Place & Wellbeing – net saving on staffing review
ICT – renegotiation of printing contract
Assets – office rental income
Transformation Team staffing efficiencies
Community and Infrastructure Grants.

Investments

The Council had made investments in two areas namely, Community Safety in relation to a Public Space Protection Order and Legal Services to facilitate a revised staffing structure following dissolution of the Shared Legal Service.

Investment Properties

The investment property portfolio had allowed the Council to achieve a net income in excess of £2 million.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Strategy covered the next 3 financial years and it had estimated a funding gap of £2.3 million for 2023/24 following a series of annual assumptions as presented.

A raft of measures would be considered to assist with closing the funding gap as follows:

Service Reviews

Annual Review of Fees and Charges

Review of Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Procurement Savings

Consideration of alternative Service Delivery models

Council Tax base and inflation increases

Rationalisation of Council owned properties

Digital Service Transformation efficiencies

Potential use of reserves.

Earmarked Reserves

Earmarked reserves stood at £15.8 million made up from the Business Rates Equalisation Reserve and the Commercial Property Investment Reserve.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

The January 2022 Cabinet had agreed a 2022/23 rent increase of 4.1% and Members acknowledged that the 30 Year HRA Business Plan was currently sustainable but did not factor in potential use of reserves to meet decarbonisation costs. (Carbon Net Zero).

Budget savings had amounted to £271k and investments had reached £76k to recruit to Consumer Standards Lead Officer and Maintenance Operative posts.

Following the presentation, Members discussed the value of the Council's commercial property portfolio and the reasons for market fluctuations in property values. Procurement savings and the preferred use of local companies/contractors was also considered including how organisations could provide social value to the Ashfield District (as part of any contract) in relation to local apprenticeships, employment and community investment. It was agreed that an overview of social value methodology would be helpful for Members going forward.

RESOLVED that

- a) the presentation from the Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) on the 2022/23 Annual Budget and the update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy, be received and noted;
- b) as a result of (a) above, the following Member comments/observations be forwarded to Cabinet/Council for consideration as part of their budget deliberations for 2022/23:-
 - a recognition that the income generated from investment properties had enabled the Council to maintain delivery of some of its discretionary services
 - whilst the Committee did not have any objections or changes to the Council's investment portfolio, the fluctuation of investment property prices was discussed. It was acknowledged that fluctuation in property prices was to be expected and due to the properties being income generators and not buy to sell, the Committee were satisfied that the income generated was assisting in the delivery of services
 - the ongoing development work being undertaken in procurement and the local business directory was welcomed and the Committee is keen that local businesses and buying local wherever possible should continue to be a priority
 - as part of Scrutiny's ongoing role in budget considerations, the Committee would be receiving an overview of how social value is taken into account to consider how the Council's current contracts have incorporated this within their recent procurement activity
 - overall, the Committee welcomed the details contained within the budget update and MTFS and recognised the ongoing challenges for the Council.

OS.10 Corporate Plan 2021/22 - Progress Update

The Assistant Director, Corporate Services and Transformation presented the Quarter 2 Corporate Scorecard for April to September 2021 to enable Members to review the levels of performance achieved and further consider the impact of the pandemic on the Council's performance.

Members were reminded that the Corporate Plan sat above a wider strategic context which included the Corporate Project Management Framework, the Corporate Performance Framework and a range of strategic documents relating to the organisation and its services.

The Council used many different tools to assess how well they were performing and these included:

- The Corporate Plan
- Performance Scorecards
- Place Survey/Star Survey
- LGA Peer Challenge (last challenge was January 2020).

It had been recognised that Ashfield District Council was the only local authority in Nottinghamshire that has continued to deliver their Tier 1 and Tier 2 critical services without interruption throughout the pandemic and had also gone above and beyond with additional services including the Spring Clean and Bulky Waste collections.

As at the end of September 2021, 75% of Corporate Scorecard measures were achieving or exceeding target or were within 10% variance of their targets. 81% of measures were also indicating an improved position compared to the same period in the previous year or were within 5% of the previous year's performance levels.

The key highlights regarding performance were as follows:

Health and Happiness

- Delivery of Kirkby Leisure Centre is on track and budget
- Investment in the Lammas and Hucknall Leisure Centres
- 2 Food festivals and 4 cinema events to reinvigorate town centres

Homes and Housing

- Void relets continuing to show improved performance
- Progress had continued on developing agile ways of working for Housing staff
- Affordable housing development programme now in place and progressing with 46 new properties

Economic Growth and Place

- Delivery of the Towns Fund and Future High Streets programmes is progressing well
- A bid for Hucknall to the Levelling Up Fund is at the application stage
- The Maid Marian Line Restoring Your Railways Bid was submitted on time with the outcome awaited
- Planning performance remained above national standards for major and minor applications in the second quarter

Cleaner and Greener

- The Council is breaking the trend with a 20% reduction in fly tipping reports received this year compared with 2020

- Recycling rates for the period April to September 2021, were well above target with a 9% increase compared to the same period last year
- The Council had successfully bid for funding under the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund, the Green Homes Grant Phase 1B, the Green Homes Grant Phase 2, and was currently awaiting the outcome of a bid for funding under the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund

Safer and Stronger

- The Council responded to 4,215 reports of anti-social behaviour, neighbourhood nuisance and environmental crime reports between April 2021 and 1st December 2021
- A number of environmental crime action days have been undertaken to address fly tipping and waste on land resulting in 88 fines being issued, the highest recorded amount in the Council's history
- The Council, alongside partners, was successful in securing £550,000 in October as part of the Safer Streets Quarter 3 Funding programme
- Funding was secured in April to deliver domestic abuse awareness sessions across 20 primary schools.

Innovate and Improve

- changes to call handling has seen a further significant 22% reduction in the level of abandoned calls for the period April to September 2021, compared to the previous year
- Over 33,000 payments have been made online from April to September 2021, a significant increase of 9% compared to the same period last year and a third higher over the last 2 years since the Council implemented its new 'e-store', exceeding channel shift predictions
- The new Customer Portal is due to be launched imminently, supported by a comprehensive publicity campaign, to facilitate further channel shift, and raise awareness of the Council's modern digital online features.

Members also considered areas for improvement and these included homelessness preventions, a reduction in direct debit payments, an increase in staff sickness levels and a decrease in young people as a proportion of the workforce.

RESOLVED

that the level of performance achieved against the Quarter 2 Corporate Scorecard for 2021/22, as presented, be received and noted.

OS.11 Scrutiny Workplan Update

The Scrutiny Research Officer advised that the Scrutiny Workplan was progressing well to date and asked Members to note that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 10 March 2022 would be moving

back to 24 March 2022. This was to enable Scrutiny Panel A to meet on 10 March to finalise the Tenancy Support review recommendations for submission to Cabinet.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services also advised that consultation on the Scrutiny Workplan for 2022/23 would be commencing soon and Members would be contacted for their suggestions/ideas in the next few weeks.

The meeting closed at 8.58 pm

Chairman.