

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Thursday, 13th October, 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Kier Barsby in the Chair;

Councillors Chris Baron, Trevor Locke and
Lee Waters.

Apologies for Absence: Councillors Will Bostock, Andrew Harding and
Daniel Williamson.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Mike Joy and Shane Wright.

OS.4 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.5 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 June 2022, be
received and approved as a correct record.

OS.6 Overview and Scrutiny Co-optees

The Chairman introduced the item and advised Members that the Council's
scrutiny function had recently undergone an audit review carried out by the
Central Midlands Audit Partnership (CMAP).

One of the outstanding recommendations from the audit review had
highlighted that Members had not recently considered the potential added
value of appointing non-voting co-opted members to the Overview and
Scrutiny Committee and/or Scrutiny Panels A and B, so a report was now
presented to the Committee for consideration.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services advised Members
that the option had always been available to the Committee and would involve
Members presenting a scheme to Council for approval, outlining their plans for
recruitment of co-optees including interview arrangements and selection
criteria etc.

If Members were minded to explore the possibility for having non-voting co-optees on the Committee, some preparatory work would need to be undertaken in respect of terms of office, resource implications, officer time and levels of out-of-pocket expenses etc.

Committee discussed the matter and expressed their views as follows:-

- acknowledgement that the term of office for sitting Councillors was due to end in May 2023 and that the decision might be best made by the new Administration and new Members of the Overview and Committee following the District Council elections next year
- consensus that the insights offered by expert witnesses invited to meetings on a review-by-review basis, were welcomed by Members and were probably more beneficial to the Committee as a targeted response to reviews rather than the overall insights, however helpful, that might be offered by a co-opted Member
- concerns regarding any potential co-optee appointments being made on a yearly basis (as opposed to a 4 year term) as any recruitment and selection exercise would be a cost to the Authority each time.

To conclude the Scrutiny Research Officer advised Members that he could use the time up to the District Elections next year to compile some comparison information regarding costs for undertaking a co-optee recruitment and selection exercise, including the cost of advertising any potential vacancies and levels of payment for out-of-pocket expenses etc.

The Chairman thanked Members for their input and reiterated that a decision of this nature, at a time when the Council and its residents were under extreme financial pressures, would not be particularly well received or necessary for the ongoing facilitation of the work of the Committee.

RESOLVED that

- a) having considered the potential added value of appointing non-voting co-opted members to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and/or Scrutiny Panels A and B, it be agreed that this course of action be declined at the present time;
- b) as a result of a) above, the Scrutiny Research Officer be requested to add the item to the first Overview and Scrutiny Committee agenda following the District Council Elections in May 2023, to enable new Members to consider the matter further.

OS.7 Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living

The Scrutiny Research Officer presented the introductory report for the 'Cost of Living' review and asked Members to consider the national context of the cost of living crisis, the actions the Council had taken so far to acknowledge the impact of the crisis and to establish appropriate terms of reference for identifying the next steps needed to progress the review.

An informal Working Group had been arranged in September 2022 to allow Members time to determine the remit for the review but unfortunately the meeting was cancelled and so Committee was now being asked, in its formal setting, to identify the parameters for the review. Members were asked to consider how the Council might best help its residents to cope with the impacts of the cost of living crisis that was showing no signs of abating.

Members were provided with the following information:

- outcomes from recent Office for National Statistics surveys between 14 September and 25 September relating to food shopping, pay, jobs, future concerns, energy bills and mortgage and rent payments
- the latest information regarding energy prices, energy caps and Government support for households
- the current rate of inflation and contributing factors resulting in the sharp increases over the preceding few months
- the work being undertaken by the Local Government Association to offer solutions and support to local authorities working through the crisis and the introduction of the new 'Cost of Living Hub'; a toolkit sharing best practice and offering guidance to enable Councils to support residents with the rise in the cost of living.

Members were also reminded of the Council's declaration of a 'Cost of Living Emergency' through a notice of motion to the Council meeting in July 2022. A cost of living survey had recently been made available for employees to complete and it was acknowledged that the results and any outcomes from the survey would be helpful for informing the work of the review.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services acknowledged that the cost of living crisis would undoubtedly have an impact on all of the Council's services and residents and the importance of the Council being adequately prepared for the tough times ahead.

Members debated the matter and considered, amongst other things:

- the initial reasons for its inclusion on the Scrutiny Work Programme as a result of concerns that not enough information was being made available to residents, through the Council's media channels, to assist them with navigating the rising cost of living
- concerns regarding how the cost of living crisis was evolving and deepening nationally and across Europe and its inevitable effect on housing, debt, bills, employment and mental health for all
- the importance of the Council being able to effectively signpost and support people who cannot cope during the crisis
- the potential for providing 'Warm Rooms' across the District through the winter to offer help and support to residents and encourage some much needed community spirit

- the alarming reductions in disposable income for the majority of households due to the rise in interest rates and mortgage repayments
- acknowledgement that the Council's Annual State of Ashfield Debate was due to tackle the cost of living crisis at its meeting to be scheduled in December 2022
- the urgent need for local authorities to lobby their local MP's and Government to ensure their complete focus remains on assisting the nation through the crisis and not on in-house disputes
- the possibility of speaking to an energy company representative as part of the review to gain some insight into the crisis from their perspective.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services advised Committee that some authorities were already starting to address the potential impacts of the crisis by reviewing all their current policies to ensure they remained fit for purpose. New focussed policies were also being created to address food provision, financial wellbeing and anti-poverty issues. Some Council's were also developing 'Here to Help' strategies to ensure optimum targeted support was offered to residents during the course of the crisis.

RESOLVED

that the Scrutiny Research Officer be requested to undertake and ascertain the following in readiness for the next meeting of the Committee in December 2022:

- a) whether the Council is intending to refresh their current Corporate Plan document to reflect the local and national difficulties being faced as part of the cost of living crisis;
- b) if the Council is utilising their buildings and/or preparing any events over the winter period to provide warm, safe places for people and to increase community spirit and wellbeing;
- c) to establish which of the Council's current policies might benefit from a refresh to incorporate any additional support or contingencies for residents struggling with the impacts of the cost of living crisis;
- d) what provision and/or dedicated pages are currently available on the Council's website offering support, signposting and guidance to residents needing help with housing, financial, emotional difficulties as a direct result of the crisis;
- e) to circulate the results of the recent employee cost of living survey, if available.

The meeting closed at 8.05 pm

Chairman.