

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,
on Thursday, 16th February, 2023 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor Andrew Harding in the Chair;
Councillors Will Bostock, Trevor Locke and
Lee Waters.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Kier Barsby.

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

OS.11 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

OS.12 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 15 December 2022,
be received and approved as a correct record.

OS.13 Annual Budget Update 2023

The Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) attended the meeting to provide a presentation on the 2023/24 Annual Budget and an update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

Members were advised that the 2023/24 Annual Budget would be fully considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 21 February 2023 in readiness for its final approval at the Extraordinary Council (Tax Setting) meeting on 2 March 2023.

General Fund Budget

Members were advised that the budget, as presented, had assumed a 2.94% increase to Council Tax (an additional income of £198K for the Council) with the use of £386k from General Reserves.

In relation to the General Fund, £2115k of savings/efficiencies had been identified from the following areas:

- Planning Fee Income
- Customer Services Review during 2022/23
- Additional income from Photovoltaic Panels on Leisure Centres.

The following investments were to be made during 2023/24 thus producing a net saving of £29k:

- Community Safety Public Spaces Protection Order
- Re-procurement of the Procurement Service
- Loss of income from Land Charges as service transfers to Land Registry in April 2023
- Asset Management Energy Plan
- Speedy Delivery of Digital Transformation
- Renewed HR/Payroll Shared Service with Mansfield District Council
- Implementation of a new Finance System.

Members were advised of the Council's borrowing compared to other Nottinghamshire authorities and income/costs associated with the Council's investment property portfolio. A new 'liability benchmark' analysis was now required to be completed and published by local authorities each year as part of the Treasury Management Strategy and the graph and visually illustrated data entries, as presented, were explained to Members.

Estimated Medium Term Financial Strategy Summary - 2023/24 to 2026/27
Committee were advised as to the estimated expenditure, income, cumulative and annual funding gaps that could evolve from the Council's finances over the next 5 years. The Council needed to prepare for the Local Government Funding Reform which was earmarked to take place during 2025/26. Much of the data within the Strategy had been evaluated based on the following annual assumptions and core funding uncertainties:

Annual Assumptions

- Pay inflation (2%) (NB: 5% for 2023/24)
- Contract Inflation (2.4%)
- Utilities Inflation (5%)
- Insurance (2%)
- No allowance for any inflationary increase in District Council Tax increase from 2024/25
- 1% growth in the Council Tax Base (Number of properties).

Core Funding Uncertainties

- The last 5 years had been one-year funding settlements – which limited the capability of Councils to effectively financially plan for the medium term
- Local Government Funding Reform would not be implemented until 2025/26 at the earliest (Government – Provisional Settlement)
- Future distribution (or not) of New Homes Bonus – was still to be determined (expected announcement during 2023/24) - £170k received for 2023/24
- Funding Guarantee paid in 2023/24 as a one-off (£466k).

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

The January 2023 Cabinet had agreed a 2023/24 rent increase of 7% and investments for 2023/24 included working towards Social Housing White Paper compliance and a one-off resource (due to an inability to recruit over the preceding 12 months) to recruit stock condition surveyors and domestic energy assessors to address service backlogs.

RESOLVED

that the presentation from the Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) on the 2023/24 Annual Budget and the update on the Medium Term Financial Strategy, be received and duly noted.

OS.14 Corporate Plan Progress Update - April to December 2022

The Assistant Director, Corporate Services and Transformation presented the Corporate Scorecard for April to December 2022 to enable Members to review the levels of performance and delivery achieved against the Corporate Plan priorities.

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 Challenges.

As at the end of December 2022, 67% of Corporate Scorecard measures were achieving or exceeding target or were within 10% variance of their targets. 72% 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 improved performance included:

- Customer experience and channel shift with the level of take-up for making payments easily, using digital channels, continuing to increase.
- Improved collection of Non-Domestic Rates.
- Increase in attendances at all the Council's leisure centres (a 33% increase compared to April to December 2021), returning to pre-pandemic levels.
- Substantial increase in number of homeless preventions.
- The Money Advice and Tenancy Sustainment teams securing £84,058 of additional income for tenants.

Areas still requiring improvement:

- decreases in E-store online payments
- Rent arrears and Council Tax collection due to challenging climate
- Processing of minor planning applications within eight weeks due to staff vacancies and increased numbers.

Following the update, Members debated progress across all areas and made some suggestions for further consideration. In respect of domestic violence and the impact it continues to have on many of Ashfield's residents, it was agreed that the issue could be submitted as a potential scrutiny review topic for the 2023/24 municipal year.

RESOLVED

that the level of performance achieved against the Corporate Scorecard for 2022/22, as presented, be received and noted.

OS.15 Scrutiny Review: Cost of Living

The Scrutiny Research Officer presented the item and advised Members that the report submitted for consideration had been deferred from the previous meeting in December 2022 due to limited attendance and a desire by the Chairman to ensure the topic received a full and frank discussion by the Committee.

Since the December 2022 meeting, the Council had been working hard to support its residents through the current cost of living crisis and at the Council's State of Ashfield Debate held in December 2022, the Leader first announced the Council's Fifteen Step Plan for offering such assistance and support.

The Fifteen Step Plan:

1. Utilise leisure centres as community living hubs for residents to access a warm energy room (including use of electricity charging and Wi-Fi for use of mobile phones/laptops). Explore options for leisure centre showers to be used for free by our residents.
2. Explore the use of energy rooms at Council buildings.
3. Promote to residents, local businesses and voluntary and community organisations which offer warm spaces to residents who cannot afford to heat their homes.
4. Maintain a 100% Council Tax Support Scheme for residents to March 2024.

5. Continue to maintain a cost-of-living hub on the Ashfield District Council website which gives useful information to residents, including signposting residents and businesses to benefits, Council Tax and housing support, Council services support, support for businesses, money, bills and debt support, health and wellbeing support and support from other organisations.
6. Promote help with the cost of living to residents who may not be able to access online information. Utilise Ashfield Matters as a tool to provide timely, up to date information on how residents can access support.
7. Explore options to waive charges to rent rooms to any voluntary organisations who provide help to residents through cost-of-living activities.
8. Support the voluntary sector to secure any available funding which may be able to help residents with the cost of living. Continue to lobby for fairer funding from the Government to continue to provide critical services for residents.
9. Continue to provide money management advice offering free financial health checks and work with the NHS to provide advice and help on healthy eating on a budget.
10. Share and promote the food support locations in Ashfield with residents to support them with feeding their families from organisations such as food banks and food share schemes.
11. Our Housing Teams are available to assist tenants with money management advice to help with daily costs and maximise benefits. Our teams can also ensure your insulation in a Council property is at the appropriate level and external drafts dealt with.
12. Continue successful Spring Clean events including giving residents one free bulky waste collection to save on disposal costs.
13. Work with partners such as the DWP on holding Cost of Living Zones to ensure residents can access all the support and benefits to which they are entitled.
14. The Council will continue to provide 2 hours free parking (this financial year) to encourage residents to shop locally and cut their fuel bills.
15. Continue implementing the Council's successful play park strategy offering free state of art play facilities for families across Ashfield.

Having considered the content of the Plan, Members were of the opinion that it would be prudent to receive a progress report regarding implementation of the Fifteen Step Plan at its first meeting following the District Council Elections in May 2023. Any potential recommendations to Cabinet could then be considered to conclude the Cost of Living Crisis review, once progress was known and fully understood.

RESOLVED

that a progress report in respect of implementation of the Council's Fifteen Step Plan for supporting its residents through the current cost of living crisis, be submitted to the first meeting of the Committee in the new 2023/24 municipal year.

The meeting closed at 8.31 pm

Chairman.