

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 2nd February, 2023.

Present:- Councillors Gahir (Chair), Matloob (Vice-Chair), Basra (from 7.23pm), P. Bedi, Kaur and M. Malik

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ajaib, Anderson, Smith, Strutton and Swindlehurst

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Akbar, Bal and S. Malik

PART I

30. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

31. Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 1st December 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2022 be approved as a correct record.

32. Member Questions

No Member Questions had been submitted.

33. Budget Proposals 2023/24

The Committee received presentations from the Executive Director, Finance & Commercial on the following:

- 2nd tranche of 2023/24 budget savings proposals from the Strategy & Transformation directorate.
- 2nd tranche of 2023/24 budget savings proposals from the Finance & Commercial directorate.
- Capital Strategy 2023/24.

The Leader of the Council, Lead Member for Financial Oversight & Council Assets and the Lead Member for Customer Services, Procurement & Performance were in attendance to answer the committee's questions on the savings proposals and other budget issues within their portfolios.

It was noted that the first tranche of directorate and corporate savings proposals had been reviewed by the committee and relevant scrutiny panels in December 2022 and that the People, Customer & Community and Place panels had held meetings earlier in the week to review further savings ahead of finalising the 2023/24 budget to be presented to Cabinet and Council.

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Each presentation was given in turn and questions and discussions were taken after each presentation. Councillors Smith and Strutton were in attendance and asked a number of questions under Rule 30.

In relation to Strategy & Transformation, a further saving of £0.668m was scrutinised, which was in addition to the £1.155m reviewed at the last meeting. The directorate was largely composed of services in the former Chief Operating Officers directorate which included communications, strategy, IT and digital, human resources, transformation and customer and business services. The saving proposed was a 'reduction in services and efficiencies' such as removing the budget for events that no longer took place, vacant posts and removing subscriptions that were not required. It was stated that the Director of Strategy & Improvement (who was not able to be present), was confident the savings were realistic and deliverable. Members asked whether the savings would have negative impacts on the performance and capacity of corporate services. The Lead Member responded that the staffing savings were largely for vacant posts and were therefore not considered likely to have major service impacts. The Executive Director of Finance & Commercial commented that the restructures of IT and finance had shown that better services could be delivered within the revised budgets.

The Committee accepted the savings proposals and made no amendments or alternative proposals.

The Finance & Commercial directorate proposals were reviewed. A further £4.363m had been identified since the proposals brought to scrutiny in December taking the total to £7.5m. This included a £3.5m saving on Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) charges as a result of the fact that the asset disposal programme was ahead of schedule. Other savings were from cost savings from using a different procurement method for interim staff in revenues and benefits and budget overhead cleanse and efficiencies.

The Committee welcomed the significant saving on MRP charges and highlighted the importance of maintaining momentum in the asset disposal programme. The Chair congratulated the Officers involved for the progress that had been made. Questions were asked about the saving on interim staff in revenues and benefits and it was responded that change was purely to the procurement framework used and it would not have any negative impact on the service. The strategic commissioning saving and the budget cleanse were considered acceptable on the basis that by removing budgets that were no longer required or used, it would make the base budget more accurate. If activity needed to recommence in future, e.g. those events that were no longer taking place, they could be added if there was a business case to support the spend.

(Councillor Basra joined the meeting)

The fees and charges proposals were discussed. Members of the committee commented that it would have been helpful to include the fees and charges schedule that had been approved by Cabinet in January in the agenda pack

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for the meeting. The Leader explained the rationale for the fees and charges increases. It was noted that many fees and charges had risen by 10% which was in line with inflation. Some charges had been increased by more following a review, to ensure the Council fully recovered the cost of delivering those services. Questions were asked about a number of specific fees and charges and the Leader highlighted that many charges in Slough remained lower than neighbouring areas e.g. car parking charges. Councillor Strutton expressed concern that the Council had lost income as it had not been charging for electric vehicle points at Herschel car park and asked if there were any other such anomalies. The Lead Member for Financial Oversight & Council Assets set out the principles for fees and charges which included to recover all costs, and for appropriate fees, to charge commercial rates, where the Council was able to do so; to keep charges under constant review; and in support of wider Council policies and to support certain behaviours. The latter point had been the case the EV charging when the Council moved to Observatory House next to Herschel car park, however, that position was now under review.

No amendments or alternative proposals were agreed by the Committee in relation to the finance and commercial savings.

The capital programme was summarised and considered. It was noted that no new borrowing was required and all the items were funding through external grants, capital receipts of Section 106 monies. The asset disposal programme was a key component of the capital strategy and this was reviewed. Members asked about the performance of the advisors to the programme, Avison Young, and the prospects for future income as the Council moved in the further phases of the programme which included operational assets. The Executive Director of Housing & Property stated that he had a high degree of confidence that the programme could be delivered. The Committee reviewed the Housing Revenue Account capital programme and current issues such as the backlog of housing repairs. The work taking place with the contractor, Osborne, was summarised and the future options were noted. It was generally agreed that performance management was the key issue rather than the budget.

At the conclusion of the discussion it was confirmed that the Committee had no amendments or alternative proposals to the capital programme or any of the budget savings, but that the comments of Members about how the savings were delivered and managed should be noted.

Resolved – That the budget savings proposals for the Strategy & Transformation and Finance & Commercial directorates, and the capital programme, be noted.

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34. Task & Finish Group Report - Review of Contract Management

The Chair introduced a report of the O&S Task & Finish Group on Contract Management.

The report of the Task & Finish Group was included at Appendix A to the report and included twelve recommendations which the Committee was asked to approve and refer to the Cabinet.

The review had looked in detail at three contracts – Gate One (Our Futures transformation programme), Matrix (interim staff) and Osborne (housing repairs). Recommendations were set out in full in section 5 of the covering report and included:

- Improvements right at the start of the procurement process so that contracts have very clear outcomes-based deliverables, monitoring and timelines;
- To ensure Member engagement we propose that where authority is delegated to an officer to award a contract that it should always be in consultation with the Lead Member so there is proper democratic oversight;
- That there be a dedicated contract manager for high value or impact contracts, which are properly risk assessed; and
- Meaningful key performance indicators which are properly reviewed and followed up.

The Chair thanked members of the Task & Finish Group for the significant amount of time and commitment they gave to the review; all of the contributors who Members had spoken to and asked questions of during the fieldwork; and Officers who supported the task and finish group, particularly Clare Priest, the Head of Commercial Services.

The Committee welcomed the report and agreed that it was a constructive piece of work with important recommendations for the Cabinet to consider.

The Lead Member for Customer Services, Procurement & Procurement thanked the Committee for the work it had undertaken and said that the Cabinet would carefully consider the recommendations. Lead Members highlighted the improvements that had been implemented already to strengthen contract management and said that the report would help inform the further improvements that were necessary.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee agreed the report of the Task & Finish Group and would refer the report and twelve recommendations to Cabinet.

Resolved – That the Task & Finish Group report on contract management be approved and the recommendations be referred to Cabinet.

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35. Attendance Record

Resolved – That the Members' attendance record be noted.

36. Date of Next Meeting - 15th February 2023 (Ext.)

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as the extraordinary meeting on 15th February 2023 which would be the annual visit of the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.10 pm)