

Minutes of the Scrutiny Overview Committee held in the Council Chamber at Walsall Council House

Monday, 11 December 2023 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present: Councillor J Murray (Chair)
Councillor A Nawaz (Vice-Chair)
Councillor P Bott
Councillor S Ditta
Councillor A Hicken
Councillor K Sears
Councillor G Singh-Sohal
Councillor V Waters

Portfolio Holder present: Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Councillor Ali – Customer

Officers present: Judith Greenhalgh – Executive Director of Resources and Transformation.
Shaun Darcy – Director of Finance, Corporate Landlord, Assurance and Section 151
Stuart Wootton – Finance Planning Manager
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

39. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Follows and Hussain.

40. Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

41. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

42. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items to consider in private session.

43. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 9 November 2023 was submitted [annexed].

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2023, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

44. **Draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme 2024/25 – 2027/28**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and outlined that it was still a time of budgetary pressures. He highlighted that many Councils across the country were facing financial pressures. The Council was committed to balance the budget for 2024/25 and the Cabinet were due to consider revised proposals and provisional statement on 13 December 2023.

The Committee considered a supplementary paper, which provided an updated snapshot of the medium-term financial outlook. This paper identified that the financial gap had been reduced from £18.06m to 12.35m from the period between October 2023 and December 2023.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

A Member sought clarification of the capital development investment scheme. In response, the Leader of the Council confirmed that there were a number of capital pipeline schemes which were subject to business case approval. Majority of the schemes related to regeneration activity such as the Walsall Gateway project. The pipeline schemes enabled the Council to be ready and perceptive to Government funding allocations as and when announced.

Ref: OP36 – 50% mitigation of Bed and Breakfast costs – increase of temporary accommodation provision

There were concerns that the increase of bed and breakfast costs were a result of an increase of Section 21 notices. In response, the Director of Customer Engagement confirmed that the Council had seen an increase of demand of temporary homelessness. This was a national trend, and Walsall was not unique in this respect. She concluded that a breakdown of temporary accommodation numbers would be circulated to the Committee.

Ref: 40 - Increase in volume of Bank Charges for receiving online payments

The Chair sought clarification on the increases of bank charges. In response, the Director of Customer Engagement confirmed that the increase was a result of an expiration of a payment contract and had looked to renegotiate the

contract. Due to inflationary pressures, the new contract and cost associated had resulted in higher costs overall.

Ref: Other schemes carried forward from previous years requiring completion.

There was a discussion about prior year approval schemes in respect of Civic Centre and Council House heating works. In response, the Director of Finance confirmed that Council had received a significant grant from the Midland Energy Hub for works to improve energy efficiency across both sites. The Leader of the Council welcomed the scheme and stated that the buildings were inefficient and suffered from substantial heat loss especially over the winter period. It was noted that building consent had been given to majority of the works.

Ref: Low Carbon Heating Project – Civic Centre/Town Hall/Council House

A Member queried whether community organisations were eligible for funding in respect of Solar PV. In response, the Director of Finance confirmed that the Council was preparing a project assessment to maximise the effectiveness of Solar PV and renewable investment. Initial bid for funding had been prepared for the Council's total estate and subject to funding further analysis prior to approval.

Ref: Chip & Pin Devices

Concerns were raised about the reduction of cash payment options in respect of Council payments. In response, the Leader of the Council gave assurance that cash payments would always be available for Council service payments. In addition, the Director of Customer Engagement reiterated that the Council had cash payment options and worked with a number of local shops to offer 'PayPoint' to provide cash payment options locally for services such as Council Tax.

Ref: Information Governance – Shortfall in income from Schools.

A Member queried whether there had been a reduction in schools undertaking information governance training or whether schools were procuring training options from alternative providers. In response, it was confirmed that a number of academies had chosen to procure their own training packages which had resulted in a reduction of schools using Council services.

There was a lengthy discussion on the competitiveness of Council traded services. The Leader of the Council confirmed that Portfolio Holders had been requested to review statutory and non-statutory services to enable best use of Council funds. There was a view that circular funding could enable community organisations to run services more efficiently.

Ref: Council Tax

There was a discussion about incentives relating to Council Tax. Officers confirmed that a study would be carried out on whether it would be feasible for the Council to incentivise one-off annual Council Tax payments. This would be subject to whether the Council achieved better investment returns and cashflow as a result.

Ref: 58 – WM Combined Authority contribution for Metro

The Chair sought clarification on the Council's contribution to the metro and funding associated. The Leader of the Council confirmed that there were historical proposals for the metro to be extended to Walsall. Funding was included as part of the transport levy at the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Ref: OP48 – Early Payment Supplier Programme

A general point was raised in respect of supplier payments, the Council offered an incentive for suppliers by way of shortened payment terms if a discount was provided for services.

Ref: General Savings by directorate for 2024/25

There were concerns about the proposed savings of £4.59m in Adult Social Care, Public Health and Hub. A Member queried whether savings were as a result of a reduction of services or making services much more efficient. In response, the Leader of the Council confirmed that the Council was working to make services more efficient, such as keeping individuals in their own homes for care services and treatment. In addition, the Council had also reviewed care assessment procedures to optimise referral processes.

The Council had procured Impower to undertake a review of Children and Adult Social Care to review procedures to improve practices and identify best practice.

A Member welcomed and commended the investment of £28.61m and £14.09m into Adult Social Care and Children's Services.

Ref: 90, 91 and 96 – Increase of Community Protection Enforcement Officers, Town Centre Guardians and Reintroduce a youth team into the community

A Member sought clarification on the lack of investment into services for 2025/26 and onwards. In response, the Director of Finance confirmed that the investment in 2024/25 had been positioned and would be reoccurring in future years unless stated. The Leader of the Council committed to the provision of delivering youth services in the Borough for the current administration and should be invested in year on year.

A Member sought clarification on the number of recruited community enforcement officers. In response, it was confirmed that 3 officers would be recruited.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. The Committee considered and noted the draft revenue budget proposals 2024/25 –2027/28 to date that related to the remit of the Scrutiny Overview Committee and associated discussion actions.**
- 2. The Committee considered and noted the draft capital schemes 2024/25 – 2027/28 included in the draft capital programme that relate to the remit of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.**
- 3. The Committee noted that the revenue budget for 2024/25 was not balanced, with a gap of c£18m, and requested that a further report be considered by the Scrutiny Overview Committee if there any significant changes to draft proposals outlined relating to services within the committee’s remit.**
- 4. The Committee welcomed investment put forward in respect of youth service provision and request that consideration be given to any further investment needed in the base budget subject to satisfactory feedback data.**

45. Forecast Revenue and Capital Outturn for 2023/24 – 6 month position ended 30 September 2023

The Committee received a report which considered the forecast revenue and capital outturn for 2023/24 up to 30 September 2023.

Members noted that in relation to forecast capital, there was a £280k underspend after re-phasing of £7.14m into 2024/25. In respect of forecast revenue, it was noted that there was a predicted overspend of £680k with use of earmarked reserves.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- ‘A41 Moxley Transforming Cities Fund’ and ‘One Palfrey Big Local’ were new grants as a part of the capital programme for 2023/24. Further information would be provided to Members in writing once further details are released.
- A Member sought clarification on the proposal for ‘Renovation Park Tennis Courts’. It was confirmed that further information would be provided to Members in writing.
- The terms ‘business as usual’ and ‘impact of service transformation plan’ in relation to Adult Social Care were categorisations of budgetary planning rather than unaccounted expenditure.
- Pipeline Development Fund was a programme to provide a number of significant investment schemes, which were principally approved and subject to further business case approval.

- In response to a question on Social Housing Carbonisation reduction, there was a view that savings had been identified as part of the programme of works rather than a reduction of services. Further details would be provided to Members in writing.
- Further information on the allocation of £20m of investment funding in relation to Darlaston would be provided to Members as and when announced by Government.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and officers for their attendance.

Resolved:

1. **That, the forecast 2023/24 year-end financial position for the Council as a whole and remit of the Committee be noted.**
2. **That, information on the following items be circulated to Members of the Committee in writing:**
 - a. **A41 Moxley Transforming Cities Fund**
 - b. **One Palfrey Big Local**
 - c. **Renovation Park Tennis Courts**
 - d. **Social Housing Carbonisation reduction.**

46. **Areas of focus – 2023/24**

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. [Annexed]

The Senior Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee that a report on recommendation tracking in respect of the School Gate Parking Working Group would be delayed until 18 April 2024. In addition, following a lengthy discussion, the following changes were made to the areas of focus for 2024:

- Walsall Borough Local Plan – Moved to 14 March 2024 due to timescales in respect to the consultation.
- Final Budget and Capital Programme Report – Added to 6 February 2024
- Emergency Planning – An update on lessons learned from Covid-19 pandemic, Operation Freeway and an invitation to the operators of M6 Toll. Added to 6 February 2024.

The Committee received feedback from the Chairs of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees on meetings of their committees since 9 November 2023.

Resolved:

That, the areas of focus for 2023-24 as amended and forward plans be noted.

47. **Recommendations Tracker**

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items. [Annexed].

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

48. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the date of the meeting would be 6 February 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.33p.m.

Signed:

Date: