

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 NOVEMBER 2018

PRESENT

Councillor D. Acton (in the Chair).

Councillors C. Boyes (Vice-Chair), R. Bowker, J. Coupe, J. Holden, A. New, B. Shaw, S. Taylor, S. Thomas, A.J. Williams, M. Young and D. Western (ex-Officio)

Also Present

Cllr A. Western	- Leader of the Council
Cllr M. Cordingley	- Executive Member for Finance
Cllr M. Freeman	- Executive Member for Constitutional Reform & Resident Engagement
Cllr J. Wright	- Executive Member for Investment, Regeneration & Strategic Planning
Cllr G. Coggins	- Leader of the Green Party Group

In Attendance

G. Bentley	- Head of Financial Management
P. Forrester	- Head of Governance
C. Gaffey	- Democratic & Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R. Chilton (Ex-Officio).

20. MINUTES

The Chair requested that two alterations be made to the minutes.

The reference to 'the Grenfell Tower enquiry's decision to ban combustible cladding on buildings 18 floor or higher' in paragraph 4 of minute 17 should be amended to reflect that this was in fact a Government decision (not the Grenfell Enquiry's decision).

Also in minute 17, it was requested that the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) be invited to meet with Council Officers and Members to discuss the options available for retrofitting sprinklers in buildings. It was asked that this be listed in the 'resolved' section of the minute.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 October 2018, incorporating the changes listed above, be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

22. CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP - PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director for Governance and Community Strategy detailing the recommendations of the cross-party Constitution

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Working Group (CWG) setup to review current practice in a number of areas, with the aim of improving openness, transparency and public engagement within the Council. The report was presented by the Executive Member for Constitutional Reform and Resident Engagement, and had recently been considered by the Standards Committee. The report would also be considered by the Executive before being presented to full Council on 28 November 2018. The CWG would be meeting again in January 2019 to discuss other areas which remained under review.

Members discussed the changes proposed in the report. It was felt that a process would need to be agreed on the proposals to allow members of the public to ask questions at meetings. How questions were managed at the meeting itself would be at the Chairs' discretion, but it was suggested that any questions raised should be relevant to that Committee and its remit. It was also suggested that questions should be submitted in advance of the meeting to allow for these to be reviewed by the Legal Team to ensure they were relevant and not vexatious. The Head of Governance agreed to incorporate these comments and propose a process on how these questions were considered, which would be included in the final report to full Council. Members agreed with the proposals in principle, but were mindful of the difficulty already faced when trying to complete all business at some busy meetings, and felt that the addition of questions from members of the public could create further time pressures.

Some Members raised their concern about moving all meetings to paperless. Members agreed that an attempt should be made to have paperless meetings, but felt it would be difficult in some instances where large reports which required cross-referencing with previous reports were being considered.

The Committee were advised that proposals on motions at full Council had been presented to the Constitution Working Group, and Members of the Group had been asked to take these proposals back to their respective Political Groups for discussion and comment. Members were asked to provide their feedback to the Head of Governance. The proposals and any comments received on these could then be considered at the next CWG meeting in January 2019. Many Members remained frustrated by the time constraints at some full Council meetings where there was limited time available to speak on motions. It was agreed that something needed to change to improve debate, but whilst ensuring that limitations were not enforced which could dilute the democratic process.

Some Members asked whether the new signature threshold for debating petitions at full Council and Executive meetings were too low. Members were advised that analysis had been conducted against the petitions received by the Council in previous years, and the CWG Members had agreed these thresholds were adequate.

The Committee were generally in favour of the proposals which would improve openness and transparency within the Council.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That a process for considering questions from members of the public at Committee meetings be formulated based on the discussion at the meeting and included in the final report to full Council.
- 2) That the proposals in the report, incorporating the comments raised, be endorsed for referral to full Council.

23. 2019/20 DRAFT BUDGET PRESENTATION BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL, INCLUDING UPDATE ON THE INVESTMENT STRATEGY

The Committee received a joint presentation of the Leader of the Council and the Executive Member for Investment, Regeneration and Strategic Planning, providing details of the 2019/20 Draft Budget Proposals and Investment Strategy. Following the identification of areas of additional income and receipts, the revised budget gap since the Committee received its update in October now stood at approximately £800k. Further proposals were being considered on how the remaining budget gap would be addressed.

In relation to the Investment Strategy, the Council expected to recover an exit fee following the ending of the No1 One Trafford investment, which should end up being cost neutral. The Council were currently awaiting guidance on whether they could go ahead with investing in the UK Wide Zone (Zone 3 – referred to on page 19 of the agenda).

When discussing the additional income from the green waste fee, Members were advised that the numbers had increased year on year and this was expected to continue. The green waste fee would not be increased.

Questions were also raised around the Adult Social Care Budget, and Members asked how certain the projected savings associated with these proposals were. The Leader acknowledged that these demand led budgets and savings proposals carried a level of uncertainty, but felt that the proposals were not over ambitious. The introduction of new technological equipment would help drive the Right Care For You project, and the Let's Talk model had attracted national attention and been highly successful in some Local Authorities.

Continuing the discussion on the Social Care Budget, Members were advised that additional foster carers had now been recruited, and a significant amount of modelling had been done by Children's Services on child in care placements, which should see the amount of out of borough placements reduced. The Committee were advised that foster carers had been identified to care for two children currently placed out of borough, which could generate a significant net saving when the cost of the fosterers had been taken into account. The Council was also looking into adopting the Mockingbird Model – a fostering model which had been successful in the United States of America, which aimed at creating satellite families to replicate the family unit. A network of foster carers would be created to assist each other with respite opportunities and help underpin placements in the borough. Members were reminded that these potential savings did not entail removing provision from children who had special requirements, and

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the Leader was confident that these children's needs and requirements would be met by placing them back in borough.

When discussing car parking charges, Members were advised that the analysis had determined that this would not have an effect on town centre footfall. The 2017/18 proposals had not adversely effected Altrincham Town Centre, and it was noted that the evening element of the parking fees would not be introduced until the following year.

Members were reminded that the general inflation provision was passed onto the individual service areas every year and this process had not changed. In relation to the general contingency budget, the lower level of savings programme compared to previous years gave scope to reduce the overall contingency budget. The level of contingencies required was constantly assessed to ensure the budget was robust.

Members discussed the customer service model and how improving the digitalisation of services could deliver savings whilst enhancing the services for residents. It was agreed that the correct balance was required to ensure everyone could access these services, as not all residents had online access.

The Committee discussed the additional £400k which would be generated from recovering housing benefit overpayment and the potential reasons for this. Although the amount seemed high, it was noted that this was in line with the trend in recent years, but Members could be provided with further information on this if they required. It was noted that the amounts being recovered in future would reduce with the introduction of Universal Credit.

Members requested clarity over the changes to the Council Tax and Social Care Precept for next year's budget. The Council could raise a total of 6% for the Social Care Precept over the 3 year period, with 2019/20 being the final period it could be levied. As the Council had levied 3% and 2% increases in the two previous years, this allowed for a 1% increase in 2019/20. The general increase in basic Council Tax would be 2.99%, giving a total proposed increase of 3.99%.

The Committee discussed the increased costs associated with improving Leisure Centre provision in Altrincham and Stretford, as well as the vision for Sale Leisure Centre. Members were advised that the previous projected costs were based on business cases designed to provide modest improvements to facilities in those areas. New business cases had been put together since these projections, which would provide much better facilities, but at a higher cost. The proposals could be more ambitious now, with UA92 helping to drive these. No business plan was in place for Sale as of yet, but the Leader acknowledged the need to improve provision in this area and hoped a business case would be brought forward in the coming couple of months. The Executive were also looking to provide some interim funds to improve the centre in the meantime, possibly using some of the £1m retained by Trafford Leisure Trust which was ring-fenced for use at the Sale site. When discussing the impending closure of the Trafford Soccerdome, Members were advised that the Council was corresponding with the local Football Association to discuss potential provision. Although it was a regrettable situation

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and would affect a number of residents, the Soccerdome was a private business which meant the Council had little control over the situation.

It was confirmed that the loan provided in respect of the redevelopment in Salford was projected to provide a 6% yield, with a £372k expected return on the investment in the first year, £1.6m in the second year, and £1.86m in the third year.

Members were advised that work was ongoing on scoping how the Broom House building in Seymour Grove could be repaired, and whether this could be added to the capital budget for the coming year.

The Committee asked what assurance could be provided that the Council was safeguarding its investments. Members were advised that the key element considered when investing was security, and that external advisors the CBRE Group, supported by other professional valuation and property condition advisors, provided advice and due diligence support on all proposals. All investment decisions were considered by the Council's Investment Management Board. Also, a proportion of the new income streams were used for setting prudent sums aside for debt repayment and provisions and this would be done on an annual basis in line with national guidance. There was also a risk reserve in place to cover periods of void affecting returns from the investments made. It was also important to have a diverse investment portfolio. The Council has approved a budget of £300m for investment in commercial assets.

The Chairman thanked the Executive Members and Officers for attending the meeting and answering Scrutiny Members' questions. The Chair and Vice-Chair would agree the arrangements for the upcoming Budget Scrutiny Working Group sessions scheduled for 4 and 6 December 2018 in due course, and Democratic Services would contact all the relevant Members and Officers to advise.

RESOLVED:

1. That the update be noted.
2. That the Chair and Vice-Chair agree the arrangements for the upcoming Budget Scrutiny Working Group sessions scheduled for 4 and 6 December 2018, and that Democratic Services contact all the relevant Members and Officers to advise.

24. OVERVIEW REPORT

The Committee received a report of the Scrutiny Committee Chair providing information on the work programme, Task & Finish group reviews, Scrutiny recommendations, and a summary of recent Executive decisions.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

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The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and finished at 7.57 pm