



Buckinghamshire Council

Finance & Resources Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER 2020 VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.32 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

R Bagge (Chairman), D Anthony, M Appleyard, M Bateman, T Butcher, S Chhokar, A Christensen, G Harris, H Mordue, D Shakespeare OBE, M Smith, M Stannard and C Whitehead

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

J Chilver, M Tett and K Wood

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies had been received from Mrs Jilly Jordan. The Chairman welcomed Mr Mike Appleyard as a new member of the committee, replacing Mr Brian Roberts.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2020 were agreed as an accurate record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman explained to the Committee that initial discussions had taken place with officers in preparation for the budget scrutiny inquiry taking place in January. A budget briefing would be arranged with members in November/December and a scoping document would be presented to this committee for agreement at its next meeting.

6 RETURN OF STAFF TO THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT AND UPDATE ON FUTURE WAYS OF WORKING

Ms Katrina Wood, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources provided an overview of the return of staff to the office environment. Ms Wood summarised the slides appended to the agenda pack and updated the Committee of the progress made to date. Much of the work which had commenced had to be reviewed following the updated Government advice issued on 22 September that people should remain working at home, where possible. The following points were highlighted:

- A return to office steering group, chaired by the Corporate Director for Planning, Growth and Sustainability was in place and developing a dynamic action plan.
- Employees had been categorised to understand the numbers who needed to be in the office to undertake their role, who would predominantly be home based, whose role was community based and who needed to be office based because their home environment was not suitable. Signage had been installed in all council buildings, along with screens where customer contact would take place, there was a system for staff to sign in to maintain track and trace requirements and desks had been colour coded so staff knew where they could work when in the office.
- Increased support was in place for staff working from home including the Employee Assistance Programme which provided counselling, a number of Health and Wellbeing Champions, Webinars and eLearning courses and online wellbeing and fitness activities organised by staff. Staff had also been supplied with the appropriate software and hardware to undertake their roles from home.
- There had been comprehensive communications and engagement for staff including regular vlogs from the Chief Executive, virtual roadshows for staff, regular updates on the intranet, consultations with employee reps and trade unions respectively, and surveys to understand staffs experience at home.
- With government guidance changing to reflect the number of cases locally, guidance was kept under regular review and the impact of staff working from home was being considered as part of a longer term strategy.

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- A member queried what the workplace financial implications had been and the committee was advised that colleagues in facilities management had kept track of covid related spend and the Council would continue to lobby Government to cover these actual costs.
- The number of staff in each of the work place categories was queried. The Committee was advised that the vast majority of staff were working from home, role permitting but many staff did have to be in the offices, which had been made covid secure, for a variety of reasons. Mr I Thompson, Corporate Director for Planning, Growth and Sustainability advised that he would circulate numbers of staff in each category to members following the meeting.
Action: I Thompson
- The Committee was advised that 800 was the maximum occupancy within the offices, although not all space was necessarily utilised each day. There was a system in place to keep track of numbers in the offices on a daily basis and a requirement for staff to sign in and out. Mr Thompson agreed to circulate a typical week's figures for office use following the meeting.
Action: I Thompson
- In terms of the responsibility the Council had for the health and safety of its staff, Ms

Wood clarified that staff working at home had completed risk assessments. Capturing covid related sickness was also discussed. The committee was advised that covid had been recorded as a sickness code since July and the recorded numbers of staff taking time off due to the sickness was low, reflecting the rate of covid within the county. The overall sickness rate over the lockdown period was significantly lower than what would normally be expected over those months, a theme seen across many office based employers. The Committee gave thanks to all staff who had continued to deliver business as usual services in challenging circumstances and noted that the physical measures, signage and staff interactions had been exemplary.

- Future use of office space was an area officers were starting to look at with options for the entire Council estate being reviewed. It was expected that this work would take place over the next 12 months and options would be presented to members.

7 6 MONTH REVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2020 BUDGET SCRUTINY TASK & FINISH GROUP

Mr M Tett, Leader presented the report and placed on record his thanks to the Finance and Resources Committee for their work in scrutinising the budget. The update paper appended to the agenda pack provides an update to each of the recommendations made by the 2020 Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group.

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- A member asked what steps the council had taken in its strategy to reduce agency staff, particularly in the planning service. Mr Tett and Ms Wood affirmed that addressing agency numbers was a priority of the Council. The Committee was advised that work had been undertaken to identify the number of agency workers and understand whether their roles were to cover established posts or whether they had been employed to focus on particular projects. It was confirmed that the council used one single supplier for agency staff and the use of agency staff was understood and controlled. Work was underway to promote the Council as an excellent place to work, this included a successful social media campaign that had helped recruit other national shortage occupations within the Council, notably children's services and adult social care. Attempts were made to convert agency staff to permanent contracts where appropriate and the wider picture of looking at reward structures and creating an excellent culture were ongoing areas of work HR were undertaking in partnership with service areas. The planning service was currently in the first wave of service transformation and as part of the transition to a larger authority some experienced staff had been moved across teams to maximise performance.
- Mr Tett advised the Committee that much of the transformation progress planned for the April to August period had been significantly affected due to the Council's efforts being focused on its covid response. Due to the potential of a second wave, the Committee were informed that this may further affect progress with staff potentially having to move from their business as usual roles to once again support the covid response. Cabinet Members had been asked to re-visit priorities as significant resources set aside to deliver all priorities were expected to be diverted to the covid response.
- A member questioned the Council's strategy for dealing with and allocating monies received from section 106 and community infrastructure levy (CIL) developer contributions and queried the influence members had over this funding. The Committee was advised that the recently published Government consultation on planning, the Planning White Paper, proposed s106 and CIL be abolished and replaced with a levy on developments over a certain threshold. Discussions had been held with the portfolio

holder about harmonising the legacy councils' approaches with the intention of involving local members.

- Key worker housing was listed as a priority in the update report and the Committee noted that a report had been proposed for autumn to assess possible business cases. The Committee was advised that a paper to develop a strategy on affordable housing was in progress, although had been delayed, in part due to the covid pandemic. It was hoped that the report would be available this side of Christmas. Mr J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Property and Assets advised that a survey was about to commence to establish the need for key worker housing and to collect evidence so that the Council could focus on where it is needed the most and identify any further barriers to recruitment and retention of staff.
- In response to a query around parking restrictions being the responsibility of Community Boards, Mr Tett explained that whilst TfB were funded by the Council there was no central budget for certain areas of need, including parking restrictions. These had been devolved to the former County Council Local Area Forums so that local members could look at restrictions in their areas and address whether they could be part funded through the LAF along with match funding from town and parish councils. Town and parish council partnership working remained key with community boards now exploring local parking needs and options. It was explained that introducing restrictions involved significant costs such as staff and legal costs and various cycles of local consultation. The Committee was advised that local residents' expectations had to be managed appropriately.
- Members were informed that the development of a parking strategy had not progressed as it had been hoped due to covid-19 and the impact the pandemic had had on residents travel patterns. A significant loss of income in parking had been evident with charges suspended into July to support retail businesses and car parks not being utilised at the level they were pre-lockdown. A strategy would be developed once post-pandemic travel patterns emerged.
- A question was put to the Leader and Deputy Leader on the success of Community Boards to date. It was explained that due to the ongoing pandemic, many of the Boards had only recently been stood up, with many having only held one meeting so far. Mr Tett advised that success of the Boards was dependant on having a good chairman and a membership group where every voice was heard and the full membership felt able to participate. Initial meetings had been well attended, early funding applications made and a number of Boards had already started the process of setting subgroups up to look at strategic issues affecting their areas. Local consultation in decision making was recognised as being important and cabinet reports were in the process of being updated to ensure they captured the views of community boards.

8 Q1 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

Ms K Wood, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources presented the Q1 Budget Monitoring Report which was presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 28 July. Ms Wood summarised the report which reflected the business as usual and covid pressures faced during that period.

The forecast revenue outturn was an overspend of £5.97m. Many pressures were covid related with not all costs being recovered and not all lost income being offset by Government. 'Business as usual' pressures were noted in adult services within learning disability budgets, childrens services within home to school transport budgets and in staffing budgets within the Planning, Growth and Sustainability directorate. A quarter 2 update report would be presented to Cabinet at the end of October and the Committee was advised that figures were not expected to be

significantly different with many income streams still yet to have been stood up by the end of Q2. The committee was advised that it was difficult to predict additional lost income and further Government support at the present time with covid cases on the rise again locally, and nationally. Further, it was noted that there may be slippage on capital increases due to the impact of covid.

The following key points were raised by the Select Committee members during discussion:

- In relation to Government support, the committee was advised that the council had been lobbying where it could and awaited the rules and regulations to be shared around lost income. Local Members of Parliament were aware of the council's concerns, particularly around the reimbursement of fees and charges and concerns around the collection of council tax and business rates, all of which lead to difficulties with forecasting for the next financial year. The Council had received information from Government on the income protection scheme, however this scheme applied only to the current financial year and there was a lack of clarity on support to local authorities in the next year.
- Leisure centres were recognised as a significant strain on this year's budget, and potentially could be an issue in the next year, dependant on the local and national situation. Central Government was being lobbied on this issue which was a significant concern for many local authorities, with leisure centres being outsourced and the Council receiving an income from leisure operators.
- Clarity was provided on the difference between the transformation delivery programme and transition funding in such that a transition budget was created in the lead up to becoming a unitary authority and at the beginning of the year this had an underspend which was moved to the transformation programme which the Shadow Authority had previously approved to focus on bringing teams and systems together to deliver further savings. The balance of the transition fund had been added to the 14m transformation pot to total 16.7m. Covid had delayed some of the transformation work although service reviews had commenced and remained closely monitored.
- Concern was raised that since the return to school in September, home to school transport could be further overspent than noted in the Q1 update. The Committee was advised that covid had significantly affected this income stream and support had to be given to providers. Further pressures were expected in this area within the next monitoring report.
- Childrens services remained a substantial concern due to the sensitivity and importance of the service and its demand driven nature where individual cases can have significant associated costs. As a result of the lockdown period and increased family tensions, severe financial pressure were anticipated.
- In comparison to other local authorities, the Committee was advised that in relation to national emergency funding it had received from Government, the Council was not in as difficult a position as many other local authorities found themselves and were not at any present risk of having to publish a section 114 notice. It was confirmed that there was still a large funding gap and Government lobbying would continue to ensure covid related costs were fully recovered.

The timing of the report was discussed and the Committee was advised that the calendar of meetings had not tied in well with the monitoring report this meeting cycle, however the November meeting would be more timely for the Q2 report to be discussed.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the work programme as appended to the agenda pack. The Committee was advised that the climate change strategy was an area of work on the work programme of the Transport, Environment and Climate Change Select Committee. The scrutiny officer would circulate reports to members of this Committee for their information and if any member wished to attend to contribute to those meetings this could be explored.

The Committee requested a report on section 106 and CIL contributions to understand the level of contributions the Council had at present and the proposals and associated timelines for spending. Members were concerned that these payments were time limited and that some funds were held on behalf of town and parish councils who may not be aware of timescales for spending. This issue had also been raised at Community Board meetings.

The Committee also requested a further covid update report be provided at its next meeting so that it could assess how the situation had changed since the last update report was presented in June.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Thursday 26 November 2020 at 2 p.m.