

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

15TH FEBRUARY 2021, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors J. Till (Vice-Chairman), C.A. Hotham, R. J. Hunter, A. D. Kriss, P. M. McDonald, C. J. Spencer, M. Thompson and P. Whittaker

Observers: Councillor K. May – Leader and Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, the Town Centre and Strategic Partnerships
Councillor G. N. Denaro – Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling

Officers: Mr. K. Dicks, Mrs. S. Hanley, Mrs. R. Bamford, Mr. C. Forrester, Mrs J. Willis Mr. G. Revans, Mr. D. Riley, Mr. M. Austin, and Ms K. Goldey

Democratic Services Officers: Ms. A Scarce and Mrs. J Gresham

70/20

ELECTION OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD CHAIRMAN

Nominations for the position of Chairman were received in respect of Councillor C. Hotham. On being put to the vote a majority of Members on the Board agreed that Councillor Hotham should be appointed Chairman.

RESOLVED that Councillor C. Hotham be appointed as Chairman of the Board for the remainder of the municipal year.

71/20

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R. Deeming with Councillor P. Whittaker as named substitute.

72/20

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS

There were no declarations of interest nor of any whipping arrangements.

73/20

TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD HELD ON 11TH JANUARY 2021

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 11th January 2021 were submitted for Members' consideration.

The Chairman enquired whether it was possible for Councillor R. Hunter to have a dispensation considered in respect of the declaration of the pecuniary interest regarding his employment with a not-for-profit-housing association. Officers undertook to look into this and provide an update at a future meeting.

It was noted that there was a duplication of the subtitle Notice of Motion - Encouraging responsible use of fireworks at item 64/20 Notice of Motions - Request to Investigate. The Democratic Services Officer present undertook to make the correction.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 11th January 2021 be approved as an accurate record.

74/20

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2021/22 TO 2024/25 (INCLUDING THE CAPITAL PROGRAMME) - PRE-SCRUTINY

The Head of Financial and Customer Services presented the Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021/22 to 2023/24 and in so doing highlighted the following points for Members' consideration:

- District Councils could increase Council Tax by a maximum of 2.99 per cent or £5. Officers were proposing that Council Tax should be increased by £5 in Bromsgrove. This would help the Council to have a robust financial position going forward.
- There was a sizeable gap in the budget which was considered a difficult position to start from and had been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and uncertainty in respect of grant funding from Central Government.
- There was pressure on the incremental progression which was driven by the increase in pay award at 2.75% instead of the expected 1%.
- Additional pressures, including loss of income from car parking fees, though some of these losses in income from parking had been offset by the financial support provided by Central Government.

- There was a correction to the Business Case in respect of Commercial Waste which had been a result of an increase in costs charged by Severn Trent Water.
- New Revenue bids had been received which were mainly concerned with provision of IT Member Support and Training.
- The Corporate Management Team (CMT) and budget managers had reviewed the Council's budget and in doing so had identified a number of savings and income opportunities. The cumulative amount of these identified significant savings of £426k.
- A significant grant had been received from the Lower Tiers Services Grant which had not been expected.
- The proposed budget would result in a return of £22,000 to reserves in 2021/22. However, significant gaps remained in 2022/23 and 2023/24. This would result in a substantial amount of work being done in order to address these gaps for future years.
- New Homes Bonus was likely to no longer be available by 2023-4.
- There had been significant capital funding bids for Disabled Facilities Grants in addition to the 'Green Thread' bids. However, it was clarified that some of the funding in respect of the electric vehicle charge points was to be funded by using grant funding that had been received.
- Covid-19 and Brexit had impacted on the future financial position of the Council. However, both had been placed on the Risk Register and officers were working on mitigating any risks associated with these.

Following the presentation of the report the Chairman invited the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling to comment, and he explained that it had been a significant piece of work to prepare the budget in such difficult circumstances however, despite this, a balanced budget was still being proposed. He thanked the Head of Finance and Customer Services and his team for their hard work.

Following the presentation, the Board discussed the proposed deferral of the recruitment of two Environmental Services Officer roles which had been presented as part of the Medium-Term Financial Plan. After detailed debate regarding the proposed deferral the following recommendation was proposed by Councillor R. Hunter:

That the two the Environmental Services Officers roles, as outlined in the Medium-Term Finance Plan, be reinstated and not deferred as proposed within the Plan.

On being put to the vote this recommendation was lost.

Members questioned officers in respect of the potential loss of parking revenue in the Town Centre for future years. The Head of Finance and Customer Services reported that it was expected that there would be a decrease in car parking revenue in the first quarter and therefore this had been reflected the core budget.

In response to Members' questions regarding the Correction to the Disposal Budget on Commercial Waste. It was clarified by the Head of Environmental Services and Housing Property Services that the increase in costs for the disposal of waste were due to the increase in the amount of waste that was being collected in addition to the cost increases charged by Severn Trent Water for the disposal of waste. Members were informed that during the pandemic the Commercial Waste service figures had been slightly distorted but that new customers were still signing up for the service and which would result in a continued increase in income.

During the consideration of this item further clarification was requested in respect of the following:

- Mileage and professional services. Members were informed that the savings in respect of mileage appeared several times within the Plan across various Service Areas and that mileage claims were still being made.
- Fleet Replacement. It was clarified that work had been undertaken in respect of the replacement of the fleet with electric or hybrid vehicles. It was reported that vehicles with these fuel types were considerably more expensive than the current vehicles and further work would be undertaken, and any findings reported back to Members later in 2021.
- Covid-19 Business Grants. Members were informed that the discretionary grants had been reflected within the Plan in addition to the grants received in respect of fees and charges. The process was explained in detail regarding how the grants would be allocated in the future.

RESOLVED to note the report.

The Financial Support Manager presented the Council Tax Support Scheme 2021/22 report and in so doing highlighted the following points for Members' consideration:

- The Council Tax Support Scheme was reviewed on an annual basis.
- The amended scheme had been considered by Cabinet in draft form earlier in the municipal year and had subsequently been subject to public consultation in October 2020. The majority of those who had responded through the consultation process were broadly in support of the proposed scheme.
- The proposed changes would result in an increase in costs to the Council of approximately £136,000.
- The new banded scheme worked in a more integrated way with Universal Credit and make the process simpler for the customer.
- There would be an increase in the level of support to the most vulnerable residents.
- The hardship provisions from the previous were to be retained and residents whose eligibility had been reduced under the new scheme would be able to apply for these provisions.

The Chairman invited the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Enabling to comment on the report. He reiterated the hardship provision included within the proposed new scheme and highlighted that those who were most in need would still receive support going forward. It was confirmed that the hardship provision information was available on the Council's website and it was possible to apply for funding online and claims were dealt with by a specialist team that dealt with applications.

Following presentation of the report Members raised some concerns in respect of the data provided regarding the number of residents that might be adversely impacted by the proposed scheme. Officers were questioned whether any modelling had been conducted to understand the potential impact on residents in the District, particularly those who were to experience a decrease in the amount of Council Tax reduction they received. In addition to this, it was queried what the rationale was regarding the reduced level of support for the single person and childless couple client group which was included within the report. Officers confirmed that any Council Tax scheme was required to incentivise a return to work and the paragraph included within the report was not a comment on any particular client group.

Some Members commented that that although they understood the reservations expressed by some Members that it was positive that

hardship provision was still available for those who were potentially affected by the new scheme. However, it was requested that the scheme be revisited in the next financial year to see if it was operating as expected. It was clarified that this scheme was revised or replaced on an annual basis.

After lengthy debate, Councillor R. Hunter proposed the following:

The decrease in Council Tax support for the 28% of residents, as detailed in the report, be quantified and presented to Cabinet before their consideration of the Council Tax Support Scheme report.

On being put to the vote this recommendation was lost.

Councillor P. McDonald presented an amendment to the Board in respect of the removal of the paragraph within the report regarding reduction in the amount of Council Tax support for those in the single person or childless couple client group. However, this recommendation was withdrawn and not put to the vote.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

76/20

EQUALITIES TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT

Councillor P. McDonald introduced the Equalities Task Group Final Report for Members' consideration and highlighted the following:

- There had been regular attendance at the Task Group meetings which had resulted in a consistent approach during meetings and enabled the investigation to be completed in good time.
- The recommendations of the Task Group would hopefully enhance the Equalities policies that were already in place within Council operations.

The Chairman reiterated Councillor McDonald's point regarding the importance of consistency for Task Groups and that this should be a consideration when undertaking future task group investigations.

RECOMMENDED that the report and recommendations as detailed in it be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 31st March 2021.

77/20

FINANCE AND BUDGET WORKING GROUP - UPDATE

The Chairman introduced the Finance and Budget Working Group update and explained that the Working Group had met on 11th February 2021 and had looked at a number of areas in detail.

Members were informed that the Medium-Term Financial Plan had been considered in addition to the additional costs that were associated with Commercial Waste. He explained that due to the increase in septic tank disposal costs from Severn Trent Water the revenue from the Commercial Waster Service would be impacted. He clarified that officers were consulting with Severn Trent Water to see if there were any potential solutions to the increase in charges.

Also highlighted for Member's attention that work was being undertaken regarding the type of lifting mechanism currently used in the bin lorry vehicles. It was explained that there had been some issues regarding the lifting of bins with the current type of mechanisms and that there might need to be a gradual, replacement bin programme in the future. Members queried whether there was the potential to use a hybrid version and the Democratic Services officer present undertook to ask the relevant officers and provide the information to the Committee.

RESOLVED that the Finance and Budget Working Group update be noted.

78/20

TASK GROUP UPDATES

a) Impact of Review of Library Services Task Group – Chairman, Councillor S. Colella

Councillor S. Colella presented this update and informed Members that the final meeting had taken place for the Task group and a report had been drafted and would be presented at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting that was due to take place in March 2021.

b) Impact of Flooding in the District Task Group – Chairman, Councillor R. Hunter

Councillor R. Hunter updated the Board regarding the Task Group and informed Members that the final meeting was due to take place during the following week. He informed Members that he please with the recommendations that had been proposed as a result of the investigation. The report would be presented to the Board at the meeting due to take place in March 2021.

RESOLVED that the verbal updates in respect of the Task Groups be noted.

79/20

WORCESTERSHIRE HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - UPDATE

Councillor J. Till presented the update from the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) and advised Members that there had been one meeting since the last Board meeting. Members were informed that Peter Pinfield, the Chairman of Healthwatch Worcestershire, had sadly passed away in January 2021.

During the meeting updates on Covid-19 and the vaccination programme had been provided and Councillor Till highlighted that the data fluctuated regularly. It was confirmed that any information received would continue to be circulated to Members as and when it was received.

RESOLVED that the verbal update in respect of the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

80/20

CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Cabinet Work programme dated 1st February 2021 to 31st May 2021 was considered by the Board.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet Work Programme be noted and that the Overview and Scrutiny Board's Work Programme for 2020-21, be updated to include any items that had been discussed and agreed during the course of the meeting.

81/20

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME

This item was discussed as part of the previous item.

The meeting closed at 7.49 p.m.

Chairman