

MINUTES  
OF A MEETING OF THE  
**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

held on 29 January 2024

Present:

Cllr J Brown (Chair)  
Cllr A Kirby (Vice-Chair)

Cllr H Akberali	Cllr J Morley
Cllr K Davis	Cllr L Rice
Cllr A Javaid	Cllr M Sullivan
Cllr R Leach	

Also Present: Councillors A-M Barker and D Roberts

Absent: Councillors A Caulfield

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Caulfield.

**2. MINUTES**

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on Monday, 20 November 2023 and 11 December 2023 be approved and signed as a true and correct record.

**3. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE PREVIOUS MINUTES OSC24-002**

The Chairman introduced the report on matters raised at previous meetings of the Committee, drawing the Committee's attention to actions undertaken subsequently.

In response to a question from the Chair Beverley Kuchar confirmed that Byfleet and West Byfleet had been made aware that approximately £4000 of its CIL funding had accidentally been attributed to Byfleet Ward and then spent. It was confirmed that the attribution had been corrected and that the money would be recouped in time.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

**4. URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business to discuss.

**5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were received.

**6. FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT - BUDGET MONITORING AND FORECAST 2023-24 - QUARTER 3 OSC24-006**

Kevin Foster introduced the item and noted that there had been an improvement from the Q2 report. Although service pressures had increased by £700,000 there had been a £5 million improvement in the corporate items. It was forecast that the Council's overspend would total £3.277 million for the year 2023/24.

It was requested that table headings be carried overpage for convenience in future editions.

It was discussed whether comparators from pre-covid could be included in the report however, the indicators captured were significantly changed and it was unlikely that consistent comparisons could be provided.

Beverley Kuchar undertook to provide details on the £705,000 business rates overspend for Red car park.

It was not anticipated that the staffing restructure would impact the delivery of the Local Plan for 2027. There was budget provisioned to deliver the Local Plan and use of necessary consultants.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

**7. CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023-24 TO 2027-28 OSC24-003**

It was noted that the item had been renamed to the Capital Programme from the Investment Programme in reflection that the programme was fundamentally different from previous years.

The Programme included provision for the Victoria Square and ThamesWey investments to allow for best value to the public purse.

Approximately £16.8 million was sought for housing in the 2023/24 Programme.

The Acting Director of Place confirmed that there was provision for play area maintenance in the budget. The moneys from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for play areas was to be used to perform remedial works. Beverley Kuchar would confirm outside of the meeting whether Sutton Green was one of the play areas that would receive remedial works.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

## 8. GENERAL FUND BUDGETS UPDATE 2024-25 OSC24-004

The report separated the deficit in the Council's 'business as usual' budget from its historic investments.

Interest payments were expected to be £8 million for 2024/25 if Government support was provided. Without the support the Council would be required to repay an additional £97 million in debt repayments. Additionally, the Council would need to make another £67 million in interest payments on the remaining debt. The Council would also need to account for minimum revenue provision, both backdated at £356 million and for the year 2024/25 of £97 million.

The Council was due on paper to receive £44 million in loan interest payments for 2023/24. However, £43 million would not be received as two of the borrowers, ThamesWey and Victoria Square Woking Ltd, were unable to make payments. The same outcome was expected next year. Work was being undertaken by the two companies to identify if any repayments could be made.

Appendix 4, setting out the service savings, was yet to be published.

Eugene Walker, Section 151 Officer and Interim Director of Finance, highlighted the savings that had been identified, approximately £8.4 million, and recognised the scale of the savings against the Council's overall budget and the speed in which they had been identified. The Section 151 Officer was confident that the savings that had been identified were deliverable.

The overall budget pressures on the Council had risen to £20 million which therefore left a deficit of approximately £12 million.

Following consultation on Council restructure approximately 60 posts had been removed across the organisation as the Council refocused on delivering statutory services at the minimum viable position. Staff and the trade union had been kept informed throughout the consultation.

Local Partnerships had benchmarked the cost of the Council's services against other local authorities which helped inform the savings targeted. It was subsequently recommended by the Committee's Finance Working Group that a more significant, invasive exercise be performed that reviewed how the Council delivered several statutory services in comparison with other local authorities.

A channel shift project was underway at the Council to modernise and make more efficient many of the Council's customer-facing services. The intention was to enable more self-service by those with the facility to do so whilst maintaining support for those that could not access digital services. It was intended that the frontline contact centre be reoriented to resolve queries at first contact rather than direct customers to specific services.

Public consultation had demonstrated the public's interest in raising prices to keep Pool in the Park open. Consequently, the Council had raised charges and expected to generate an additional £460,000 revenue.

A number of community groups had expressed interest in taking over community assets and work was being undertaken to assess each. £140,000 of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) grants had been allocated to aid the process.

The Council had invited all recipients of grant funding to meet the National Lottery. 16 Organisations had attended.

Citizens Advice Woking (CAW) and the Lightbox had both agreed to review their business models. The Council had allocated UKSPF funding to aid each review; £30,000 and £130,000 respectively.

It was discussed why CAW and the Lightbox had been allocated such different amounts and the Chief Executive noted that UKSPF funding could not be provided for revenue purposes.

CAW was in receipt of other grants from the Council, provided from funding received from central government, notably the Syrian and Afghan refugee and Homes for Ukraine funds. The Council had also allocated £10,000 of funding for the court desk operated by Citizens Advice.

Although referenced in the reports and links provided concern was expressed that notice of the publication of the Equality Impact Assessments had not provided.

Concern was shared that withdrawing funding from CAW would equate to an increased cost to the Council greater than the savings from withdrawal of the grant. The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Councillor Roberts, noted that it would not be representative to approximate the increased cost to the Council as the Council's services were not efficient.

Should the Lightbox cease operation the Council would face substantial costs including from business rates liability as well as security costs for the empty site.

A benchmarking exercise had revealed that the Council spent significantly more on arts and sports than similarly sized local authorities.

Work on the street maintenance and sports ground contract was underway, simultaneously looking to deliver in-year savings as well as a new contract at a reduced cost. The new contract would still ensure that minimum service requirements would be met.

The Business Liaison team had been identified through the structural review to be shuttered. The Council intended to work with Surrey County Council to continue the work of the Business Liaison team.

10 public toilets were proposed for being mothballed, none of which were in the Town Centre. The Council was engaged with community organisations to provide alternative locations for those closed.

The Minister for Local Government had written to the Leader granting permission for the Council to raise its proportion of Council Tax by 10%, which was approximately equivalent to a 1% rise on a household's overall Council Tax bill. The rise equated to £1.1 million additional revenue per year. The Leadership had submitted a proposal to the Minister for a smaller increase, but this had not met with approval.

Although the Council organised the billing process it received precepts from Surrey County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner on their required tax levels. The 10% from the Borough contribution would make Woking the most expensive lower-tier authority in Surrey.

A new fixed-term debt coordinator post that would work with organisations providing debt advice was proposed in the papers. The role had been suggested in part to respond to comment from central Government for hardship mitigation for those unable to pay the increased Council Tax costs. Officers undertook to provide a job description for the role along with the budget papers when submitted to Council.

Concern was expressed that the organisations signposted by the Council to provide advice would do so only to specific populations or in a doctrinal manner. Officers would review any cases reported to them but considered that as part of due diligence any specific provisions would be accounted for.

The Working for All strategy was under review in recognition of the Council's situation. Work had already begun with Councillors and the Corporate Leadership Team on the Council's vision and mission.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

## **9. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUDGETS 2024-25 OSC24-005**

Louise Strongitharm, Strategic Director of Communities, explained the undertaking to bring the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) back into balance for the next year. Due to the work, it was expected that the HRA would have a surplus of £953,000 for the year 2024/25.

The Government had confirmed that local authorities could increase rents by CPI+1% which was contrary to previous years.

In total a capital programme of £16.7 million was proposed for the HRA in the next year.

The Government had removed the requirement for minimum revenue provision in the HRA some years previous in favour of a depreciation-akin model. The model allowed for provision to fund increased investment in the stock.

The Section 151 Officer noted that relatively few Councils made debt repayment provisions on the HRA.

It was suggested that residents be provided communication that although works were provisioned the programme would take time to be fulfilled. Officers agreed to the suggestion.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

## **10. WORK PROGRAMME OSC24-001**

The Chairman introduced the report on the updated Work Programme, drawing Members' attention to the key changes since the document had been received at the Committee's previous meeting.

The Committee was disappointed that Officers asked to pull the item on Freedom of Information Requests. The Chair agreed to work with Officers to deliver the report before the end of the Municipal Year.

The Committee agreed to remove the Climate Change, Enterprise M3 and Joint Waste Solutions items.

The Chief Executive suggested that the Committee consider an item on scrutiny other Councils in intervention were undertaking.

The Committee and Officers agreed that the structure of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be considered. It was suggested that there be a focus on Task and Finish groups to scrutinise specific topics.

An item on the St Johns footbridge over the railway was suggested. It was requested that a Scrutiny Topic Request form be submitted to the Chair and Vice-Chair for consideration.

Members had been informed that the Council had proposed no pay rise for Officers. Concern was raised that this would impact staff retention and the effectiveness of the recovery.

RESOLVED

That the Work Programme be noted.

#### **11. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP UPDATE OSC23-059**

The Chair of the Economic Development Working Group provided a verbal update of the previous meeting of the Group held on 25 October 2023.

The Chair of the Group recommended that the Channel Shift workstream identified under the Improvement and Recovery Programmed be considered either at the Working Group or by the Committee.

The Chair suggested that the work of Surrey County Council be scrutinised once it had taken over duties performed by Enterprise M3.

#### **12. FINANCE WORKING GROUP UPDATE OSC24-007**

The Committee received the update report of the Finance Working Group. A programme of fortnightly meetings had been incepted in October 2023 and a summary of the meetings held since the last Committee report was provided.

The Committee expressed its gratitude to Officers for the increased demands that had been placed on them in resourcing the increased number of meetings and their benefit recognised.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted.

**13. HOUSING WORKING GROUP UPDATE OSC24-008**

The Committee received the update report of the Housing Working Group.

RESOLVED

that the update be noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm  
and ended at 9.19 pm

Chairman: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_