

# MINUTES OF BROOKE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 FEBRUARY 2019

## PRESENT:

**Members of the Committee:** Councillors Claire Edwards (Chair), Mrs A'Barrow, Keeling, McQueen, Mrs New, Pacey-Day, Picker, Srivastava and Mrs Timms

**Officers:** Dan Green (Head of Environment and Public Realm), Chris Blundell (Financial Services Manager and Deputy Chief Financial Officer), Suzanne Turner (Human Resources Manager), Dave Gower (Arboricultural Officer) and Veronika Beckova (Democratic Services Officer)

## 13. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2018 were approved and signed by the Chair.

## 14. FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING 2018/19 Q3

The committee had previously been requested to bring copies of the relevant Cabinet report from 4 February to the meeting.

The Financial Services Manager and Deputy Chief Financial Officer attended the meeting to answer questions. The item was briefly introduced as per the Cabinet report and key points were highlighted:

### **General Fund Revenue Budgets**

Financially, the council was in a favourable position with a variance of £301,800 General Fund Revenue forecast for the end of the year. The Corporate Savings Target for 2018/19 of £360,000 has been achieved.

The General Fund balances forecast for year-end was at nearly £3.152 million, after consideration of projected variance and other budget adjustments.

### Community Advice and Support Team

The council was working on mitigation measures to manage the pressures of dealing with homelessness and temporary accommodation and lessen the impact on the budget.

### Housing Benefit Payments

The overall level of debt associated with Housing Benefit payment has reduced, primarily due to the transition to Universal Credit. The bad provision relating to the collection of Housing Benefit overpayments was forecast to reduce by £166,000 compared to budgeted estimates.

### Business Rate Retention

The forecast for actual business rates income collected and accounted for in 2018/19 was £50.6 million which was £1.8 million higher than estimated.

## **Housing Revenue Account Revenue Budgets**

A budget overspend was expected at year-end, primarily due to redevelopment of the council's high-rise flats. The forecasted variance was based on the current timing of the decant process at Biart Place, ongoing risk measures at Rounds Gardens, increased void levels, intensive structural surveys, additional security costs and council tax charges.

## **General Fund Capital – Major Variances**

Great Central Walk Bridges – a full survey of works has been concluded. A programme of works was due to commence in Spring 2019. The committee was informed that a report will be presented to Whittle Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11 March.

During wider discussion the following questions were raised:

### Rainsbrook Cemetery Preparation capital budget and the works associated with the water table at the site

A survey of the site has now been completed. It is anticipated that traffic to and from the site will increase whilst works are being carried out. The Head of Environment and Public Realm was asked to inform residents of the schedule of works as soon as the timetable is confirmed.

### Street Cleansing general fund revenue budget

Following the completion of the route optimisation process and the evaluation of outcomes, a review of the service area will be undertaken to ensure that the service is provided in the most efficient way.

The Chair requested background information on the capital budget for the Disabled Facilities Grant. The committee was informed that a response will be provided via email by the Principal Accountant.

The committee placed on record their thanks for the support provided to the committee by the Financial Services Manager and Deputy Chief Financial Manager over the years and wished him all the best for the future.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the Financial Services Manager and Deputy Chief Financial Officer be thanked for attending the meeting.

## **15. LIGHT-TOUCH REVIEW OF EMPLOYEE WELLBEING**

The committee received a report (Part 1 – Agenda Item 5) concerning a light-touch review of employee wellbeing.

The Human Resources Manager attended the meeting to present the report and answer questions. The report was discussed in detail at the meeting and the following additional points were made:

- Employee absence relating to stress was referred to the occupational health therapist at a very early stage. The occupational health therapist ensured that they receive the right support that they need. Counselling was also

- offered. Whilst the employee remained absent from work or upon their return to work, a stress risk assessment was completed and an action plan agreed.
- Within the manual workforce, many of the stress related cases were found not to be related to workplace stress but to stress from homelife which manifested whilst at work. Stress was often caused by external factors which made it challenging to minimise.
  - Officers were in consultations with trade unions with regards to the option of withholding council sick pay (not Statutory Sick Pay) where absence triggers are hit or job performance is unsatisfactory. Any changes to contracts were subject to a terms and conditions review. If such review was needed in the future, the option of withholding council sick pay would form a part of it.
  - Upon their election into the office, all new councillors meet with Democratic Services Team to discuss any needs that they may have. If they have a disability or a long-term illness, the team would discuss their requirements and make reasonable adjustments. The committee was seeking clarification on whether discussions take place with serving councillors as their needs may change over time. The Human Resources Manager stated that she will clarify with the team and provide a response via email.
  - Lone worker training was also offered to all councillors. It was highlighted that councillors' attendance at training was poor but was a separate issue in need of addressing.

The committee felt that more information was needed to fully understand the council's sickness absence management and rates. The committee has therefore requested:

- a detailed breakdown of figures for manual and non-manual roles to be circulated via email and include the following:
  - number of employees and the type of sickness absence for each age bracket
  - causes of short-term and long-term sickness
  - percentage of stress related absence comparing to other causes
- a progress report to be presented in six months' time to ensure that the mechanism in place to manage sickness absence at the council were fit for purpose. A list of areas to consider in more detail was to be provided by the committee and include the following:
  - The committee was interested to compare how the private sector manages sickness absence. It was agreed that the Human Resources Manager would contact organisations to find out what their sickness absence rates are and include some of the council's contractors (focus on employees in similar manual roles to the council's internal employees), ESPO and Daventry Norse.
  - what does the council do to support elected members

The committee agreed that a consultation with the private sector and the council's contractors may provide ideas on how to improve to sickness absence management and sickness absence rates at the council. The Human Resources Manager was asked to carry out the exercise and report back on the outcomes as part of the progress report in six months' time.

## **RESOLVED THAT –**

- (1) the Human Resources Manager be thanked for her attendance and report;
- (2) a detailed breakdown of figures for manual and non-manual roles to be circulated to the committee via email; and
- (3) a progress report be presented to committee in six months' time.

## **16. LIGHT-TOUCH REVIEW OF TREES AND HEDGES**

The committee received a report (Part 1 – Agenda Item 6) concerning a light-touch review of trees and hedges.

The Arboricultural Officer attended the meeting to present the report and answer questions. The report was discussed in detail at the meeting and the following questions were raised:

*What is the procedure with regards to watering newly planted and young trees?*

As a rule, newly planted and young trees require more frequent watering than older, well-established trees. We aim to water trees regularly but due to limited resources this is not always possible. Members of the public are encouraged to take ownership and water newly planted or young trees, especially during dry spells. 'Please water me' notices are attached to newly planted trees to encourage residents.

*Sometimes, trees appear unexpectedly without any consultation or notification causing problems for residents. Why aren't residents informed?*

Trees planted in highway verges are generally replacements for defected or fallen trees. In this case, the resident will not be consulted. If a tree is planted where there wasn't one before, it is good practice to consult with the resident. It was highlighted that Rugby Borough Council no longer manages highway trees. As of April 2017, highway trees are a responsibility of Warwickshire County Council.

*With Rugby expanding so quickly, should we be looking to plant more trees and grow our own stock?*

We are very good at planting trees. They absorb 50 per cent of air pollution from busy streets. We have a very good tree stock in Rugby.

The following additional points were made:

Any pruning work on a protected tree should be carried out by a qualified tree surgeon to comply with conditions of the Tree Protection Order and the British Standard for Tree Work (BS3998). A tree will only be pruned if there is a valid arboricultural reason.

A member of the committee raised concerns with regards to the woodland and conservation areas in her ward. The officer informed the committee that a good quality woodland requires managing in terms of thinning, issues with highway/railway in terms of lifting the canopy or removing defective branches, etc. Any concerns may be reported to the Arboricultural Officer for investigation.

A member of the committee highlighted the importance of raising awareness with regards to the general understanding of what makes a tree a tree, tree preservation orders, conservation areas, etc. The Arboricultural Officer agreed to put together an article for members to share with their constituents.

The committee concluded that the development of a Tree Policy was essential to protect Rugby's trees and green infrastructure for future generations.

**RESOLVED THAT –**

- (1) the Arboricultural Officer be thanked for his attendance and report; and
- (2) it be recommended to Cabinet that a Tree Policy be developed and adopted by Council.

**17. MOTION FROM COUNCIL 27 FEBRUARY 2018 – REDUCE PLASTIC WASTE AT THE COUNCIL**

The committee received a report (Part 1 – Agenda Item 7) concerning a motion referred by Council on 27 February 2018.

The motion was considered by Brooke Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 28 June 2018 where the Head of Environment and Public Realm was asked to undertake an audit of single use plastics used by individual service areas.

The Head of Environment and Public Realm attended the meeting to present the findings of the light-touch audit.

The following additional points were made:

- In the budget statement, a commitment was made to eliminate all single use plastics by April 2019.
- The Head of Environment and Public Realm was in consultation with Warwickshire County Council and the council's recycling providers with regards to the disposal of any alternatives used in place of single use plastics to maximise the environmental benefit.

**RESOLVED THAT –**

- (1) the Head of Environment and Public Realm be thanked for his attendance and report;
- (2) a draft council-wide Plastics Policy be presented for consideration at the next meeting of committee on 11 April 2019; and
- (3) a progress report be presented to the committee in six months' time on the progression of acquiring suitable alternative for replacing single use plastics identified in the audit.

**18. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The committee received a report (Part 1 – Agenda Item 8) concerning the progress of scrutiny reviews and the overview and scrutiny forward work programme for 2018/19.

### Annual Review of Crime and Disorder

The committee was invited to submit any specific issues relating to the annual review of crime and disorder to the Head of Environment and Public Realm prior to the next meeting of the committee on 11 April 2019.

The committee noted the position regarding reviews and the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

### **RESOLVED THAT –**

- (1) the progress of scrutiny reviews be noted; and
- (2) the forward work programme be noted.

**CHAIR**