

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 10th OCTOBER, 2013 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Tate in the Chair

Councillors Bonallie, Howe, Kay, T. Martin, Shattock and N. Wright

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Waller and from Ms. A. Blakey, Ms. R. Hood and Mr. D. Noon

Minutes of the last Meeting of the Committee held on 12th September, 2013

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th September, 2013 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record, subject to the resolution to the item 'Improvement to Urgent and Emergency Care Services in Sunderland' being amended to read 4. RESOLVED that the information received within the report and presentation and the progress to date be noted.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Reference from Cabinet – 9th October, 2013 Proposals for Budget Consultation 2014/2015

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on proposals for the budget consultation strategy and framework to inform the preparation of the Budget for 2014/2015.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Sonia Tognarelli, Head of Financial Resources, presented the report advising that the Cabinet at its meeting on 9 October, 2013 gave consideration to the report proposing the budget consultation strategy and framework as set out, and drew Members attention to the proposal to extend community engagement as set out in paragraphs 5.7 and 5.8 of the appended Cabinet report.

Councillor Tate asked if the views of the VCS network were gathered as part of consultation and was advised that representatives from each area were contacted and their views included to give a picture across the city.

Councillor Tate went on to ask how the Council would aim to reach those groups of people who are particularly vulnerable or hard to reach and was advised that the Council would do similar to previous years, whereby they had a survey available online and how through using VCS and other advisory groups they would receive as many views as possible. Ms. Tognarelli informed Members that following the event, the idea was to raise community engagement and look to having events in areas to reach wider audiences.

In response to a question regarding the involvement of Community Spirit Panel members, Ms. Tognarelli advised that a letter was circulated to all members of the citizen's panel to request their attendance at the consultation events and there had been a substantial number who had attended in previous years.

Councillor Tate asked how the views of the youth in the city were received and Members were informed that the Youth Parliament tended to meet with the young people and go through the budget situation and gather views and thoughts about any particular areas of interest they had or any issues they wished to be discussed and the Youth Parliament would collate suggestions to the Council from these discussions.

Councillor Wright referred to the Youth Parliament only including a narrow minority of the youth within the city and asked if the consultation exercise could be increased to take in a wider range of views from young people. Ms. Tognarelli explained that the Youth Parliament were used as a lever into the views of young people and other avenues would be explored with them.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was: -

2. RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Committee endorses the budget consultation strategy and framework for 2014/15

Reference from Cabinet – 9th October, 2013 – Budget Planning Framework 2014/2015 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/15 – 2016/17

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on the proposed budget planning framework 2014/2015.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Sonia Tognarelli, Head of Financial Resources, presented the report advising that the Cabinet at its meeting on 9 October, 2013 gave consideration to a joint report of the Chief Executive and Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services which identified the key factors influencing the development of the Council's financial plans into the medium term and set out the budget planning framework for Council for 2014/2015.

Councillor Shattock commented that the report was dispiriting to read and an injustice to the city and asked what would happen should a Council go 'bust'. Ms. Tognarelli commented there would need to be some form of intervention in place to support those Councils in managing the position.

Councillor Shattock also referred to the equal pay claims and resources to cover them. Ms. Tognarelli advised that the required had been factored into the medium term financial plan to support the position,

In response to a question from Councillor Howe as to whether that money was held as a resource or invested, Ms. Tognarelli informed the Committee that treasury management arrangements in place involved investing surplus cash every day and that these resources were included within this overall sum and could be released when required.

Councillor Wright commented that she concurred with comments made by Councillor Shattock and raised concerns over how frontline services would be affected. Ms. Tognarelli explained to Members that one of the key things to understand was that after ring fenced funding was taken into account, almost two thirds of the remaining budget was allocated to adult and children social care services, with the rest being allocated to streetscene, leisure, library provision, etc. Therefore, given the budget challenges ahead it was clear that greater targeting of resources and alternative ways to deliver frontline services would be required. This would include working collaboratively with partners, communities and other agencies to best meet the needs of the city.

Councillor Tate referred to the £0.8 million top sliced by Government for grants and other allocations, and asked if Sunderland would receive any of this funding. Ms. Tognarelli explained that there was potential to secure funding in some areas but the detail around this was not likely to be available until December.

Councillor Tate asked how achievable the savings plan was and was informed that at this stage high level plans were being developed which would be subject to consultation once detailed plans and implications were developed further.

In response to a further comment from Councillor Tate regarding the protection of front line services, Ms. Tongarelli advised that as far as possible the Council would always try and look at different ways to deliver the same outcomes but that there would be choices that needed to be made and over the next few months they would have to prioritise services within the resources available to the Council. It would continue to become much harder but plans would need to be delivered to ensure a balanced budget.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the Committee supports the proposed Budget Planning Framework and endorses the Medium Term Financial Strategy and supports the Cabinet recommendation that both are submitted to Council for approval.

Reference from Cabinet – 9th October, 2013 – Revenue Budget Second Review 2013/2014

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on an aspect of the report on the Revenue Budget Second Review for 2013/2014 namely requesting Council to approve the transfer of funds.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Sonia Tognarelli, Head of Financial Resources, presented the report advising that in accordance with the Council's Budget and Policy Framework certain transfers require Council approval and that the following extract referred to those transfer of funds which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 9 October, 2013:-

“Savings on capital financing charges as a result of slippage on the capital programme and income from interest on investments are anticipated to result in planned savings of approximately £0.5m at year end. It is proposed that these amounts and any further underspendings arising from unspent contingencies at the end of 2013/2014 are earmarked to support the overall 2013/2014 position and transitional costs arising from the 2014/2015 budget setting process.”

In response to a comment from Councillor Tate regarding the Council Tax freeze grant, Ms. Tognarelli advised that government had suggested that it continue through the financial years 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 and as this was again limited to 1% and that the sustainability of accepting the grant was something the Council would need to consider as part of the budget considerations for next year. She also explained that Councils also needed to consider any restrictions around raising Council Tax and referred to government regulations around any raise above 2% requiring a referendum to be held.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was: -

4. RESOLVED that the Committee supports the transfer of funds to support the overall 2013/2014 position together with the transitional costs arising from the 2014/2015 budget setting process and support the Cabinet recommendation that the transfer be submitted to Council for approval.

Reference from Cabinet – 9th October, 2013 – Feed and Food Controls Service Plan 2013/2014

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) which set out for advice and consideration the Feed and Food Controls Service Plan for 2013/2014 to be used by the Public Protection and Regulatory Services section for the Street Scene service.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Tom Terrett, Assistant Head of Street Scene, presented the report advising that the Cabinet at its meeting on 9 October, 2013 gave approval to the Feed and Food Controls Service Plan for 2013/2014 which formed part of the Council's policy and budgetary framework as defined in the Constitution.

Councillor Bonallie referred to the statistics as set out at paragraph 3.6 of the report and asked why there were so many variations over recent years, Ms. Marion Dixon, Environmental Health Manager, advised that a lot of increases were as a result of more residents of the city travelling to foreign destinations and could also be down to the fact that people were now visiting their doctor with any ailments more frequently.

Councillor Howe referred to a premises which he had received a number of complaints around concerning smells and was informed that if there were complaints made the service would investigate to find if there was a particular incident which had caused the issue. Ms. Dixon explained that the service worked hard with food manufacturers to combat each case and look into them on their own merit. She advised that they worked to ensure that meats were disposed of in the correct manner and these facilities would be checked on visits to ensure they were running in line with guidance.

In response to a query from Councillor Martin regarding a recent case whereby the UN had been taken to court following a cholera breakout and the risk of that happening in this country, Ms. Dixon advised that there were very occasional cases of the disease but that they were usually travel associated and be mainly found around international airports. She explained that there were very good national systems in place to deal with such cases and they would be closed down quickly to ensure there was minimum or no spread into the general population.

Councillor Wright referred to the fact that there were a lot of food premises rated as medium risk and asked if the service were concerned over these figures. Ms. Dixon advised that there were a lot of medium risk premises as a lot of takeaways, cafes and principle food preparation areas were medium risk classified. She advised that the Council had worked hard to improve standards so that there were not as many high risk premises and now the service was working with the Food Standards Agency to reduce them from medium risk to low risk.

Councillor Bonallie asked if the National Food Hygiene Scheme was still voluntary and was advised that it needed to go through primary legislation. There was currently one local authority that had not yet taken it up and once they were onboard it could be brought in as mandatory for England, Scotland and Wales, which was only a matter of time.

Councillor Kay commented that food prepares/manufacturers could only control what happened on their own premises and asked how much of the role was to advise on them being as aware of the supply chains as possible. Ms. Dixon advised that a key part of the Officers role when inspecting was ensuring that food could be traced between premises. She explained that other Officers would be undertaking the same checks in those premises providing food stuffs to ensure that traceability was continual.

Councillor Howe asked if the premises were forewarned of an Officers inspection and Ms. Dixon informed the Committee that generally they were not advised of their intention to visit as the FSA code of practice encourages them to be on the spot visits.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was: -

5. RESOLVED that the Committee endorsed the Feed and Food Controls Service Plan 2013/2014 and supports the Cabinet recommendation to submit the Service Plan to Council for approval.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28 day period from 8 October, 2013.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman asked any Members having issues to raise or requiring further detail on any of the items included in the notice, to contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, Ms. Helen Lancaster for initial assistance.

Councillor Kay asked that further information on 130910/10 – To consider and approve the Housing Financial Assistance Policy be brought to a future meeting of the Committee, and it was:-

6. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions as detailed above be received and noted and further information be provided as requested.

Annual Work Programme 2012/13

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken during the 2013/14 council year.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

7. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted.

Lead Scrutiny Member Update

The Lead Scrutiny Members submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing an update to the Scrutiny Committee regarding the work of each of the six Lead Scrutiny Members and supporting Panels.

(for copy report – see original minutes).

The Committee received an update from those Lead Scrutiny Members present on the work that had been carried out to date by the Scrutiny Panels.

Full consideration having been given to the report it was:-

8. RESOLVED that the update of the Lead Scrutiny Members be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

(Signed) R.D. TATE,
Chairman.