

Item 2

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2024 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair.

Councillors Burrell, Dodds, Hartnack, Jones, Leonard, Mullen, Samuels, P. Smith, Usher and Walton.

Also in attendance:-

Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Claire Emmerson, Assistant Director of Finance

David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate

Paul Wilson, Director of Finance

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Morrissey and Thornton.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 18th January 2024

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 18th January 2024 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Item 4 - Reference from Cabinet – 31 January 2024 – Budget and Service Reports.

Councillor P. Smith made an open declaration in the item as a Council appointed representative to Gentoo Group Ltd.

Councillor Samuels made an open declaration in the item as an employee of Unison.

4. Reference from Cabinet – 31 January 2024 – Budget and Service Reports:

(A) Collection Fund (Council Tax) 2023/2024

(B) (i) Capital Programme 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 and Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2024/2025, including Prudential Indicators for 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 (ii) Revenue Budget and Proposed Council Tax for 2024/2025 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/2025 to 2027/2028

The Assistant Director of Law and Government submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the advice and consideration of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee on a number of reports considered by Cabinet on 31 January 2024 regarding the Revenue Budget and Capital Programme for 2024/2025 that had been referred to this Committee in accordance with the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance presented the Collection Fund (Council Tax) 2023/2024 report setting out the overall position in relation to the collection fund. The Council's major precepting authorities (the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Authority) had been notified of the implications for them.

The Chair thanked Mr Wilson for his presentation and invited questions and comments from members.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Walton regarding the Council Tax collection rates, Mr Wilson replied that the long-term collection rates continued to be good with a collection rate of around 99%, however, it was clear that aligned to the cost of living crisis that there was some challenges around in-year collection rates. Sunderland operated a Council Tax Support scheme which provided additional financial support and reduced the amounts some residents were required to pay.

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance presented the Capital Programme 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 and Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2024/2025, including Prudential Indicators for 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 report and advised that the Capital Programme remained virtually unchanged following its consideration by the Committee in December save for the inclusion of specific grants in relation to highways maintenance, disabled facilities and the condition of schools.

The Treasury Management Policy and Strategy contained no change in the Council's approach to Treasury Management from the current Strategy save for the Strategy being updated to reflect the latest economic conditions. The Strategy had been considered and approved by the Council's Audit and Governance Committee at its meeting held on 2nd February.

The Chair thanked Mr Wilson for his presentation and invited questions and comments from members.

Councillor Mullen referred to paragraph 1.1.3 of the Capital report and welcomed the funding to provide the necessary infrastructure to allow Regulatory Services to fulfil statutory requirements including the re-deployable CCTV cameras. He noted however that there was no provision in the Revenue Budget to increase the number of Enforcement Officers. He asked that this position be monitored as there was some concern that there were not enough officers on the ground when enforcement issues arose.

Councillor Mullen welcomed the £3m allocated to improve Sunnyside and the Joplings building and reiterated his comments from previous meetings that a great deal of thought would need to go into the redevelopment of the area given its importance as a city gateway.

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance presented the Revenue Budget and Proposed Council Tax for 2024/2025 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 report.

He advised that the Government's forecasts for increases in Core Spending Power were based on the assumption that Local Authorities would raise their council tax by the maximum permitted without a referendum i.e. 4.99%. As a result, Councils were left with impossible choices about whether to increase council tax bills to bring in desperately needed funding to ensure the delivery of services whilst being very aware of the additional burden it would place on residents. Mr. Wilson advised that indications were that a significant majority of upper tier councils across the country were planning to increase council tax by the maximum permitted amount. Despite the planned increase in Sunderland, our council tax would remain the lowest in the North East region.

Mr. Wilson provided an update in relation to the Final Local Government Finance Settlement and advised that traditionally there was rarely any change from the Provisional Local Government Settlement. This year however, following significant lobbying, the final settlement announced on 5th February included an increase in social care grants which were ring-fenced for adults and children's social care. The emphasis from the Government being placed on using this funding (Sunderland's allocation is c. £3.2m) to support children's social care.

The savings proposals detailed in Appendix A to the Revenue budget report showed no change to those noted by the Committee at its December meeting. In addition in order to protect service delivery it was planned to again use £9m of reserves.

The Chair thanked Mr Wilson for his presentation and invited questions and comments from members.

Councillor Mullen referred to the minutes of the Budget Consultation Meeting with the North East England Chamber of Commerce and Sunderland BID, detailed on page 166 of the agenda papers, and asked how the business representatives were chosen? Mr Wilson replied that the Council asked the Chamber of Commerce and the BID to reach out through their networks to seek representatives. It was often the case that it was only representatives from those organisations that had attended the most recent meetings. The representative attending from Mortons Solicitors had been through the BID. Councillor Mullen asked that the Council continued to seek as wide a range of representatives as possible.

In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Mullen, Mr Wilson advised that the Budget proposals for 2024/25 did not contain any levy in respect of the North East Mayoral Combined Authority. The new combined authority would come into being on 7th May 2024 following the Mayoral election scheduled for the 2nd May.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chair thanked Mr Wilson for his attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that :-

i) the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee noted and acknowledged the information in the various reports as presented.

ii) the Committee also acknowledged the financial pressures on the Council and its services as detailed throughout the report and noted the recommended Council Tax increase for 2024/25, which still needed to be approved by Council. The Committee also noted the proposed budget savings proposals within the reports and the outcome of the budget consultation that was undertaken.

iii) the Committee recognised the work of Officers and Members in preparing the budgetary information presented to this committee and to other key stakeholders and had no further comments to make.

Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2023/24 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees. Members were also advised that additional places were available on a training session arranged for members of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee in relation to Suicide Prevention. The session was to be held on 21st February and any Members wishing to attend should contact Mr Cummings directly.

3. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2023/24 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the current scrutiny budget position.

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) K. MASON-GAGE,
Chairman.