

Minutes

Corporate Services, Commerce and Communities
Policy Overview Committee
Tuesday, 14 January 2020
Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge



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Members Present:

Councillors Richard Mills (Chairman)
Wayne Bridges (Vice-Chairman)
Lindsay Bliss
Nicola Brightman
Farhad Choubedar
Alan Deville
Jazz Dhillon
Scott Farley
Martin Goddard

Officers Present:

Andy Goodwin
Muir Laurie, Deputy Director of Exchequer & Business Assurance Services
Gemma McNamara, Finance Manager - Transformation, Finance and Chief
Executive's Office
Zac O'Neil, Head of Counter Fraud
Luke Taylor, Democratic Services Officer

35. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

36. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

37. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 5 NOVEMBER 2019

RESOLVED: That the minutes from the meeting held on 5 November 2019 be agreed as a correct record.

38. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was confirmed that all items were marked as Part I and would be considered in public.

39. 2020/21 BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR SERVICES WITHIN THE REMIT OF CORPORATE SERVICES, COMMERCE AND COMMUNITIES POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Officers introduced the 2020 / 21 budget proposals for services within the remit of the Corporate Services, Commerce and Communities Policy Overview Committee.

Members were informed that Cabinet will consider the budget proposals in February, including budget comments from all Policy Overview Committees, and Council will meet to agree the 2020 / 21 budgets and Council tax levels on 20 February 2020.

Officers noted that funding from the Chancellor's review was in keeping with what the Council expected, and the Social Care grant funding was off-set by the loss of London business rates retention.

The Committee noted that the budget gap of £27.7m remained consistent with previous years and other local authorities, and there was a planned Council Tax rise of 1.8%, alongside a 2% increase relating to the Adult Social Care Precept. Officers commented that this equated to £43.31 per annum, or £0.83 per week, for a Band D household.

Responding to Councillors' questioning, officers noted that the investment in youth infrastructure was built into the capital programme, and further details will be provided in the budget proposals report that is to be presented to the Residents, Education and Environmental Services Policy Overview Committee.

Members sought clarification regarding the Exchequer and Business Assurance Services service review savings, and were informed that the Council reviewed each areas for efficiency, including the way services were delivered, staffing and the use of digital technology. The Deputy Director of Exchequer and Business Assurance Services confirmed that the review considered what was needed now and what the Council required in the future, including the impact on Universal Credit on the way the Council operates.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the budget projections and the combined budget proposals put forward by the Chief Executive's Office and Finance Group and the relevant services areas within the Residents Services Group, within the context of the corporate budgetary position.

40. COUNTER FRAUD ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS

Officers introduced the report which contained information on how the Council is meeting its statutory duty to safeguard public finances by implementing effective arrangements for the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption within the Council and its services.

The Deputy Director of Exchequer and Business Assurance Services noted that the Council took a risk-based approach to fraud in every case, and directed the majority of its resources to the areas at the highest risk; most notably, Housing, Social Care and Revenues.

Members heard that the Counter Fraud Team was on track to meet its target of a 99% Business Rates collection rate and an overall loss prevention target of £2m across Council services, with current savings at the end of Quarter 3 being £1.46m. Officers noted that one key component in the Council's ability to tackle fraud has been the presence of a Home Office Immigration Enforcement Officer working within the team. This has allowed direct access to Home Office data, which has helped the Council quickly check the immigration status of those applying for Council services where recourse to public funds is required.

Officers noted that one of the best sources of intelligence gathering for the Council remains Councillors, as they are out in the Borough a lot and know their local areas well, so are able to flag up any potential irregularities they see.

The Head of Counter Fraud confirmed that, while the Council did enforce in certain cases, it focuses on using a prevention strategy. Members heard that the Counter Fraud Team were focused on looking at where risk was and verifying information before allocating any resources, as acting after the fact was a lot more expensive. The Committee were informed that 21 Council properties had been recovered by the team to date this year, with another five cases ongoing. Prosecution cases only took place where appropriate; it must be proportionate, reasonable, and necessary to act as a deterrent against further fraud.

Responding to Councillors' questioning, officers confirmed that generally, recovered properties were usually those that had been sub-let or abandoned, and did not result in residents being evicted from their homes. Furthermore, property mutual exchanges were facilitated in some cases instead of the recovery of the property where it was appropriate to do so.

The Committee commended officers for being on target to meet its £2m loss prevention target, and asked what direction the Council's targets would likely go in. Officers confirmed that targets will likely increase. Whilst the team was working hard on areas of highest risk of loss to the Council, officers were also focused on areas of less financial value but still of great importance, for example, blue badge fraud is investigated and action taken (potentially including a fine of £100) to assure residents that the Council is tackling fraud of this kind.

Members heard that, with regards to the 99% business rate collection target, the Council implemented an ethical collection policy which focused on those who will not pay business rates, as opposed to those businesses who cannot pay. The Council were able to give different types of relief to those businesses that were struggling, as there was little point chasing debts that could not be paid, as this would cost the Council more money in the long run.

Officers noted that, when collecting business rates payments, there were a number of different methods of payment, but the Council encouraged payment by direct debit. Although this is a gradual change, most residents also prefer to pay in this manner, and it encourages dialogue with businesses that were struggling to pay. This can lead to relief or a payment plan to help with the issue.

The Committee thanked the officers for their report.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the arrangements for the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption within the Council and the Quarter 2 2019/20 Counter Fraud Progress Report.

41. REVIEW C: LOCAL COMMERCE, EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS & JOB CREATION

The Chairman introduced the proposed draft recommendations for the Committee's review into Local Commerce, Employment, Skills and Job Creation, and noted that the recommendations reflected the comments received throughout the review.

The Committee commented on draft recommendation 4, and noted that it may be helpful to include some wording to support Hillingdon residents who wish to access opportunities at the Institute of Technology.

Members agreed to explore the possibility of altering recommendation 4, and noted that the final wording of the recommendations could be agreed under delegated authority by the Chairman and Labour Lead.

RESOLVED: That the Committee agreed the draft recommendations of the review on Local Commerce, Employment, Skills and Job Creation, subject to:

- 1. Reconsidering recommendation 4 to potentially include wording to support Hillingdon residents who wish to access opportunities at the Institute of Technology; and,**
- 2. Delegated authority to the Chairman and Labour Lead Member to agree the final wording of the draft recommendations, following discussions with officers.**

42. FORWARD PLAN

Members sought further details on the property transaction at 1 Whiteheath Avenue, Ruislip, which would be provided by officers.

RESOLVED: That the forward plan be noted.

43. WORK PROGRAMME 2018/2020

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted, subject to the following changes:

- 1. The report regarding the monitoring of the "Homophobic, Biphobic and Transphobic Bullying" review be moved to a later date in 2020, following discussions with officers for an appropriate timeframe;**

- 2. The report regarding the monitoring of the “Broadcasting of Overview & Scrutiny Committees on YouTube” be moved to the meeting in February 2020, subject to officers’ agreement; and,**
- 3. The final recommendations for the current Committee review into “Local Commerce, Employment, Skills and Job Creation” be added to the work programme in February 2020.**