

## Minutes

### CORPORATE, FINANCE AND PROPERTY SELECT COMMITTEE

12 January 2022

Meeting held at Committee Room 6 - Civic Centre,  
High Street, Uxbridge



	<p><b>Committee Members Present:</b> Councillors Richard Mills (Chairman), Vanessa Hurhangee (Vice-Chairman), Lindsay Bliss, Farhad Choubedar, Tony Eginton (Opposition Lead) and Richard Lewis</p> <p><b>Also Present:</b> Councillor Steve Tuckwell</p> <p><b>LBH Officers Present:</b> Sarah Hollingsworth, Naveed Mohammed (Head of Business Performance &amp; Insight), Liz Penny (Democratic Services Officer) and Iain Watters (Head of Finance - Financial Planning, Capital, Treasury &amp; Systems)</p>
51.	<p><b>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</b> (<i>Agenda Item 1</i>)</p> <p>Apologies were received from Councillor Raymond Graham with Councillor Steve Tuckwell substituting.</p>
52.	<p><b>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST IN MATTERS COMING BEFORE THIS MEETING</b> (<i>Agenda Item 2</i>)</p> <p>None.</p>
53.	<p><b>TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING</b> (<i>Agenda Item 3</i>)</p> <p><b>RESOLVED:</b> That the minutes of the meeting dated 24 November 2021 be agreed as an accurate record.</p>
54.	<p><b>TO CONFIRM THAT THE ITEMS OF BUSINESS MARKED AS PART I WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PUBLIC AND THAT THE ITEMS MARKED AS PART II WILL BE CONSIDERED IN PRIVATE</b> (<i>Agenda Item 4</i>)</p> <p>It was confirmed that all items were in Part I and would be considered in public.</p>
55.	<p><b>REVIEW: DRAFT FINAL REPORT - PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND REPORTING IN HILLINGDON COUNCIL</b> (<i>Agenda Item 5</i>)</p> <p>Further to its review of Performance Monitoring and Reporting in Hillingdon Council, the draft final report was considered by the Committee. At the request of Members, it was agreed that recommendation 1b) be amended to omit the work 'regular'. The revised recommendation would read '...Select Committees also be presented with high-level quarterly performance updates...' It was further agreed that the word 'considering' in recommendation 2) be replaced with 'including'. The revised recommendation would</p>

read ‘...including the use of manager briefings, toolkits or other online internal information.’ Finally, at the request of Members, it was agreed that recommendation 1a) be separated into two parts for the purposes of clarity:

1a)i) That service heads / directors, in conjunction with respective Cabinet Members, be requested to review the current use of data within their areas during 2022 – either for reporting purposes or to identify performance issues;

1a)ii) That service heads / directors consider regular monthly or quarterly performance updates to Cabinet Members.

In response to their requests for clarification, Members heard that, once the recommendations were implemented, all data provided to Select Committees would be made publicly available on the Council’s website via the meeting minutes.

With regards to recommendation 3), the Committee was advised that the usual process for procuring any new system would involve the Business Performance Team putting together a business case and working in collaboration with both IT and Corporate Procurement.

**RESOLVED That the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee:**

- 1. Agreed the draft final report and recommendations in principle, subject to the agreed amendments to recommendations 1 and 2, and endorsed its submission to Cabinet for due consideration; and**
- 2. Delegated any minor drafting changes required prior to the report’s submission to Cabinet to the Democratic Services Officer, in consultation with the Chairman and Opposition Lead as required.**

**56. 2022/23 BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR SERVICES WITHIN THE REMIT OF THE CORPORATE, FINANCE AND PROPERTY SELECT COMMITTEE (Agenda Item 6)**

Iain Watters, Head of Finance – Financial Planning, Capital, Treasury & Systems, introduced the 2022/23 budget proposals report for services within the remit of the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee.

Members were informed that, following consideration by Cabinet on 16 December 2021, the budget proposals were now out for public consultation and were being presented to the relevant Select Committees in January 2022.

In terms of the Budget Strategy, the Committee heard that funding levels were based on the outputs set out in the Chancellor’s spending review in October 2021. Based on a 1% per annum increase in the Social Care Precept and a 1.8% per annum uplift in core Council tax, funding available to support service expenditure in the Borough was projected to grow by £32,034k to £270,279k between 2021/22 and 2026/7. However, it was noted that, over the same period, there would be increased demand on services (partly related to the Covid-19 pandemic), additional inflationary pressures and a need to support capital investment which would add some £66m to the Council’s costs. In light of this, there would be a gap of approximately £34m to bridge over a 5-year period. Members heard that work to date had identified some £30m of savings to balance the budget leaving a gap of £4,735k to be identified in later MTFF cycles. There was no reliance on General Balances to bridge the gap.

The Committee was informed that Covid-19 had had a significant impact on the budget; pandemic related costs over and above planned service expenditure had totalled over £32m in 2020/21 and approximately £19m in 2021/22. These additional costs had been funding through external Government support to date; however, it was recognised that the pandemic would continue to impact on services in the future and it was not expected that further funding would be forthcoming.

It was confirmed that General Balances were set to stay within the recommended range at £26m over the five-year MTFF period. The draft budget outlined £383m of proposed capital expenditure over the MTFF period including substantial investment in local infrastructure, delivery of additional high needs school places, redevelopment of the Civic Centre and £25m for the carbon reduction agenda. Members heard that the peak level of borrowing in the MTFF period would be £311m; this had been factored in to the budget plans.

The Committee was advised that a significant inflationary increase was expected between 2021/22 and 2022/23 which would particularly impact on the services under the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee since the centralised energy and fuel budgets sat within its remit. In terms of savings, £10,381k of savings proposals had been incorporated into the draft budget for 2022/23, with £1.9m falling within the remit of the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee.

Members enquired how the inflationary increases set out in Table 2 had been calculated as these were not consistent. Members also noted that the figure for fuel inflation seemed low. It was confirmed that different levels of inflation had been applied to different areas of spend hence the variations in inflation levels. In terms of the 14% for fuel inflation, the Committee was informed that an inflationary uplift of 7/8% from the previous year had been included with another 14% being built on top of this.

Members noted that the budget report appeared shorter than previous reports with less information provided regarding the strategy, calculations of changes and details of the proposed savings. Moreover, there appeared to be a lack of detail regarding capital projects. Some Councillors felt that the lack of information provided could discourage meaningful consultation especially for residents who did not have the opportunity, as elected members did, to ask questions.

Further to the Committee's queries regarding the inflation figure for workforce expenditure (1.5%) which seemed low given current levels of inflation and those projected for the future, it was confirmed that the figures had been based around Bank of England projections and would be kept under review - any future changes would be factored in.

With regards to the savings set out on page 34 of the agenda pack, Members noted that a review of the Exchequer and Business Assurance function was expected to secure £200k efficiency savings. Concerns were expressed that, if this involved a reduction in the Corporate Fraud Team, there was a risk that the amount recovered could go down. In response to this, the Committee was informed that most of the savings would come from the Exchequer area of the service – particularly from the planned service review following on from robotics automation work within the Council. It was further clarified that the planned £150k savings from streamlining of transactional financial processes were separate to this – they were also linked to automation but related to purchase to pay systems etc.

In respect of the £100k savings to be made from measures to minimise damage to the

Council's vehicle fleet, Members enquired how this could be achieved at no extra cost. It was confirmed that these savings related to measures including training and the refocussing of training budgets within the fleet service to apply them in different ways. Investment in trackers in vehicles would enable management to direct training better.

In relation to technical administration and customer contact, Members noted significant planned efficiency savings and requested clarification as to the total budget for these services and how the savings could be achieved. The Head of Finance - Financial Planning, Capital, Treasury & Systems confirmed that technical administration savings would be achieved by bringing together disparate functions. In terms of customer contact, in future residents would be able to source information more readily online without needing to call in. He agreed to check the budget figures and confirm to Democratic Services for the minutes (*following the meeting it was confirmed that the 500k planned efficiency savings from the on-going review of technical administration represented 13.5% of the current £3,712k service budget and the 415k savings linked to the in-hand review of customer contact represented 13.3% of the current £3,129k budget for the Customer Contact centre*).

In response to queries regarding the £300k savings to Democratic Services, it was confirmed that these would be achieved by a reduction in the number of Councillors following upcoming elections and reductions in back office support.

Councillors noted a budget of £35m for Civic Centre work and enquired what this entailed. In response to this the Committee was advised that this budget was for planned modernisation of the Civic Centre which would lower its carbon footprint – the intention was to make better use of the land on the site which would generate income to offset most of the costs. The £35m was an indicative figure only at this stage. It was confirmed that the additional budget of £25m for carbon reduction as set out in the report was to support the Council's wider net zero ambition by other means. Extra Government funding was also expected to support this.

In response to Councillors' further requests for clarification, it was confirmed that a facility for watersports was still planned to replace HOAC. This would be funded by HS2 funding and the figures represented the latest and best budget estimates. In relation to funding for Botwell Leisure Centre, an error on page 39 of the agenda pack was noted and it was confirmed that there was a budget of £200k for this as shown on page 37 of the pack. Members heard that the Woodside Development budget of £2.575m in 2023/24 related to a planned housing development.

The Chairman read out the following proposed budget comments to be submitted to Cabinet on behalf of the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee "The committee notes and welcomes the overall budget from officers and recognises their ongoing work in delivering a balanced budget following the continued inflationary and demand-led pressures from the Covid-19 pandemic.

With regards to the areas within the Corporate, Finance and Property Select committee's remit, savings will be achieved through streamlining of transactional financial processes and automation of business processes. Not only will these deliver savings, but also deliver technological enhancements that will improve efficiencies in services. The Committee also notes the significant capital investment planned to deliver facilities across the north and south of the Borough for our residents, as well as major steps to reduce the Council's carbon footprint."

Members were happy with these comments but requested the addition of an opening

sentence to highlight the fact that there was less information provided in the budget reports this year than had previously been the case. It was agreed that the wording of this additional sentence be delegated to the Democratic Services Officer to sign off with the Chairman in consultation with the Labour Lead.

**RESOLVED:**

- 1. That the Committee noted the budget projections contained in the report and commented as appropriate on the combined budget proposals affecting the relevant service areas within the Property & Infrastructure, Finance and Corporate Services & Transformation Cabinet Portfolios, within the context of the corporate budgetary position; and**
- 2. That the final wording of the additional sentence relating to the Select Committee's budget comments be delegated to the Democratic Services Officer to sign off with the Chairman in consultation with the Labour Lead.**

57. **WEBSITE PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVEMENT** (*Agenda Item 7*)

Sarah Hollingworth, Transformation Lead, introduced the report advising Members that the website was a key part of the Council's digital strategy. There was a lot of work going on behind the scenes to increase functionality and the website had two key purposes –to provide information and advice and to handle simple transactions for residents 24/7.

The Committee was advised that a lot of time and energy had been invested in changing the platform to GOSS and migrating information into the new framework. Whilst undertaking this exercise, the content had also been refreshed. It was acknowledged that local authorities were generally good at using their websites to convey statutory information, but this was not necessarily what residents wanted or needed. The revised website was more straightforward and had been aligned to the type of queries residents generally raised. For transactions, ideally the information captured would go directly through to the relevant back-office team who would process the request; however, this required a number of different systems to link up behind the scenes.

Members heard that the aim was to ensure residents had their needs met 24/7, not solely when the telephone lines were open. A more data led approach to decision making was being taken. Analysis of the type of contacts residents made to the Contact Centre enabled officers to rephrase the information on the website thereby reducing the need for people to call in; an example of this was in relation to housing repairs whereby it was found that a large proportion of calls did not result in a repair being made as the request was not the Council's responsibility. Information on the website had been updated to set out tenant / Council responsibilities more clearly.

Councillors were informed that My Account had been part of the first wave of changes. The functionality had been created in the GOSS system and linked to Hillingdon First cards. Members heard that previously residents had needed to log in to their accounts to raise a request online but were now able to raise one without logging in. However, it was noted that residents could not track their requests if they did not submit them via their accounts.

It was confirmed that changes were now being made to make it easier for residents to navigate the website. The aim was to make the website more efficient and interactive - chat bots were to be trialled for Waste Services to answer residents' questions quickly.

A recent project in Housing reviewing the customer pathway identified that the Council received a large number of contacts from people checking that their rent payments been received. Officers were considering ways to present this information back to the resident via the website thereby reducing waiting times and anxiety.

The Committee was informed that work was underway to link the information typed in by a resident directly to the back-office databases thereby facilitating a more streamlined process which would enable efficiencies and savings around business administration. It was felt that staff would then be able to focus on and respond to queries directly which would be more rewarding work and more efficient for the resident enabling faster response times. Following requests for clarification from the Committee, it was confirmed that user groups were utilised to assist in testing the website pathways and would be used increasingly in the future. Moreover, there was an option on most webpages for residents to give feedback. Members noted that, in the past, it had been possible for housing tenants to log in to their service accounts and view what had been paid and what was outstanding. It was confirmed that it was still possible to check an outstanding balance on My Account before making a payment. It was agreed that the Transformation Lead would investigate this to establish whether a further level of detail was available and would feed back to Democratic Services.

Members observed that some residents had experienced difficulties in signing up to the new My Hillingdon Account. It was noted that 40,000 residents had successfully registered; however, the Committee was interested to know whether it was possible to ascertain how many people had been unsuccessful in doing so. It was agreed that the Transformation Lead would investigate this further and confirm with Democratic Services what percentage of those who had had an account previously had managed to re-create one (whilst noting that there would have been a number of inactive accounts).

Councillors welcomed the new website noting that it was generally much improved particularly when accessed on mobile phones. However, it was noted that a lot of information had not yet been brought through into the new site and some links were not working or linked directly to the old website. It was noted that the link for Ruislip Woods was unavailable. Also, information for young people appeared to be missing and the details of Young People's Centres were out of date.

In response to this, Members were advised that work in relation to missing links was ongoing. In terms of young people, it was possible that some information had not yet been migrated across – possibly because the information was outdated and needed to be refreshed based on recent questions and queries. It was agreed that the Transformation Lead would explore this further and would have a look at the section on Young People's Centres in particular. It was likely that all this information would be refreshed and reinvigorated in the near future.

The Committee observed that Members were high users of the Council's website and enquired how Councillors could report any feedback re. broken links etc. It was confirmed that a link was available on each page of the website through which such issues could be reported to the web team. The Transformation Lead would liaise with Democratic Services to provide an example of this.

Finally, it was noted that the information on the website regarding support to Local Businesses with links to the Chamber of Commerce and other organisations appeared to be missing. The Transformation Lead agreed to investigate this further.

**RESOLVED:**

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the Transformation Lead explore whether a further level of detail was available in relation to housing tenants' service accounts (to show what had been paid and what was outstanding) and feed back to Democratic Services;</li> <li>2. That the Transformation Lead confirm to Democratic Services the percentage of residents who had an account previously that had managed to re-create one;</li> <li>3. That the Transformation Lead liaise with Democratic Services to provide an example of a link on the website via which issues could be reported to the web team;</li> <li>4. That the Select Committee noted the development work that had been completed on the Council's website; and</li> <li>5. That the Select Committee noted the ongoing improvements to the website and other resident contact technology currently being delivered through BID's Digital Transformation projects.</li> </ol>
58.	<p><b>FORWARD PLAN</b> (<i>Agenda Item 8</i>)</p> <p>Members requested further information regarding item ref. 110 on the Cabinet's Forward Plan in relation to Lift Refurbishment and Upgrade at Fairlie House and The Gouldings, Uxbridge. It was believed that refurbishments had recently been undertaken and Members were keen to understand why these were being done again. It was agreed that Democratic Services would speak to Gary Penticost to request additional information on this.</p> <p><b>RESOLVED:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That additional information re. item 110 on the Forward Plan be requested by Democratic Services; and</li> <li>2. That the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.</li> </ol>
59.	<p><b>WORK PROGRAMME</b> (<i>Agenda Item 9</i>)</p> <p>In response to Members' requests for clarification it was confirmed that all Select Committees' budget response comments would be received by the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee at its next meeting on 2 February 2022.</p> <p><b>RESOLVED: That the Corporate, Finance and Property Select Committee considered the report and agreed any amendments.</b></p>
	<p>The meeting, which commenced at 7.30 pm, closed at 8.35 pm.</p>

These are the minutes of the above meeting. For more information on any of the resolutions please contact Liz Penny on [epenny@hillingdon.gov.uk](mailto:epenny@hillingdon.gov.uk) or Tel: 01895 250185. Circulation of these minutes is to Councillors, Officers, the Press and

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