

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Remote Meeting using Microsoft Teams on WEDNESDAY, 10 JUNE 2020

Present: Councillor R Boam (Chairman)

Councillors J Hoult, E G C Allman, R Johnson, V Richichi, S Sheahan, N Smith, D E J Tebbutt and M B Wyatt

Portfolio Holders: Councillor N J Rushton

Officers: Mrs B Smith, Mr A Barton, Mrs T Bingham, Mr T Delaney and Mrs M Long

The Chairman opened the meeting by extending his warm wishes to Councillor E Allman on the recent new addition to his family.

45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

46. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Non-pecuniary interests were declared in relation to Item 5 – Covid 19 – Recovery, by Councillors M Wyatt in view of him having two local businesses in the district; and Councillor N Smith in view of his wife having a business in the district. They both remained in the meeting for the debate and vote on this item.

47. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no public questions.

48. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2020.

It was moved, seconded and by affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2020 be approved as a correct record subject to an amendment to the times noted that Councillors Richichi and Wyatt left the meeting.

49. COVID-19 RECOVERY

The Chief Executive presented the report to the Committee on the plans for recovery following the COVID 19 pandemic.

Members were given a detailed update on the national emergency response, which provided information on the numerous links to other agencies which the Chief Executive was involved in. She referred to the fact that there were currently 128 staff in the clinically vulnerable category with 60 of these working from home and 68 unable to. 11 staff were shielded and 20 were living with shielded individuals. This represented a challenge for the Authority in the way it delivered some of its services. The Chief Executive went on to talk about the response phase which included reference to the community hub, the number of volunteers,

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the changes to working practices and the Government grants which had been paid out to local businesses.

The Committee was updated on the numerous methods of communication which had been utilised in order to keep members, staff, local businesses and residents updated throughout the crisis. Reference was also made to the emotional and financial impact that the crisis was having on individuals together with the impact it was having on local businesses and the community.

The Chief Executive updated members on the recovery plans which would follow a parallel structure across Leicestershire and Rutland, and referred to the phased re-opening of schools, retail and night time economy. There were a number of recovery cells in operation within the Authority which helped to provide robust analysis of the impact of the Government guidance as it changes, and detailed risk assessments into every service before they resume.

The Committee was updated on the local authority discretionary grants fund scheme and the level of funding which had been allocated to local businesses in the district.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Executive for her comprehensive report and invited questions and comments from Members.

Councillor S Sheahan asked what impact the change in Government plans on the re-opening of schools would have on staffing levels, what was the current situation with regard to the leisure contract and how far behind was the work on the major redevelopment projects such as Marlborough Square, Newmarket and the Leisure Centre?

The Chief Executive advised him that it was too early to say what impact would be had on staffing levels; with the added difficulty around those who had more than one child who may be in different school years. Within North West Leicestershire, there was a phased approach to reopening, so as an Authority there would not be a level of change early on. The Chief Executive advised that the Authority had details of every member of staff and their individual circumstances regarding childcare, shielding, vulnerability etc and there were ongoing conversations around what they were able or unable to do; but the Authority does offer a very flexible working environment to help manage this situation.

In relation to the leisure contract, the officers had been in regular contact with the contractor. Some of the staff had been furloughed whilst others had been volunteering in other areas of work including waste management and the community hub. She confirmed that we need to have a look at what leisure might look like going forward as it would not be able to operate in the same way as it would have done pre Covid-19; so we have a duty to look at the business case and continue those discussions with the contractor. In terms of the redevelopment projects, not much building work had progressed on these pre Covid-19 and any works had to cease in accordance with the Government restrictions around social distancing. But with the Leisure Centre, for example, there was no delay and the discussions on design and technical details have been continuing for Marlborough Square.

Councillor S Sheahan commented that the Administration needed to be careful on what it deemed to be an urgent decision as he considered that this did not allow for proper scrutiny and he was mindful of the impact this could have on communities, businesses and the environment. He also asked for more detailed reporting going forward on the impact on local communities, businesses and the environment so that the scrutiny committee could have more influence over the outcome of any decisions.

Councillor R Johnson asked about the size of the backlog of service activity and any associated costings of dealing with that backlog. The Chief Executive advised that it would be difficult to give specific details as it would depend on which service she was referring to, but she gave an example of food hygiene inspections. The undertaking of inspections had not been possible as the premises have been closed, so the programme of works would now have a backlog. In this case, the service manager would identify how the service could be returned to normal, what the resource issues were and what barriers they faced. She gave a further example of grass cutting where staff were lost to the Waste Management service or were identified as vulnerable. Agency staff had been brought in and new machinery purchased to overcome the social distancing rules i.e. one member of staff to one machine, and it was estimated that it would take a month to get back on top. These were just two examples but there were numerous examples for every service area.

Councillor E Allman asked when enforcement action would be reintroduced to ensure appropriate measures were being enforced relating to builders and construction sites.

The Chief Executive advised that there was some enforcement capacity but not all of it as some officers were clinically vulnerable, but complaints could be dealt with so if there were any specific complaints, then these would be investigated and dealt with appropriately.

Councillor Allman extended his thanks to the Communications Team for the work they had been doing in keeping him up to date with local issues and he also wished to thank the Finance Team on the support to local businesses in the area.

Councillor N Smith passed on his personal thanks to council staff for ensuring he received his specialist medication from Glenfield hospital.

The Chairman advised that he would take it by affirmation of the meeting that Members were happy with the recommendations unless anyone objected. He asked if there were any objections. There were none.

The recommendations as set out on page 9 of the report were moved by Councillor Richichi, seconded by Councillor Hault and by affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

- (1) the contents and actions as set out in the report be noted;

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- (2) the approaches and direction as set out in the recovery plan be endorsed;
- (3) future areas of work for the recovery process be considered;
- (4) the likely need to incorporate issues raised in the report in the review of the Corporate Delivery Plan be noted;
- (5) it be agreed that the future reporting on COVID 19 recovery comes before this Committee.

50. COVID-19 FINANCIAL IMPACT

The Head of Finance presented the report to the Committee setting out how the COVID 19 pandemic had impacted on the Council's finances.

The Committee was advised that the council's own financial implications arising from Covid-19 were still emerging and expected to continue to emerge over the medium-term. The report set out the financial impact currently understood in the last week of April and was intended to provide members with an opportunity to understand the detail regarding the early financial assessment. Forecasts assumed a lockdown period lasting until 30 June, unless specific service variations were known, with economic recovery taking longer.

The revenue impact across the Council to date was estimated to be in the region of £2.129m gross and £1.043m net of the £1.086m Emergency Funding for Local Government. The majority of this impact was within the General Fund which would bear £1.870m gross impact, with the HRA impacted by £259k, notwithstanding the actual impact on housing rents which was not yet fully understood.

As Section 151 Officer, the Head of Finance advised that she had no concerns regarding the resilience of this Council but she was mindful of the future funding position; she would also be monitoring the borrowing forecasts very closely and would have the relevant delegations in place in terms of undertaking short-term borrowing.

The Head of Finance drew member's attention to the impact on local taxation, in particular council tax and business rates. Any loss in income would not be felt until 2021/22 at the earliest because of the collection fund accounting method.

The Chairman invited Councillor N Rushton to speak as the Portfolio holder.

Councillor Rushton reiterated the Head of Finance's comments about being in a sound financial position and the Government's suggestion that the Council had received sufficient funding to deal with Covid-19 when, as the report clearly demonstrated, it had actually only received half as there was currently a £1m shortfall. He also reiterated the point about the impact on the 2021/22 financial year and forewarned that a reduction in council tax and business rates sitting alongside a policy of no increase in council tax puts the council in a difficult position. If extenuating circumstances were applied and, for example a 3% increase was applied, because the base has eroded over the years, it would only equate to £100k-£150k which was worrying for a small district and even more

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worrying for those who were not responsible for their own incomes such as police, fire etc.

Councillor Rushton advised that he was receiving regular briefings on what was a moveable feast and he congratulated the Head of Finance and her team for all their hard work and excellent performance in achieving a rate of 92% of all grant monies being allocated; and who were now working hard to identify those business who did not qualify for the large scheme to see if they qualify for the discretionary grant scheme.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Finance for her detailed report and took questions and comments from Members.

Councillor M Wyatt asked whether the additional funding available to businesses would apply to showmen/fairground workers to which he was advised that they would be eligible as long as they had not been awarded any other of the government grants available to businesses and that they could demonstrate that they had still had to pay ongoing property related costs and coupled with that they had seen a reduction in their income. No business had been excluded from the scheme unless they had property related costs which exceeded £51k a year, as the focus was on smaller businesses.

Councillor Wyatt advised that he would support a reduction in service charge for tenants and Councillor Rushton advised that, following a meeting he had attended earlier in the day, this had been agreed and would see this materialise in a reduced bill next year.

Councillor Wyatt asked about the reference to reduced expenditure of the Coalville special expenses area and asked if this funding would be carried over to the next financial year. He was advised that it would be carried over if remains unspent, as special expenses were ring fenced and therefore could not be allocated elsewhere.

Councillor Wyatt thanked the Head of Finance and Councillor Rushton for their positive responses which he welcomed.

Councillor Sheahan stated that it was refreshing to hear from Councillor Rushton that after several years of not increasing the council tax he could foresee circumstances where council tax may have to be increased in the future.

Councillor Smith asked how the information regarding the local authority discretionary grants fund scheme was being communicated across the district. He was advised that this was being done by contacting those who were not eligible for the earlier scheme and through social media, press releases and direct targeting.

The Chairman advised that, as the recommendation was simply asking the Committee to note and comment on the report ahead of its submission to Cabinet, he would take it by affirmation of the meeting that Members were happy to do this unless anyone objected. He asked if there were any objections. There were none.

The recommendation as set out on page 15 of the report was moved by Councillor Hoult , seconded by Councillor Wyatt and by affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The report be duly noted and the comments made at this meeting be reported to Cabinet at its meeting on 14 July 2020.

51. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman referred Members to the Committee's Work Programme and the Cabinet's Executive Decision Notice together with the item action log which enabled Members to see the progress of any items put forward prior to being placed on the work programme.

Members were invited to make requests for additional items to be included.

Councillor Wyatt asked for an item on environmental enforcement and he was advised that this would sit with the Community Scrutiny Committee and would be added to its work programme accordingly.

No other requests were made.

It was moved, seconded and by affirmation of the meeting it was

RESOLVED THAT:

The committee's future work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 7.23 pm