

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 2019

Present: Councillor R Boam (Chairman)

Councillors J Hoult, E G C Allman, A J Bridgen and D Bigby (Substitute for Councillor R Johnson)

Officers: Mrs B Smith, Mrs T Bingham, Mr M Fiander, Mr C Lambert, Mrs M Long, Mr M Murphy and Mr P Sanders

7. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Johnson, V Richichi, S Sheahan and N Smith.

8. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

There were no interests declared.

9. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no public questions.

10. MINUTES

RESOLVED THAT: The minutes of the meeting held on 12 June 2019 be approved as a correct record.

11. CORPORATE CHARGING POLICY

Members considered a report presented by Mrs T Bingham, Head of Finance on the Corporate Charging Policy.

Reference was made to the £27m which the Council generates from local income and the importance therefore of having a relevant and up to date policy. She referred to paragraph 2.4 of the report which set out the commercial approach which the policy enabled by empowering budget holders to balance their decision against the backdrop of the public sector ethos.

Further reference was made to the three fundamental principles to the policy as set out in paragraph 3.7 of the policy document.

It was acknowledged that the requirement for an annual percentage increase announcement for charge increases that was included in the former policy had been removed and replaced with a requirement for service areas to review charges annually through the budget setting process; the intention being that this approach would improve transparency in respect of charging and the strategies that sit behind those charges thus ensuring that what may have been an appropriate charging strategy when a charge was introduced or last reviewed remained appropriate in the current economic and political landscape.

Finally, it was noted that the requirement for charges to be reviewed annually ensured the Members were involved in the decision making process allowing an effective level of scrutiny and accountability.

The Chairman invited questions and comments.

Chairman's initials

Councillor Bigby broadly welcomed the policy and considered that moving away from the percentage increase charges was a positive step although he recognised that this was included in the previous policy so did not see it as a change. He also welcomed reference to Equality Impact Assessments. However he did express concern regarding some of the phrasing in the policy document and considered that some of them were contradictory. He felt that the three fundamental principles did not capture the impact that the charges would have on disadvantaged members of the community. Whilst reference was made elsewhere in the document, it was not reflected within these principles. He also felt that there was too much emphasis placed on profit, specifically with reference to principle two. He asked if this could be caveated in some way to refer to the ability to enable subsidies in line with the public sector ethos. He also felt that there could be a fourth fundamental principle which would state that the policy takes account of the equality impact assessments and the public sector ethos. Councillor Bigby expressed his disappointment at the wording of paragraph 2.3 of the report as he felt that it implied that the main focus of the Council was to generate profit over customer impact. He was also concerned at the level of reduction in authorisation which he felt, in turn would reduce the level of scrutiny for increasing fees and charges. He there asked if a report could be brought to this Committee on any charges which had been increased.

In response to these comments, the Head of Finance advised that she would be happy to take on board the views around the fundamental principles and she clarified the intent around paragraph 2.3 whereby reference to profit was with other local authorities as opposed to businesses and residents where the focus was on full cost recovery where possible. She also advised that she would consider whether regular reporting to this Committee was the most appropriate way forward but suggested that Members would be fully engaged through the budget setting process.

The Chairman advised that, in accordance with the recommendation, these comments would be reported to the next meeting of Cabinet.

12. CORPORATE ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Members considered a report presented by Chris Lambert, Head of Housing and Property Services on the Corporate Asset Management Strategy.

Members were advised that the strategy exists to provide a framework to enable the Council to own and manage its land and property assets and was closely linked to a number of other key strategies as set out in paragraph 2.1 of the report. Reference was made to a number of key points within the report.

The Chairman invited questions and comments.

Councillor Bigby welcomed references to improvements to Moira Furnace, health and safety and carbon footprint. He stated that it appeared to him that the emphasis of the report was to maximise profitability from the Council assets yet it was not clear to him which assets the council intended to maximise its profitability from. His concern was again, whether the Council was placing its emphasis on profit over the needs of the community, for example those assets being utilised for useful purposes within the community both now and in the future. He would not like to see the Council selling off its valuable assets to address any financial needs of the Council where these assets are for the good of the community; for example land which could be used for affordable housing. He therefore thought it would be helpful if there was some clarification in what constituted a commercial asset.

In response to these comments, the Head of Housing and Property Services referred to paragraph 1.4 of the report which listed the different categories of assets but understood the point that Councillor Bigby was making and advised that each individual asset would be considered on its own merits. He added that the disposals policy gave the flexibility to allow for transfers of land where appropriate in order to facilitate local housing needs, adding that we also now have the opportunity of developing our own land for council housing which, historically we have never had, and would produce a commercial income as well as addressing a local housing need.

Councillor Bigby sought clarification on the term 'for regeneration purposes' and made reference to the poorest performing asset being Ashby Market Hall and asked what measures were being put in place to address the constraints faced by such assets.

The Head of Housing and Property Services replied that it might be the case that an asset is purchased in order to form part of a wider regeneration scheme and the asset on its own might not necessarily meet the criteria for a commercial purpose. The next part of the review will see us looking at all the constraints placed upon us and agree a programme to enable us to move forward.

The Chairman advised that, in accordance with the recommendation, these comments would be reported to the meeting of Cabinet scheduled in November.

13. END OF YEAR REPORT

Members considered a report presented by Bev Smith, Chief Executive which set out the narrative which formed the basis of the End of Year Report based on the Council's previous corporate priorities.

Reference was made to the fact that 31 of the 35 commitments were achieved or were still on target. Details of those commitments currently behind plan were set out in paragraphs 2.3 and 2.5 of the report. Detailed achievements were set out in appendix one of the report.

The Chairman invited questions and comments.

In response to a question by Councillor Allman regarding the delay of the Marlborough Square refurbishments, it was reported that the details of the revised plans will be presented in detail at the next meeting of the Community Scrutiny Committee, scheduled to be held on 23rd October 2019. Councillor Bigby asked for more information regarding the reason for not establishing a local housing trading company and it was acknowledged that, after detailed discussions with some neighbouring authorities on issues such as seeking additional benefits from sharing resources, it was considered that there was no evidence at this time to suggest that this approach would add any value to our current working practices. It is not off the agenda and these discussions will be continued to see if there is any scope for more collaborative working. Councillor Bridgen asked if there was any opportunity to extend the town centre boundary to enable more businesses to access the Future High Street Fund. Mark Fiander, Head of Economic Regeneration responded by advising that the Future High Street Fund proposals were still at the development stage but there were a number of Government constraints and a strict deadline of 11 January 2020 for the final bid. So it is an evolving situation but attempts are being made to be as inclusive as possible. Councillor Allman asked how many potential sites had been identified for the possible location of a cinema in Coalville. He also asked whether there was any scope to extend the waste collection facility at Coalville to accommodate the increase in the number of homes and business in the area as a number of people are being turned away.

In response to these questions he was advised that a cinema consultant had looked at a number of potential sites including previous cinema sites and the market hall site, although the latter will also have to be borne in mind as a possible station for the Ivanhoe line should this be a future development. Paul Sanders, Head of Community Services advised that the waste collection facility at Coalville was a responsibility of the County Council and this issue would need to be referred to them.

Councillor Bridgen asked if there was any scope in ensuring that the Belvoir Centre development could follow a framework whereby they would have to adhere to regeneration target deadlines. Mr Fiander advised that we have no powers to insist this, only the leverage of the access to the Future High Street Fund, but he was as assured as he could be that they were committed to regenerating with the possibility of a first phase before Christmas, and he was pleased with the direction they were heading.

The Chairman advised that, in accordance with the recommendation, these comments would be reported to Cabinet.

14. 2019/20 Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Members considered a report presented by Bev Smith, Chief Executive on the 2019/20 Quarter 1 Performance Report.

It was acknowledged that this was the first report following the introduction of In-Phase, a performance management system which will enable more transparency and visual presentation which will identify trends and assist with scrutiny. This will be rolled out to Members in due course and will enable portfolio holders to have direct access to live monitoring and give Members the ability to monitor progress against specific actions. The report set out additional information relating to sickness absence, as was requested at the previous meeting. The report is still 'work in progress' and the way in which individuals' actions are scrutinised is still at an early stage and Members will see more as the new system is rolled out.

This report will be regularly presented to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee ahead of its submission to Cabinet which, again, will assist the scrutiny process.

The Chief Executive sought views on an area she would like to explore which is the inclusion of regional and national context around some of the key priority areas. For example, whilst we cannot be held responsible for employment or crime rates as they are not within our control, we are still a contributor to these and including this landscape will help scrutiny to link this back to our priorities. This additional information may also help with the uncertainties facing us over the next couple of months.

The Chairman invited questions and comments.

Councillor Allman welcomed the increase in recycling rates but questioned whether the 1% target was adequate or if there was more that could be done.

Paul Sanders, Head of Community Services advised that across the country recycling rates have plateaued and 1% is a pretty steep target. Autumn will see the start of the food waste trials, which makes up about 30% of the average black bin and if this was rolled across the district then 1% should be achievable.

Councillor Bigby welcomed the Chief Executive's suggestion of the inclusion of regional and national context. He also welcomed the food waste trial and hoped that this would be successful, but expressed some surprise that we were not doing this already. He felt that the inclusion of the electric charging point in the new car park in Ashby should be

rolled out with some urgency rather than wait for the outcome of a pilot report, especially as he envisaged that the uptake on electric cars was set to increase.

Paul Sanders, Head of Community Services advised that the pilot had gone very well and discussions were ongoing with a number of suppliers on the best possible solution and this will be a key action in the carbon road map in 2020/21 going forwards.

Councillor Bigby reported that he was keen to see a stakeholders' group established to oversee the works on Ashby Hood Park and that it was unfortunate that this was not set up at the outset. Mr Sanders agreed and confirmed that this had been programmed for September.

Councillor Hoult asked if there was a possibility of having our own bio-digester for household waste. Mr Sanders replied that this was a county function and they therefore determine where we take our food waste.

The Chairman advised that, in accordance with the recommendation, these comments would be reported to Cabinet.

15. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Members were invited to put forward suggestions for inclusion in the Committee's work programme which was set out in the report. This was subject to the Council agreeing an additional budget meeting on 7th November.

They were reminded to make clear any specific requests and the timetable for their consideration.

No items were added.

RESOLVED THAT: The work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 7.25 pm