

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Abbey Room, Stenson House, London Road, Coalville, LE67 3FN on THURSDAY, 31 AUGUST 2023

Present: Councillor S Lambeth (Chair)

Councillors M Ball, D Bigby, M Blair-Park, M Burke, A Morley, S Sheahan, J G Simmons (Substitute for Councillor K Horn) and N Smith (Substitute for Councillor R L Morris)

In Attendance: Councillors J Legrys, A Barker and T Eynon

Portfolio Holders: Councillors K Merrie MBE, A C Woodman and M B Wyatt

Officers: Mr A Barton, Mrs A Crouch, Mr T Devonshire, Ms K Hiller, Mrs C Hammond, Mr G Hammons and Mr M Murphy

10. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor K Horn and R Morris.

11. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor N Smith declared a pecuniary interest in several businesses in Ashby. He accepted that it may not be directly relevant, but felt it prudent to be noted for the record.

12. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

The Chair advised Members that a question had been received, in relation to the Council Delivery Plan, however as the committee did not develop the plan, the Deputy Monitoring Officer determined that this Committee was not the appropriate place for it to be asked and that the appropriate meeting for it be considered at is Cabinet on 19 September 2023.

13. MINUTES

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2023.

It was moved by Councillor S Sheahan, seconded by Councillor J Simmons and

RESOLVED THAT:

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2023 be approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

The Chair announced a change of the order of business to consider item 7 – Establishment of Nould and Damp in Council Housing Property Task and Finish Group, following item 5 – Items for Inclusion in the Future Work Programme due to the close link between the two items.

14. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the inclusion of any items on the work programme.

No comments were received.

Chairman's initials

15. ESTABLISHMENT OF MOULD AND DAMP IN COUNCIL HOUSING PROPERTY TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Strategic Director of Communities presented the report.

A Member welcomed the creation of the group, but questioned whether three meetings of the group was enough. And, they added, should the group need more time than recommended in the report, it should be noted that the plan to return it to Committee on 23 November was not compulsory. The group should also look at the 26-point list set down by the Ombudsman two years ago and measure organisational performance against this.

Another Member noted the growing national recognition that damp was a grave problem for health if left untreated.

Councillors D Bigby, S Lambeth and A Morley were nominated to represent the Labour group on the Task and Finish Group. Councillor M Burke was nominated to represent one of the Alliance seats. Conservative group nominations were deferred considering Councillors K Horn and R Morris had sent their apologies.

It was moved by Councillor M Blair-Park, seconded by Councillor J Simmons, and

RESOLVED THAT:

1. A Task and Finish Group to review the current issues with mould and damp in Council owned homes, and what action the Council is taking, be established.
2. The principles set out in the draft terms of reference for the Task and Finish Group, as set out in the Appendix, be agreed.
3. Nominations be received and appointments be made to the seats on the Task and Finish group in accordance with the terms of reference.

16. 2023/24 QUARTER 1 GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) FINANCE UPDATE

The Head of Finance presented the report.

In response to questions from a couple of Members about why increasing payroll costs had not been adequately considered, the Head of Finance advised that 4% was in fact budgeted for, but the final cost could end up being somewhat higher. A new forecasted rise of 6.75% had now been budgeted for, though the final figure might be lower than that.

A Member suggested that rising energy costs should have been more accurately foreseen, and asked whether the leisure centre contract incentivised Everyone Active to reduce energy use or were the Council simply obliged to pay.

The Strategic Director of Communities advised that the contract did not simply pass on all costs; he would be happy to supply Members with a briefing note.

In response to a question from a Member about whether an energy subsidy scheme between a council and leisure centre provider was commonplace, the Strategic Director of Communities advised that the scheme they had agreed primarily covered extraordinary costs over a given base; more details would be provided to Members.

In response to a question from the Chair about how projected decreases in energy costs would impact the agreement, the Strategic Director of Communities advised that it was not based on hypotheticals, and there was a clear and transparent formula to arrive at the figure.

In response to a question about whether any money had been paid to Everyone Active, the Legal Team Manager advised on procedure, noted that no money had been so far paid, but some details could not be shared because of commercial sensitivity.

Several Members expressed concerns about the practice of using unutilised staffing budgets – from unfilled vacancies – to cover budgetary shortfalls. The Strategic Director of Communities advised that staffing roles weren't being unfilled to cover short falls, but if they simply couldn't be filled then the money was used elsewhere.

A Member asked if the money was utilised elsewhere, what became of the post at that point. If the roles were then lost this would impact service provision. The Strategic Director advised that no posts had been lost in this way.

The Chair asked how this practice affected the commitment to improving housing service delivery, the Strategic Director of Communities advised that this was an ongoing priority of the Corporate Management Team. Plans for the development of the service would be brought to the meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 23 November and there was a planned timetable.

The Chair expressed concern about hiring temporary staff for planning, there had been a shortage for years, and agency staff were an expensive way to fill posts. The Strategic Director of Resources advised that this was an ongoing organisational priority but had to be balanced with HR considerations. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added that additional supplements to the staffing budget for planning had been agreed and had been useful for recruiting and retraining permanent staff.

A Member requested the details of how many people had worked on a temporary contract or agency basis for more than six months, with the premium this entailed, and which might be better spent on long term recruitment. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development advised that this information could be provided; a permanent post is always preferred but not always possible.

A Member expressed concerns that it appeared that the administration had abandoned the net zero by 2030 target. He also added that the £3.1 million budget set out at in the report appeared in actuality to be a reduction from a previous projected budget of £4.5 million.

The Strategic Director of Resources advised that £3.1 million referred to the current financial year's budget approved by Council. The Strategic Director agreed to come back to Members with the precise details of the five-year position.

A Member asked why the earmarked reserve not been moved into the general reserve if it was no longer needed? The Head of Finance said that she would clarify this.

A Member expressed concern that, as set out at paragraph 2.6.3 of the report, it appeared that to cover the overspend which was required to renovate Stenson House the organisation seemed to be taking £150,000 out of the Electric Charging point budget and was concerned. The Head of Finance said it was still being used for electrical charging point but on paper it was now set out in a different budget. This would be clarified in the Cabinet report. The Chair requested a full breakdown of what had happened to the

£150,000. He felt that the amount for electric charging points at Whitwick Business Centre sounded a rather large amount, and he doubted that was where all the money had gone.

A Member asked about the affordable housing sections of the report and how the £2.27 million budget was to be spent. The Head of Finance said a briefing would be provided. The Member inquired how this tallied with numbers in the Housing Revenue Account section. The Head of Finance advised that it was a separate budget.

Questions were asked about the £1 million budget for recreation, play areas and leisure. The Strategic Director of Resources advised that they were now attempting to present the totality of the budget in finance updates. This first report was a starting point and Member comments had been useful in aiding this moving forwards.

The Chair felt that inadequate attention was being given to inflation in the report and more clarity was needed. The forecasted inflation figures in the medium term also were wrong and should be recalculated accordingly. The Strategic Director of Resources advised that the comments of the committee would be taken onboard, and future budgets were already being planned and the impact of inflation would extend over the medium terms. He added that a draft budget would come to the Corporate Scrutiny on 4 January 2023.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments which would be presented to the Cabinet on 19 September 2023.

17. COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development presented the report.

A Member said that she felt that, as a new Member, she found the delivery plan clear, well formatted, and easy to understand.

A Member asked whether the reports back to the Committee would be judged against Key Performance Indicators in this document or the lower-level departmental performance indices. He was concerned that if the latter, this might obscure things from the Committee that had previously come before them. The Head of Human Resources advised the reporting will be against indicators in appendix 2. He set out the logic behind this and how it would operate.

A Member found the new Key Performance Indicators, for example in Housing and Leisure but he felt his point could be applied more widely, concerning as they did not go into enough depth nor have a wide enough scope. He also found some unoriginal.

A Member wanted more information from housing to be gathered. She also felt the benchmarks seemed unambitious and the report gave no contextual information on what they had been based, she feared they were simply set near to current benchmarks.

The Strategic Director of Communities advised that in the example given, regarding Housing complaints, the plan was scaled to work up to 100% over the plan period, this was also the case for most of the targets in the plan. Previous background information had also been presented to this committee through past monitoring reports.

The Member still felt that the first-year benchmarks were too low. Key Performance Indicators should be aspirational and benchmarked against peers.

A Member expressed concern with both the form and content of the report. He wanted to consult with the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development again.

Officers advised that the formal process of Scrutiny meant this committee needed to comment prior to consideration by Cabinet and then Council.

A member confirmed that the Labour Group were happy to put suggestions to the Cabinet.

The Portfolio Holder welcomed Members feedback so far and would work with Officers to reflect Scrutiny comments. The Portfolio Holder intended the Delivery Plan to be a costed and achievable document which synthesised the thoughts of Officers, the Alliance, and Opposition Members.

The Chair concurred that the Delivery Plan must be costed and targeted and success should be clearly defined and measurable.

A Member expressed concern that Key Performance Indicators may have unintended consequences which needed to be considered. He listed some ways which he felt that overly simplistic metrics may lead to undesirable outcomes. Then he asked what had happened to net-zero Council houses by 2030 and why had this been pushed back to 2050. He dismissed budgetary concerns as they could and should be allayed by central government grants. The removal of this target removed any incentives to raise this money and pursue the matter with appropriate zeal. Key Performance Indicator 9 regarding private rental tenants and minimal energy standards also seemed in his view both immeasurable and unambitious.

Expanding on the point of unsophisticated metrics and unforeseen outcomes, another Member felt that decreased crime rates would be a more sensible measure of success with regards to what was hoped to be achieved by CCTV. Another Member suggested that wider community cooperation was necessary to combat crime and should be reflected in the appropriate Key Performance Indicators however accepting that this was not fully in the Councils control.

A Member referred to the waste management Key Performance Indicators and requested more specificity around food waste recycling.

A Member expressed concern that a Key Performance Indicator which detailed how successful the Council had been at getting landlords to sign up to the housing charter had been omitted from the document.

The Chair felt the document was unclear and ought to be restructured. He felt that the drafting process was failing, and the final document would not achieve what it hoped to achieve.

Several Members felt that, with the critical importance of what was being discussed, it was imperative that the granular and complex nature of the discussion be accurately recorded in the minutes. No alternative measures or metrics were provided by the Committee.

The Chair thanked Members for their comments on the report which would be presented to the Cabinet on 19 September 2023.

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 7.53 pm