

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday 30 January 2023

Present: Councillors Gerry Clark (Chairman), John Story (Vice-Chairman), Simon Bond, Greg Jones, Lynne Jones, Helen Price, Julian Sharpe, Shamsul Shelim, Leo Walters and Simon Werner

Also in attendance virtually: Councillors David Hilton, Mandy Brar, Ewan Larcombe, Donna Stimson and Gurpreet Bhangra

Officers: Mark Beeley, Adele Taylor and Nikki Craig

Officers in attendance virtually: Andrew Vallance, Emma Duncan and Alysse Strachan

Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Davies.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

Minutes

Councillor Price was pleased to note that with the extra money which had been received as part of the local government financial settlement, some of the points which the Panel had requested at the December budget meeting had been picked up and considered. She also felt that the decision to refer relevant items to the People Overview and Scrutiny Panel and the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel had been a good one and both Panel's had recently held beneficial meetings. Councillor Price suggested that these items should automatically be considered by the relevant Panels for next year's budget process.

Adele Taylor, Executive Director of Resources, confirmed that a review of the budget process would be conducted to see where improvements could be made for next year.

Mark Beeley, Democratic Services Officer, said that the actions table which collated all of the actions from the meetings held in November and December would be circulated to the Panel shortly, with the outcomes of the actions from these meetings.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 14th December 2022 were approved as a true and accurate record.

Budget 2023/24 - Fees and Charges

Adele Taylor said that the full fees and charges report was part of the agenda pack, the Panel were asked to provide any comments on the proposals. This included the financial implications which were included as part of the draft budget. Lines that were statutory had been indicated and service areas were asked to consider the fees impact on the budget, for example an increase in volume should be fed into the service area income budget.

Councillor Price commented that there was no point in the Panel discussing non-discretionary items as these were fixed. This was confirmed by the Executive Director of Resources.

Councillor Price asked if there was a rationale for some areas which had increased and other areas which had not.

Adele Taylor explained that some increases could be higher due to the scale of some of the fees, cost recovery could be a factor if costs had also increased. Average increases could be skewed if one specific fee had increased which had affected the overall average.

Councillor Price asked why the parking fees had gone out to public consultation but no other fees in the budget had done so.

Adele Taylor said the parking fees formed the majority of the council's income which was why officers had focused on this area.

Councillor L Jones said that inflation was forecast to drop rapidly over the next couple of months, she asked why the finance team were not using the forecast on inflation.

Adele Taylor said that the rate of inflation was taken at the current point in time, the same had been done for expenditure. Some of the fees and charges were driven by costs in year. All fees and charges were done on an individual service basis, these service areas could justify any rises if needed.

Councillor L Jones did not understand what other costs had been incurred on parking over the past year, other than a loss in income. She did not believe that parking charges needed to be raised to match coinage as parking charges were now done digitally. Councillor L Jones suggested that particularly in Windsor, residents needed more than a one hour discount on parking, residents needed to be encouraged to use their local high street. She requested to Cabinet that the parking charge was not increased, that the inflation rate used needed to be revaluated and that residents were given a greater discount on parking.

The Chairman recalled that the parking team had benchmarked parking charges against other local authorities and RBWM had low parking charges, in comparison.

Alysse Strachan, Head of Neighbourhood Services, confirmed that benchmarking had been done with neighbouring authorities and also with other authorities in different areas of the country. RBWM was largely similar in the level of charge for parking.

Councillor Sharpe wanted to ensure that comparisons had been made locally, residents of RBWM were only likely to visit other local town centres for shopping.

Councillor Werner felt that the cost of parking in Windsor was shocking, he said it was cheaper to travel and park in Bracknell. Councillor Werner said that residents should have a greater discount at car parks in RBWM, they should not be charged the same level as tourists.

The Chairman highlighted that an increase in discounted parking would have to be offset by revenue in another area, to ensure that the budget remained balanced.

Councillor Werner suggested that there should be a proper residents discount scheme, where residents paid a fairer rate which was less than what tourists were charged. The more parking charges were raised, the less residents would use RBWM car parks. The council was losing customers to Bracknell and Wokingham due to the cost of parking.

Councillor Shelim understood that some of the car parks in Windsor were near tourist areas and it made sense why the charges in these car parks were higher. Other car parks were used by residents and the charges should be kept as low as possible.

Councillor Bond noted that there was a proposal to charge for parking in Maidenhead on a Sunday but this was now going to be withdrawn and he welcomed this change. He also understood that the one hour free parking for residents would be extended to a third car park

in Maidenhead. Councillor Bond felt the Panel should be informed of the estimated cost, so that this could be factored into the overall budget proposals.

Adele Taylor said that any amendments to the budget would be part of the Cabinet agenda which was due to be published on 1st February. She was unable to comment further until the agenda had been published, which would contain the final confirmed information.

Councillor Price was concerned that a price increase on parking would affect businesses in Windsor as well as residents.

Councillor L Jones said that Windsor did not benefit from free parking on Sundays, the price was the same regardless of the day. She felt that this showed the inequality between Maidenhead and Windsor. Councillor L Jones commented that there was a high chance that residents would not choose to park in Windsor for shopping or leisure activities due to the cost.

Councillor Sharpe pointed out how poor he felt the parking was in Ascot during race days. Local residents should be considered to ensure that they were not forgotten.

The Chairman suggested that the Panel could ask the Cabinet Member for Finance to check the distribution of increased car parking charges across the borough and to ensure that the potential impacts on Windsor and Ascot had been considered.

Councillor L Jones suggested that the inflation rate should be reviewed, parking charge increases were not tied to coinage and therefore should be reconsidered and that the resident discount scheme should be expanded, especially in Windsor.

Adele Taylor reminded the Panel that if any recommendations had an impact on the income total, alternative sources of funding would need to be considered.

Councillor Walters felt that the impact on businesses in Windsor from a rise in parking charges would have been taken into account by officers when the decision was made.

Alysse Strachan said that the reference made to York being a comparison was because Windsor was also a tourist destination. The daily parking budget was up to around 96% of pre-Covid levels, however season ticket income was much lower and was around 55% of pre-Covid levels.

The Chairman felt that it was appropriate to ask the Cabinet Member for Finance to note the comments which the Panel had made and to consider whether there were any elements in the points which had been made that should be addressed before the budget was proposed to Full Council for adoption. This recommendation was seconded by Councillor Werner.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the comments from the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel on parking were considered by the Cabinet Member for Finance.

Councillor Sharpe said it was important to not let things get out of control and that the council had the funds to cover all services in the budget. In other areas, charges had not been increased at all. One example was charges on anti-social behaviour, he asked if this was something that the council could change.

He was informed that this was a non-discretionary charge, therefore the council had no power to amend this amount.

Councillor Price felt that the charges for film units were low, she suggested that this market could bear higher prices.

Adele Taylor said most of the income would come from the price on application, so this could vary.

Councillor Price was surprised that the charge for hiring the Guildhall in Windsor had not increased, she felt like this was a missed opportunity.

Adele Taylor said that the Guildhall was charging fairly significant rates compared to other venues, uptake on its usage was plateauing.

Councillor Price was concerned that the charge on the collection of special waste had increased, residents could be more likely to fly tip which would cost the council more money in the long term.

Alysse Strachan understood the concerns, there had been a lot of research done on this. The organisation Keep Britain Tidy had confirmed that there was little to no increase in fly tipping as a result of charges being increased. She was aware of some authorities which had no charge on waste collection but still had high levels of fly tipping, therefore no definitive correlation could be made.

Councillor Price asked if the charge for rooms at the library applied to all organisations. The police had recently given a presentation to residents using this space, she asked if they would have been charged by the council.

Adele Taylor confirmed that all organisations were charged for their use of the library space.

Councillor Bond was disappointed to see the charges for sports pitches were increasing more than inflation when it was good for people to participate in exercise. He noticed that sexual entertainment venue licenses and sex shop licenses were charged at the same amount, particularly when other things like the Windsor Horse Show and the triathlon paid significant amounts to the council. Councillor Bond suggested that he would like to see the cost of these licenses be increased so that they were in line with inflation. One of the budget proposals was to review public conveniences in parks, it did not seem appropriate or convenient to implement this.

Councillor L Jones asked if there was a discount or benefit on special waste collection for those who were disabled or the elderly. Allotments were increasing by 15%, this was a £50 increase a year which was significant. The council were meant to be encouraging people to exercise and maintain wellbeing, increasing the cost of sport pitches and allotments went against this principle.

Alysse Strachan confirmed that there was a 50% discount on waste collection available to those on housing benefits. On sport pitches, the tariff in RBWM was particularly low when compared with neighbouring local authorities, it was important that the council was able to cover the cost of the maintenance of these areas. Allotments were very popular, in some places there was a ten year waiting list in place. These prices were also comparable to other authorities.

Councillor Shelim asked why on the annual fee for premises licenses, the report said 'see website'. He asked if it was therefore a different amount for each premise.

Adele Taylor said that the amount had not been set which was why the website had been referenced in the report, she would confirm this after the meeting.

ACTION – Adele Taylor to confirm the reason why 'see website' had been referenced in the report.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel provided comments on the proposed fees and charges for 2023/24, these would be published as part of the budget report for consideration by Cabinet on 9th February 2023.

Corporate Peer Challenge Update

Emma Duncan, Director of Law, Governance and Public Health, said that an action plan had been developed after the peer review team visited the council in January 2022. The peer review team had revisited the council later in the year to consider the progress made on the action plan, the report highlighted the recommendations that had been made as a result.

Councillor Price made a comment on the Windsor Town Council, the peer review team had been told that only 3% of residents had responded to the public consultation. Councillor Price disputed this figure, she felt that it was closer to 10% as this included the number of residents who had signed the e-petition.

Councillor L Jones noted that the peer review team had suggested that the council needed to invest to save. She wanted to see some service areas given the proper resource to allow transformation to happen.

Adele Taylor said that through the capital programme there were some schemes that were funded through borrowing and these were invest to save.

Councillor L Jones felt that more could be done on governance and culture, some progress had been made but scrutiny needed to be embedded on all policy papers. Draft proposals should be seen by scrutiny so that they could add value, rather than being brought for consideration at the end of the process.

Councillor Bond considered what he knew already and what he had only been informed about through the peer review, there was probably an even split. Briefings could be used to help improve the Panel's knowledge for certain issues. Councillor Bond questioned if the peer review team were aware of a number of changes in the Corporate Leadership Team at the council. He noted that the health scrutiny terms of reference were being reviewed by the Head of Governance, who had left the council at the end of 2022. He asked what was being planned for this piece of work.

Emma Duncan said that the peer review team had revisited the council just after the departure of the previous Chief Executive. It was the job of all employees at the council to ensure good governance, there would be a change in the leadership team but there had been substantial improvements in the governance of the council. RBWM was in a better place now than when Emma Duncan had joined the council. On health scrutiny, the council was considering how it could best perform the health scrutiny role, particularly as the footprint of the healthcare system was different to that of local authorities. It was likely that this would be resolved after the election.

Councillor Price expressed concern that the Cabinet Transformation Sub Committee was not meeting four times a year and therefore it was not effectively monitoring how transformation had been taking place across the council. She did not feel it had the weight of importance that the committee should have. An annual governance statement being produced had been referenced in the report, Councillor Price asked when this annual governance statement would be available. A planning service improvement plan was also mentioned in the report, Councillor Price queried whether this was something that either the Corporate or the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel should consider.

Adele Taylor clarified that the meeting of the Cabinet Transformation Sub Committee scheduled for early February had been postponed to March due to the budget being prioritised, the meeting would still take place. The annual governance statement was

published annually with the statement of accounts, these reports were considered by the Audit and Governance Committee.

Emma Duncan added that the planning service improvement plan could be considered by the Place Overview and Scrutiny Panel, should they wish to add the item to their work programme. The best course of action could be for the Panel to ask the Head of Planning for a briefing on the item, so that the Panel could understand the context of the plan.

Councillor Walters asked if investment zones were still planned to happen or if the government had scrapped them.

Adele Taylor said that investment zones had been scrapped by the government.

Emma Duncan said that often councils did support developments depending on the application and service requirements. However, the council did not have to grant every application which was made.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and the comments that had been made by the Peer Review Team.

Work Programme

Mark Beeley informed the Panel that items on the agenda for the next meeting in April would be a report on performance monitoring and a resident scrutiny suggestion on the physical separation of resident and library services. Councillor Price had suggested that the Panel should look at the council tax reduction scheme paper, after a discussion with officers it was decided that it would be more beneficial to bring a general cost of living crisis scrutiny review item. The Panel could then consider what schemes the council had in place, how these schemes were being communicated and whether residents were engaging with the support in place. Mark Beeley added that a scoping document would be drafted and shared with Panel Members in the coming weeks.

Councillor Price added that there were a lot of initiatives in place to support residents but it was not clear if this help was reaching all residents and if they were taking advantage of the support that was offered by the council.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 8.35 pm

Chair.....

Date.....