

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2023 at 7.00 pm in Council Chamber, Council Offices, Cecil Street, Margate, Kent.

Present: Councillor Phil Fellows (Chair); Councillors Austin, Boyd, Currie, Coleman-Cooke, Huxley, Keen, Paul Moore, Tomlinson, Towing and Yates

In Attendance: Councillors Ashbee, J Bayford, Garner, D Saunders and M Saunders

422. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from the following Members:

Councillor Stuart Piper;
Councillor Rattigan;
Councillor Leys, substituted by Councillor Towing;
Councillor Pat Moore, substituted by Councillor Yates.

423. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Boyd and Councillor Wing each made a significant declaration interest on the Fees and Charges agenda item (minute item 426).

424. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Councillor Paul Moore proposed, Councillor Tomlinson seconded and the Members agreed that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 24 November 2022 were a correct record.

425. CABINET MEMBER PRESENTATION - THE EFFICACY OF USING THE CAGS APPROACH IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Councillor Ashbee, Leader of Council made a presentation at the Panel and made the following points:

- Currently there were four cabinet advisory groups (CAGs) that included the Fees & Charges CAG, Housing CAG, Local Plan & Local Development Scheme CAG and Climate Emergency CAG;
- There was cross party membership on all these advisory groups;
- The main purpose for these sub groups was to consider issues of interest to the Council and when appropriate, forward any recommendations to Cabinet;
- Each sub group was chaired by the relevant portfolio holder;
- They met in private working sessions in order to encourage maximum member contributions;
- CAGs played an important part of sharing information across political groups;
- This role was different to the role played through a scrutiny review.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- Members acknowledged the positive contributions by cabinet advisory groups to the decision process;

- They further praised the honest debate that went on in the CAG private working sessions;
- One member requested that independent Members should be added to the CAG membership. Currently they were not on any CAG membership list;
- Did the Leader of Council feel that the strong leader model as opposed to the committee system was giving Thanet the best decision making process?
- Could the Health and Wellbeing CAG be re-established?

Councillor Ashbee, Chris Blundell, Acting Deputy CEx and Nick Hughes, Committee Services Manager responded to Member comments and questions as follows:

- CAGs provided those Members not on Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet with an opportunity to play a role in the decision making process;
- There was a need to check why the Health and Wellbeing CAG was stopped. It could have been a resource issue;
- Independent members fail to get onto the CAGs because these are created using proportional representation rules; In addition, it would be difficult to find a criterion that would be used to select one Independent Member over the other since they were not a political group;
- The Strong Leader model is a better option than a committee system of governance arrangements. Decisions are made more expeditiously in an executive model of governance than committee model;
- CAGs were necessary in making the Executive arrangement model work more efficiently;
- The Leader would consider setting up the Health and Wellbeing CAG, having first looked at what this CAG's terms of reference would be.

Members noted the report.

426. FEES AND CHARGES 2023/24

Chris Blundell introduced the report and made the following points:

- The proposals in the report had been considered by Cabinet on 12 January 2023;
- A 10% broad increase in fees and charges was being proposed for approval by Council;
- This increase was largely linked to high inflation and in order to recover the costs to services that were being delivered by the council;
- Officers were still working on providing additional fees and charges for car parking that would make it easier to identify fees for each car park;
- In 2021/22 Mill Lane raised £100k, Royal Harbour raised £170k and all the other car parks had a total of £1.63million;
- During the pandemic period Mill Lane raised £75k. This was largely due to the staff car park income;
- In the past these budgets were not aligned properly;
- Proposing a 10% was not an easy decision to make;
- It was worth noting that Council was not allowed to increase fees and charges in order to plug a budget gap. The intention should be to change the behaviour of residents.

Nick Hughes, Committee Services Manager explained to Members that having made an interest declaration, they could make their statements regarding the item for

debate and then leave the Council Chamber until after a decision had been made by the Panel.

Members made comments and asked questions as follows:

- The proposed purchase of the multi storey car park was welcome news. Did the £3million include costs for the refurbishment;
- One Member said that the Labour Group was not happy with the proposed 10% increase in fees and charges for car parks. The Group was still working on their own proposals;
- Would the Bulky and Green Waste work as intended, which would be to reduce flytipping occurrences in parts of the district?
- There were also occurrences where households would move houses and just dump unwanted stuff or household waste at undesignated spots;
- Could the performance of both bulky waste and green waste be monitored to ascertain the impact on flytipping?
- Did the Safer Streets campaign which included collections of bulky waste in flytipping hotspots have the desired effect?

Chris Blundell and Penny Button, Head of Safer Neighbourhoods responded to Member comments and questions as follows:

- The refurbishment to the multi storey car park was covered in the budget;
- An officer response regarding the impact of the Safer Streets campaign would be sent out by email to Members after the meeting;
- Green waste service demand might decrease due to the increased costs. However this was a service that residents would like to have as they valued it?
- Car parking would most likely maintain demand even after the increased charges.

The report was noted.

427. BUDGET 2023/24 & 2023-27 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Chris Blundell introduced the report and made the following points:

- This was a positive budget being proposed to Council, with more money coming into the budget;
- This was a balanced budget;
- There were proposals for investment in services.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- Members welcomed the budget proposals with £55million being set aside for the capital programme over 4 years;
- They congratulated officers for work done to put together a balanced budget;
- In the repairs budget; was there a priority list of which repair projects to carry out?
- What will be the priorities for the five new coastal enforcement posts?
- How did the Council's CCTV system link up with Kent Police? Did Kent Police have access to the Council's CCTV system?
- How did the tidal pool issue impact tidal swimmers?

- HRA was well costed but the Port and Harbour budget was not as detailed and well costed;
 - One Member requested for more detail regarding the proposal for a ferry;
 - Could Panel members be given a tour of the Port and Harbour? It was important to carry out a risk analysis of the additional repairs and staffing costs required for the Port and Harbour to determine the best way forward;
 - It was good to note that Members would be given access to substantial information relating to the capital programme for the Ramsgate Harbour and Port. Why was the Council not utilising the unused land at the Ramsgate Harbour, even on a short term basis?
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- It was also good to note that the budget was proposing to invest on Council staff. Why were salary void targets in the budget?
 - The Margate Town Deal aspect of the proposals did not include the development of the Walpole Bay;
 - There had been an increased demand for home energy services. Currently the team has two officers. Could Cabinet propose the recruitment of a third officer to join this team?
 - This officer would conduct home visits to install home energy saving devices with a budget of £35k per year that could be funded from the Better Homes Care Fund. The officer will visit low income households in private sector housing to install low cost energy efficiency measures such as installing power down devices and carbon monoxide detection alarms in homes;
 - This proposal was being made now as it was the right time considering the challenges households were experiencing due to increasing fuel costs;
 - Implementing the proposal would ensure significant impact for families;
 - One Member asked if the above proposal would impact on disability funding. It would be a better approach to first get an officer report after further investigation of this proposal before it can be carried forward;
 - Another Member responded that £28k would be for labour and the remainder would go towards the equipment costs. They further said that it was their understanding that such a proposal would not impact on any other services.

Chris Blundell, Bob Porter, Acting Corporate Director Place and the Leader of Council responded to Member comments and questions as follows:

- Repairs Budget: There was an ongoing survey that would inform the repairs priority list decision;
- The Asset Team would be increased in order to drive increase in income from council property portfolio;
- Priority for the new coastal enforcement was an operational issue that would best come from Mike Humber, the Service Director for that service. The town centre car park would be worth considering as part of that work;
- It was important to be as flexible as was possible in the deployment of these additional five roles. This would ensure that they would be mobile, versatile and quick to respond areas of need;
- The team would be utilised to address the pinch points, working on intelligence regarding beach activities coming from the Events Team;
- Access to CCTV by Kent Police: Kent Police had access to CCTV to view CCTV recording as long as they had authorisation;
- It was officer understanding that the tidal pool was a prohibited area for swimming;

- The tidal pool was not covered by the RNLI. There was therefore a risk element at the pool. The solution was to have a Life Guard manning the tidal pool;
 - This would require having a concession to cover costs for manning the pool;
 - It was important to make that decision by summer;
 - Details for the capital programme were considered by the Capital Group (a sub group of senior officers) before the programme was finalised;
 - The Leader of Council was going to speak to Mike Humber regarding the request for a Panel visit to the Ramsgate Port and Harbour;
 - Officers were able to bring to a future Panel meeting additional information on the work programme (planned work);
- Salary staff voids targets: This information was in the budget because officers were aware that some posts would remain vacant in the coming financial year. This was because the process for replacing staff created such voids due to the notice periods that were required for those posts. It was important to be mindful of that so that the Council would not go over budget;
 - The ongoing senior staff restructure was also reported in the new budget;
 - Margate Town Deal projects not mentioned in the budget proposals could have been left out because of the need to scale back some of the capital programmes due to high inflation. Additional information was in the Risk Register. Any scaling back would be reported back to Cabinet;
 - Funding a proposed third energy services officer: The Better Care Fund was a government grant that was used to fund pay for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants. The grant was also used to pay for existing energy officers, handyman services, tradesmen who make adaptations for individuals coming out hospital;
 - Officers suggested that a report be brought to Cabinet on the current progress regarding the Better Care Fund activities. This would help Members determine whether there was any scope for recruiting a third officer for the energy team.

Councillor Yates proposed, Councillor Currie seconded and the Panel agreed to forward the following recommendation to Cabinet:

That cabinet considered recommending to council for inclusion in the 2023/24 General Fund Revenue Budget, the appointment of a 3rd officer for the home energy services team who will provide a cold buster service.

428. HRA BUDGET 2023/24

Chris Blundell introduced the report and made the following comments:

- There were lots of pressure on the budget with nearly 50% increase in energy costs;
- Inflation was at high historic levels;
- Government had consulted on the rent increases including an option to increase the rents by 7%;
- The Council was proposing a 7% increase because the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was in still deficit and if approved would bring the HRA out of deficit into surplus;
- There was an ambitious programme to bring more housing development to the district;

- Most Council tenants were on housing benefits and or universal credit. The impact of these increases would not be that significant on these residents;
- The HRA had gone into deficit mainly due to the mandatory rent reductions between 2016 and 2020. This had put a strain on the account.
- Bob Porter, Acting Corporate Director of Place made the following comments:
 - The rent increases were largely inflation linked;
 - There were also high fuel costs to consider;
 - There were 24 hour waking watch provisions for the five tower blocks which had been factored into the budget proposals;
 - This provision was put in in place after a fire risk assessment had made that recommendation;
 - Officers were working towards a situation where the 24 hour waking watch provision would not be required;
 - The Council had also been working on improving energy efficiency that included insulation of the internal walls of the tower blocks;
 - Since 2015, the Council had delivered over 200 homes in the district.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- One Member asked why wooden windows were being installed on some of the Council properties;
- Another Member thanked staff in the Housing team for the work done since the service moved in house from East Kent housing;
- They further said that a significant number of residents in the Tower Blocks were happy with the presence of the waking watch officers on their block premises.

Bob Porter advised the Panel that the wooden windows would be fitted on listed properties in the conservation areas.

Members noted the report.

429. REVIEW OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2022/23

The Collaboration Working Party Chair gave a progress update on the activities of the working party and said that report will be presented to the Panel in the first quarter of this year.

Members noted the report.

430. FORWARD PLAN AND EXEMPT CABINET DECISION LIST

Members noted the report.

Meeting concluded: 8.04 pm