

STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL

RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Minutes

WEDNESDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2023

PRESENT: Councillor G Heath (Chair)

Councillors C Atkins, E Fallows, M Gledhill, T Hall, N Hawkins,
T Holmes, K J Jackson, L A Malyon, T Riley, P Routledge,
L Swindlehurst and N Yates

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors K Hoptroff, D Proudlove, P Roberts and M Worthington

APOLOGIES: Councillor P Wilkinson

90 **NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS, IF ANY**

There were none.

91 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

DECIDED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2022 be approved.

92 **URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS, IF ANY (24 HOURS NOTICE TO BE PROVIDED TO THE CHAIRMAN)**

None had been received.

93 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS:**

No declarations of interests were made.

94 **QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS, IF ANY. (AT LEAST TWO CLEAR DAYS NOTICE REQUIRED, IN WRITING, TO THE PROPER OFFICER IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURE RULE 15)**

Questions received from Councillor Salt: (Councillor Salt was not present and Councillor Proudlove acted on her behalf)

Q1. "Biddulph Town Council has a number of projects, which do not seem to be progressing because of SMDC hold ups.

1. Shepherd Street/ Slater Street allotment- Cllr James Aberley seems to have taken this up, what's the current status? This has been ongoing for my whole tenure on the Town and District Council 8 years, and before that!
2. Management of the old toilets on the Wharf Road car park. Apparently held up for 2+ years because of a covenant. We want to turn this into a Changing Places facility. No progress.
3. We still only have a license to manage the new toilets/ bus hub on Wharf Road. This should be a lease. Where is the lease?

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4. Station Road- I'm not clear what our role is here. We had a license to complete the S106 work, but no further communication since then. If we're going to develop the whole area, this should really be a long-term lease. Where is the lease?
5. Cycle rack at entrance to Wharf Road car park. Our Chief Officer has done all the legwork with regard to Planning and Highways- both have no issues. We just need a license.
6. The late Cllr Hilda Sheldon (MBE) wanted to install the last clematis 'statue' at the Thames Drive/ Congleton Road junction. Again, no Planning or Highways issues, but no response from SMDC.
7. We don't have a tenancy/ agreement for Cath to operate a café on our behalf at the Grange Visitor Centre. She is doing this very successfully, and Assets are aware. They haven't provided the relevant paperwork, why not?
8. I've asked a couple of times for the conditions surveys that were completed on the buildings we now manage, and note that Biddulph Town Hall has been highlighted as potentially having LED upgrades. We've done quite a lot of this already, so I'd like to work on other potential projects, our Town Council wants to see the surveys, after all we pay for and manage the buildings and want to work on issues like climate change and ensuring they meet legislation e.g. the new fire door regs that are incoming.
9. CCTV - will there be CCTV coverage of Station Road, ASB a huge issue, we've requested CCTV coverage but have heard nothing."

Response:

"I can confirm that Biddulph Town Council's Chief Officer met with our Chief Executive on 19th December 2022 and highlighted items 1 to 8. I can confirm items 2 to 7 are operational matters and that he has requested that these are prioritised and resolved by the Council's Assets Team and that he will report back to BTC with the timescales for completion.

Item one is more complex and has been discussed on numerous occasions but has not been raised by the Town Council for a couple of years – the land in question is owned by the district council and the town council have requested to purchase for the development of an allotment – as the land has monetary value, the consideration for sale would be subject to valuation and the approval by Cabinet.

With regard to item 8 the Chief Executive agreed to provide this information to the town council – this information is currently being refreshed as part of the Council's Asset Management Plan (AMP) review which is almost complete – the information will be provided once the AMP refresh is complete.

There are no current plans to further extend the coverage of the Council's public realm CCTV system, which is based upon historic crime patterns. Research by the College of Policing shows that the most significant reductions following installation of CCTV are for drug crimes, vehicle crime and property crime, but that there was no evidence of an effect on violent crime and disorder. I will ask our Communities Team to discuss anti-social behaviour in Station Road to see what would be the most effective multi-agency response. In the meantime, I would encourage residents to report any incidents to Staffordshire Police."

In response to supplementary questions, the Leader asked members to contact him or the relevant Portfolio Holder should they have difficulties receiving responses in the future.

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95 WORK PROGRAMME

DECIDED:

That the Work Programme be approved, subject to, an item on the Local Procurement Strategy being added.

96 3RD QUARTER 2022/23 FINANCIAL, PROCUREMENT & PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The report informed members of the Council's overall performance and financial position for the period ended 31st December ("Third Quarter 2022/23"). Detailed analysis was provided in the appendices to the report and the overall position was summarised in paragraph 3.3 of the report.

The Panel debated the significant capital programme underspend, increased planning revenue and performance, additional staff resource, HR overspend and underspend for staff, delays with the Birchall Playing Field project and council tax collection rates.

Members also commented on the effective health provision for the elderly influencing action contained within the Corporate Plan in relation to hospital beds at Leek and Cheadle.

In response to query around access to support with council tax payments, members were advised of the various types of assistance that was available to customers and that there were plans to increase the opening hours of the Reception. The use of enforcement agents for collection of council tax arrears was explained to the Panel.

DECIDED:

- 1) The Panel **NOTED** the Third Quarter 2022/23 financial, procurement and performance position detailed in Appendices A, B and C and summarised at 3.3 of the covering report.
- 2) For a detailed response to be provided in relation to the planned improvements at Birchall Playing Fields.

97 SMDC 2022/23 BUDGET & MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2022/23 TO 2025/26

Consideration was given to a report and presentation that set out the proposed Budget for 2023/24, updated Medium-Term Financial Plan 2023/24 – 2026/27, Capital Strategy 2023/24, proposed Fees and Charges for 2023/24 and Procurement Forward Plan 2023/24.

The use of the covid reserve to support the overall deficit was debated in detail and members sought assurance that funding was available for those suffering due to the cost of living crisis. Members felt it was crucial to support people and organisations during this difficult period of time.

Reference was made to the possibility of the allocated budget of £75,000 for Voluntary Sector Emergency Funding being increased should the available budget

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be fully utilised and the importance of this assistance being well communicated. It was agreed that members would be updated on the applications made for this fund.

The Panel welcomed the presentation, requested for this to be emailed after the meeting and thanked the Executive Director and Finance Team for the work undertaken to produce this budget.

DECIDED:

The Panel supported the following **recommendations** to Council:

- Approves the General Fund Budget for 2023/24 as detailed in **Appendix A (section 9)**
- Approves the revised Medium-Term Financial Plan (2023/24 to 2026/27) as detailed in **Appendix A**, including the revised Capital Programme (attached at Annex A)
- Approves the Capital Strategy 2023/24 as set out in **Appendix B**
- Approves the proposed Fees and Charges for 2023/24 as detailed in **Appendix C**
- Approves the proposed Procurement Forward Plan for 2023/24, providing the authority to procure based on procurement activity detailed in **Appendix D**
- Approves a Band D Council Tax of £163.14 for 2023/24 (0% change from 2022/23)
- Approves a Band D Council Tax of £52.92 for Leek and £10.64 for Biddulph for 2023/24 (0% change 2022/23) in respect of Special District Expenses
- Notes the Chief Finance Officer's view that the level of reserves are adequate for the Council based on this budget and the circumstances in place at the time of preparing it (**Appendix A, Annex C**)

98 **LOCAL TAXATION REDUCTION SCHEME**

Members received a report which provided an update on the changes to the Council Tax Reduction scheme for working age applicants in order to reduce the significant complexity of the scheme for its beneficiaries and the administrative burden placed on the Council by the introduction of Universal Credit and also to provide a scheme that is more supportive to those households on the lowest incomes. The rules for all pension age applicants was prescribed by Central Government.

DECIDED:

The Panel **RECOMMENDED** that Council:

- 1) Approve the amendments in section 7.18, 7.19 (m) and the introduction of a new income banded / grid scheme for working age applicants with effect from 1st April 2023, to increase the overall level of support for the lowest

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income families and reduce the administrative burden placed on the Council by the introduction of Universal Credit.

99 SMDC COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT FUND 2023-24

The purpose of the report was to advise the Panel of the details surrounding the Council Tax Support Fund Scheme 2023-24 announced by Government in December 2022.

In recognition of the impact of rising bills, the Government was distributing £100 million of new grant funding in 2023-24 for local authorities to support economically vulnerable households in their area with council tax bills.

Government expects local authorities to use the majority of the funding allocations to reduce council tax bills for current working age and pension age Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) claimants by up to **£25**.

The remaining fund can be used to further support vulnerable households with council tax bills.

In response to a query in regards to the cost to administer the scheme, members were advised this would be an automated system with limited additional burden on the team.

DECIDED:

The Panel **RECOMMENDED** Cabinet approve the award of up to £25.00 to reduce council tax bills for vulnerable households on Local Council Tax Support (LCTS) s7.1 and to direct the remaining funding during 2023-24 in line with the proposal at s8.1.

100 EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY UPDATE

The Panel received a report on the progress in relation to the Empty Property Strategy.

Empty homes were a wasted resource at a time when there was increased pressure to address housing and homelessness need.

There had been a decline in empty properties and those empty for more than 6 months as a proportion of housing stock. However, Staffordshire Moorlands showed a higher percentage compared with national figures for total empty and those empty for more than 6 months.

The cross-service Empty Homes Working Group undertook a service review 'health check' with the Empty Homes Network (EHN) recently. Recommendations within the EHN Service Review report (Appendix A) were to be taken forward as outlined in the Empty Homes Action Plan (Appendix B).

Changes were recommended to council tax discounts and premiums. The removal of the 3 month 100% discount for unoccupied and unfurnished properties, and the 12 month 50% reduction for uninhabitable properties. In line with proposals within the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill 2022; adoption of the Council Tax premium on second homes and the empty property premium for properties that have remained empty for 1 year.

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An Empty Homes Officer would provide a vital role in advising and supporting owners of empty homes to explore options and bring homes back into use.

Members responded positively to the report and thanked the officers for the work put into bringing these changes forward.

DECIDED:

Members **NOTED** the contents of the report and **RECOMMENDED** Cabinet approval of the Action Plan (Appendix B), Enforced Sales Policy (Appendix C) and additional staff resource and capacity (Empty Homes Officer). Also recommend Cabinet approve the removal of the discount for empty and unoccupied properties s7.3.3, the removal of the uninhabitable discount s7.3.4, adopt the Council Tax premium on second homes outlined s7.3.9 and adopt the empty property premium for properties that have remained empty for 1 year s7.3.10.

101 **EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

The Chair moved:

“That, pursuant to Section 100A(2) and (4) of the Local Government Act, 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings whereby it is likely that confidential information as defined in Section 100A (3) of the Act would be disclosed to the public in breach of the obligation of confidence or exempt information as defined in Section 10 I (1) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act would be disclosed to the public by virtue of the Paragraphs indicated.”

102 **EXEMPT QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS, IF ANY. (AT LEAST TWO CLEAR DAYS NOTICE REQUIRED, IN WRITING, TO THE PROPER OFFICER IN ACCORDANCE WITH PROCEDURE RULE 15)**

Members received a response to questions relating to staffing, costs and recruitment.

103 **EXEMPT MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

DECIDED:

That the exempt minutes from the meeting held on 23 November 2023 be approved.

The meeting closed at 12.10 pm

_____ Chairman _____ Date