

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance and Resources Scrutiny Committee

Held at 7.00 pm on Tuesday 10th May 2022 in the Council Chamber, Swanspool House, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, NN8 1BP

Present:-

Members

Councillor Mark Pengelly (Chair)
Councillor Valerie Anslow
Councillor Scott Brown
Councillor Jim Hakewill
Councillor Ken Harrington
Councillor Larry Henson

Councillor King Lawal
Councillor Paul Marks
Councillor Steven North
Councillor Mark Rowley

Officers

Mark Dickenson
Claire Edwards
Guy Holloway
Raj Sohal

Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy
Assistant Director – Finance Accountancy
Assistant Chief Executive
Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance – Councillor Lloyd Bunday

43 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors: Richard Levell, Ian Jelley and Malcolm Ward.

Councillors Matt Binley and Clive Hallam were in attendance, as substitutes.

44 Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 April 2022

RESOLVED that:

The minutes of the meeting held on 5th April 2022 were approved as a correct record.

45 Members' Declarations of Interest

The Chair invited those who wished to do so to declare interests in respect of items on the agenda.

No declarations were made.

46 Budget Forecast 2021/22 as at period 11

The Committee considered a report by the Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy, which set out the budget forecast as at period 11.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried whether representatives from the Northamptonshire Children's Trust would attend Finance and Resources Scrutiny to provide detailed insight in the Trust's budget position.
- One member posited that budget underspends should not always be viewed positively and expressed concern that with increasing levels of need across service areas, more money would need to be spent. The member drew attention to the underspend concerning waste management and also acknowledged that additional funding would need to be allocated to support schools accepting political refugees.
- Members queried whether sufficient funding was available through the contingency budget.
- One member queried whether the authority had considered the impact on the budget of social care exercise and suggested that there should be a further outlay, once this exercise had been completed.
- Members queried whether North Northamptonshire Council anticipated the cost of borrowing to increase and questioned how this potential budget pressure would affect future forecasts.
- Regarding the Hardship Fund and Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme, one member queried how much funding had been made available to support residents across North Northamptonshire and when these rebates would be delivered. The member expressed disappointment concerning the political communication surrounding the Rebate scheme.
- The Chairman queried whether the Committee would be able to receive the closing figures of Northamptonshire County Council's accounts, following this report being provided to the Audit and Governance committee.
- Members queried what provision had been built into the budget to fund increasing energy costs for Council assets.

In response, the Assistant Director clarified that:

- Representatives from the Northamptonshire Children's Trust would be invited to attend a Finance and Resources Scrutiny in the imminent future.
- The contingency balance had been reduced, as it was sufficient for 2021/22. Therefore, officers anticipated this amount would again be sufficient for 2022/23. Due to the new authority's increased certainty across service areas, the need for contingency had stabilised.
- Generally, officers had attempted to estimate the costs of social care packages, in line with inflation.
- North Northamptonshire Council had inherited loans from legacy authorities however, these were established at a fixed rate of 3%, which would not change. Nevertheless, officers anticipated that future borrowing would be more costly.

- Regarding the Council Tax Energy Rebate scheme, officers would provide the Committee with regular updates concerning payments to residents. The easiest payment to administer would be to 46,000 residents who paid Council Tax via direct debit, who would be contacted the week following the meeting. The local authority was also in the process of navigating to a single system of payments – the delay had largely been caused due to the existing four different systems.
- Despite the fact that auditors were not obligated to provide the closing figures of Northamptonshire County Council to North Northamptonshire Council, officers would endeavour to bring a report, regarding the closing position, to the Finance and Resources Scrutiny Committee.
- The 2022/23 budget had considered the anticipated increase of utilities costs. The authority would also need to ensure that it was as energy efficient as possible.

RESOLVED that:

The Committee noted the report.

47 Performance Indicator for Corporate Services 2021/22 as at period 11

The Committee considered a report by the Assistant Chief Executive, which provided an update on the performance of the Council's corporate support services. as at Period 11, as measured by performance indicators.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members requested additional data regarding the proportions of agency staff and full-time staff employed by the Northamptonshire Children's Trust.
- Members queried whether staff absences correlated to people working from home and if the authority could ensure employees were provided with the correct equipment to support remote working.
- Regarding mental health support services for Council staff, the Chairman of the Committee suggested that the authority should also consider what mental health support would be made available for elected members.

In response, the Assistant Chief Executive clarified that:

- Officers would seek to include information regarding agency and full-time staff employed by the Children's Trust in the next performance indicator report.
- Further detail regarding reasons for staff absences and sickness would be provided in future reports. Generally, higher percentages of injuries were sustained by employees carrying out manual labour.

RESOLVED that:

The Committee noted the report.

48 Timetable Going Forward

The Committee considered the timetable for future scrutiny activity.

The Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy suggested that members carry out budget scrutiny in two major stages; the first of which would take place in October 2022. He posited that the second stage of scrutiny should analyse each service area of North Northamptonshire Council, in close detail, around January 2023.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members maintained that the Committee would require the opportunity to efficiently scrutinise the budget outturn of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust, before a final position would be signed off on. One member expressed concern that previously, this scrutiny activity had been carried out too late and that representatives from the Trust should attend a meeting of the Finance and Resources Scrutiny Committee before November 2022.

The Chairman requested that officers continue to revise and make amendments to the scrutiny timetable, as necessary, and bring it back to a future meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED that:

The Committee noted the report.

49 Close of Meeting