

Minutes of a Meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

At 6.30 pm on Tuesday 23rd January, 2024

Held in the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, George Street, Corby

Present:-

Members

Councillor Lyn Buckingham (Chair)
Councillor Richard Levell
Councillor Paul Marks

Councillor Lora Lawman (Vice Chair)
Councillor Zoe McGhee
Councillor Dr Anup Pandey

Officers

George Candler, Interim Chief Executive
Janice Gotts – Executive Director of Finance and Performance
David Watts – Executive Director of Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing &
Director of Children’s Services
Graeme Kane – Interim Executive Director of Place and Economy
Jane Bethea – Director of Public Health & Wellbeing
Guy Holloway – Assistant Chief Executive
Mark Dickenson – Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy
Claire Edwards – Assistant Director of Finance Accountancy
Louise Tyers – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance

Councillor Lloyd Bunday – Executive Member for Finance and Transformation

40 Apologies for non-attendance

Apologies for non-attendance were received from Councillors Jim Hakewill, Steven North and Russell Roberts.

41 Members' Declarations of Interest

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

No declarations of interest were made.

42 Notifications of requests to address the meeting

There were no requests to address the meeting.

43 Budget 2024/2025 - Report from Budget Scrutiny Panel

The Chair presented the report which detailed the feedback from the budget scrutiny sessions which had been conducted on the Executive’s budget proposals for 2024/25. The Committee was now requested to determine its representation to the Executive for consideration at the Executive meeting on 8th February 2024. The final

budget proposals from the Executive would be forwarded to Full Council on 22nd February 2024 for determination.

At its meeting on 21st December 2023, the Executive set out its draft proposals for the Council's budget 2024/25. These draft proposals were submitted for public consultation, with the consultation period closing on 26th January 2024. As part of this consultation process, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee was invited to consider and scrutinise the draft budget proposals.

To assist the Committee in formulating its response, two phases of budget scrutiny sessions were timetabled through a Budget Scrutiny Panel. Phase 1 consisted of seven sessions during November 2023 and included an early indication of key issues to be taken into account in the formulation of the draft 2024/25 budget proposals. Phase 2 involved detailed scrutiny of the proposed budget and again took place over seven meetings between December 2023 and January 2024.

The Chair acknowledged that the scrutiny process had meant a lot of work for members. She thanked Ben Smith, Head of Democratic Services and the support team for supporting the sessions and pulling the response together. Thanks were also given to all service officers for their guidance and support and also to the Finance Team.

During discussion on the report, the following key points were made:

- i. Clarification was sought as to whether there was adequate funding to support schools to meet any RAAC requirements. In response, it was confirmed that no schools had been flagged as having RAAC. The Capital Programme contained a significant amount for schools.
- ii. It was noted with concern that the proposed pressure of £692k for domestic abuse funding was as a result of not knowing if government grant funding would continue. The Leader and Portfolio Holder were encouraged to lobby for continued funding for domestic abuse.
- iii. It was stated that funding through the highways contract was rising and what safeguards were in place to stop prices continuing to rise. Kier were also now undertaking our flood work, along with verge maintenance and was this putting more pressure on them to deliver more things. In response, the Executive Director for Place and Economy clarified that the contract had a set price, with inflationary increases each year. We were also investing more in maintaining our roads. Due diligence had been undertaken on Kier during the contract process and they were a company with financial stability and resilience. Checks would continue to be undertaken throughout the contract.
- iv. It was noted that for Place and Economy, 2024/25 would be a balanced budget but there would be pressures in the future. Asked to identify the top pressures, officers confirmed that these included inflationary pressures, growth of population and increases in contract costs.
- v. It was noted that a number of figures in the draft submission were incorrect and these would be corrected prior to submission to the Executive.

- vi. The significant pressures in future years was noted and members sought clarification as to whether reserves would need to be used to support the budget. Officers explained that some element of reserves would be used for planned investment but not for underlying costs of services. There would be pressures from 2025/26 and it was critical that these were looked at now. There would be a need to look at the costs of delivering services with reduced funding.
- vii. It was noted that spending and recruitment panels had now been introduced to review spending.

The Committee adjourned into a private session to consider the outcome of the private discussions following each scrutiny session.

RESOLVED:

- (i) To receive the draft budget submission and notes from the scrutiny budget sessions.
- (ii) That the budget submission, including the recommendations as detailed in Appendix A of these minutes, be submitted to the Executive.

44 Close of Meeting

The Chair thanked members and officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.02pm.

Chair

Date

Recommendations for Consideration by the Executive on 8th February 2024.

- a) That the Executive note and support the Budget Scrutiny process undertaken for 2024;
- b) That the Executive considers and responds to the issues raised within the Budget Scrutiny Submission at Appendix A (and the notes of the seven Budget Scrutiny Panel meetings held during December 2023 and January 2024 at Appendices 1-7);
- c) That Corporate Scrutiny Committee would draw to the attention of the Executive in particular:-
 - 1) That the Committee supports:-
 - (i) The efficacy of the 2024 Budget and Capital Programme, following detailed department by department scrutiny and questioning of officer and executive member assumptions and projections for the next and future years;
 - (ii) The raising of Council tax by 4.99% (inclusive of 2% adult social care precept). Whilst noting the impact of a rise in precepts on the cost of living, it is considered important to protect services and especially-vulnerable people as much as possible in the face of continued challenges of balancing budgets across the local government sector in this and future years;
 - (iii) That officers of the Council, particularly those based in finance, be thanked for all their hard work in putting together the 2024 budget over recent months.
 - 2) That the Committee considers:-
 - (i) That Children's Services' remains one of the budget areas of greatest concern, especially as the deficit on the High Needs Block continues to grow each year, appreciating that the aftermath of COVID has generated a significant backlog in cases and development issues in younger children.
 - (ii) There is also significant concern in relation to Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing service pressures of £19.947m in 2024/25, particularly in Adult Services of £18.648m, against savings of £4.217m. This will need to be monitored carefully in terms of maintaining a balanced budget for 2024/25.
 - (iii) Whilst noting the excellent progress made by the Council following its formation in difficult circumstances and during a global pandemic, to achieve best value, savings and equality of service availability for tax payers across North Northamptonshire,

it would be helpful for the Council to set clear defined goals and milestones for the transformation and harmonisation of the remaining prior Borough and District based service areas.

- (iv) That, to ensure effective scrutiny of the NCT, Scrutiny should undertake a further review of the NCT's transformation work and its progress around the end of the second quarter of 2024.
- (v) That the budget scrutiny process around NCT commence earlier moving forward, so that recommendations may be put forward before contracts are agreed.
- (vi) That for future budget scrutiny sessions, Equality Impact Assessments be provided to enable effective consideration of the impact of proposals on our vulnerable residents.