

Minutes of a meeting of the Finance and Resources Scrutiny Committee

Held at 7.00 pm on Tuesday 18th October 2022 in the Council Chamber, Corby Cube, Corby, Northamptonshire, NN17 1QG

Present:-

Members

Councillor Mark Pengelly (Chair)
Councillor Jim Hakewill
Councillor Ken Harrington
Councillor Ian Jelley
Councillor Matt Keane
Councillor Paul Marks

Councillor Dr Anup Pandey
Councillor Mark Rowley
Councillor Malcolm Ward
Councillor Scott Brown

Officers

Claire Edwards

Assistant Director – Finance
Accountancy

Janice Gotts
Lucy Hogston

Executive Director – Finance
Assistant Director – Revenue and
Benefits

Guy Holloway
Jo Hutchinson
Carol Mundy
Raj Sohal

Assistant Chief Executive
Senior School Improvement Manager
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance – Councillor Lloyd Bunday

66 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors: Larry Henson, Richard Levell and Steven North.

67 Members' Declarations of Interest

No declarations were received.

68 Minutes of the meeting held on 16 August 2022

RESOLVED that: The minutes of the meeting held on the 16th August 2022 were approved as a correct and accurate record of the meeting.

69 Budget Forecast 2022/23 as at Period 5

The Committee considered a report by The Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy, which set out material financial issues identified as at period 5 of budget monitoring 2022/23. The budget forecast had previously been presented to the Executive on the 13th October 2022.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried what action North Northamptonshire Council had taken to mitigate the overspend of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT). One member posited that it would be important for the Committee to understand how the local authority could hold the NCT accountable for its overspend.
- The Chair requested that the annual report relating to the NCT's budget position be provided to the Committee as soon as possible.
- One member queried whether if the overspend was to continue year-on-year, the local authority might request central government to return powers previously given to the NCT.

In response, The Portfolio Holder for finance clarified that:

- The NCT had been established by central government and that the local authority had no authority to demand the NCT to abide by its recommendations, to mitigate the overspend.
- The NCT's overspend did not sit comfortably with The Executive, which intended on meeting with representatives from the Trust imminently. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to hold the NCT fully accountable as West Northamptonshire Council had been more comfortable with the overspend.
- The local authority maintained a contract with the NCT for five years and could not possibly retake powers until the conclusion of this period.

The Chair assured the Committee that representatives from the Northamptonshire Children's Trust would attend the next meeting of Finance and Resources Scrutiny and that he would request the annual report.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

70 Capital Forecast 2022/23 as at Period 3

The Committee considered a report by The Assistant Director for Finance Accountancy, which set out the Capital Forecast for 2022/23, as at period 3. The forecast had previously been presented to the Executive on the 25th August 2022.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members hoped that the Council would return a large portion of its capital programme into the local economy.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

71 Local Council Tax Support Scheme

The Committee considered a report by The Assistant Director of Revenue and Benefits, which provided an update regarding the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2022/23 and proposed a scheme for 2023/24.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried how the local authority intended to inform elected members that this fund existed and whether residents were also made aware of this relief, when they found themselves in arrears of Council Tax payments.
- Members queried whether education and intervention had been ongoing, to combat non-payment, as well as if non-payment enforcement had been fierce.
- Members queried where the capital used to provide the Local Council Tax Support Scheme had come from.
- One member suggested that the Local Council Tax Support Scheme should remain at 25% or less – this was seconded and approved by the Committee.

In response, The Assistant Director of Revenue and Benefits clarified that:

- Residents in arrears for Council Tax had been informed of this fund however, there had been poor communication between North Northamptonshire Residents and the Council.
- Communication issues had also made enforcement of non-payment difficult however, the lower collection rate of the previous year was an anomaly, since the local authority had been 'playing catch-up'. Nevertheless, the figures seemed to be consistent.
- The capital used to provide the Local Council Tax Support Scheme came from the Council's general fund budget

RESOLVED that:

The motion to maintain the Local Council Tax Support Scheme at 25% or less was carried.

72 Performance Indicator Report for Corporate Services - Period 4

The Committee considered a report by The Assistant Chief Executive, which provided an update on the performance of the Council's corporate support services at period 4 2022/23, as measured by performance indicators.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members queried how many staff vacancies existed within the Council. One member posited that this information would be vital in allowing for effective scrutiny of the performance of services and also suggested that the Committee should seek to scrutinise the matter of staff vacancies and reliance on agency employees more closely. The Chair agreed.

- Members expressed concern around agency staff costs and requested more detailed information around this issue.

In response, The Assistant Chief Executive clarified that:

- The issue around staff vacancies had also come up at the previous meeting of the Scrutiny Commission – the local authority had been in a transitional process going into unitary restructuring, to fill vacancies. This process was still ongoing to best establish the structure of the system and need of services.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

73 Maintained Nursery Update

The Committee considered a report by The Senior School Improvement Manager, which provided an update regarding the Maintained Nurseries Scrutiny Review.

The report explained that North Northamptonshire Council was only funded for the 15 hours universal entitlement, based on participation in the Maintained Nursery Supplement (MNS). It was decided to move towards a participation model of funding for MNS in 2023-24.

As a result, a Sub-Committee of the Finance and Resources Scrutiny Committee had been established to undertake a scrutiny review of the impact of these changes to funding arrangements. Members of this Sub-Committee would visit all four maintained nursery schools in North Northamptonshire and analyse audit reports, to eventually reach a conclusion regarding the Council's decision to move to a participation model of funding.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.

75 Urgent Item - Indicative Budget Timeline and Scrutiny Process 2023/24 - Update

The Committee considered a report by The Executive Director of Finance, which outlined the indicative timeline for the 2023/24 budget scrutiny process.

During discussion, the principal points were noted:

- Members expressed a desire to see the ofsted report of children's services as soon as possible.

RESOLVED that:

The report be noted.