

MINUTES

FINANCE AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

2 NOVEMBER 2021

Present:

Cllr Townsend (Chairman)
Cllr Tindall
Cllr Symington
Cllr Guest
Cllr Cloughton
Cllr Douris

Officers:

Nigel Howcutt	Assistant Director – Finance and Resources
Linda Roberts	Assistant Director – Performance, People and Innovation
Ben Hosier	Group Manager – Procurement and Contracted Services
Mark Brookes	Assistant Director – Corporate and Contracted Services

Also in attendance:

Cllr Andrew Williams (Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Contracted Services)
Richard Thompson (Consultant - item 7)
David McHenry (Consultant - item 7)

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

61 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 07.09.21 were accepted as a true record.

The minutes from the last meeting in October 2021 were circulated in partial form, as there were some problems with the recording. The garages and works programme elements were inaudible. Anyone with key items they raised under those topics was encouraged to make them known so that they can be captured. Cllr Townsend remembered raising a request for a car parking report.

62 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for the absences of Councillors Allen, Douris, Adeleke, Sinha and Suqlain Mahmood were made.

Councillor Sobaan Mahmood attended the meeting remotely.

Vice-Chairman Councillor Townsend chaired the meeting in Councillor Suqlain Mahmood's absence.

63 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

It was established that there were no declarations of interest.

64 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

It was established that there was no public participation.

65 **CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

It was established that there were no matters for the Committee.

66 **ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The BP Pulse item was raised by Cllr Tindall, and it was confirmed that this item will remain open.

Cllr Symington asked several questions on a circulated report. It was asked whether the report that was circulated after the last meeting was confidential. It was agreed that this would be checked after the meeting. This was an action point from the 7th September meeting. It was established that just 1 outside consultant was part of that report, and that a glossary of abbreviations will be distributed.

In regard to the third action point, Cllr Guest asked for clarification on the enforcement of fly-tipping which happened during or post the Covid-19 pandemic. The response given was that further scrutiny is ongoing.

67 **QUARTER 2 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT**

Nigel gave those assembled the headlines of the report. Those included that there is £1 million of financial pressure at the end of quarter 2. £0.7 million is linked to Covid, and they are looking to use the Economic Recovery Fund for this. £0.3 million is linked to returning to business as usual.

The HRA has reported pressure of £0.8 million.

There are some technical issues around depreciation. Charges are going up. They are a notional charge, but this makes for scary reading for members. Cllr Townsend questioned if this means depreciation in the value of the housing stock, and Nigel confirmed this was the case.

In the first quarter there was some slippage in capital. They are looking at £1.2 million in slippage from the general fund, but 3/4 of that has been from fleet replacement.

Many HRA projects are delayed rather than cancelled.

Cllr Guest pointed to the forecast deficit of £1 million in the executive summary and could not see how the remaining £0.3 million will be funded. Nigel revealed that they are attempting to balance the budget by the end of the year. If all managers could save £10,000 in their budgets between now and the year end, that could balance the books. There are other initiatives taking place also.

Cllr Tindall wished to congratulate Commercial Assets and Accounts for the funds they produced, detailed on page 18. They also raised their concerns about the level of voids being higher than pre-Covid levels. Nigel explained that this was down to the period of time where letting properties was difficult, but that now they are letting them very quickly.

Cllr Tindall wanted to ensure that there are enough staff in to deal promptly with residents who have problems with their benefits. Nigel elucidated the company they use called Liberata. They have a pool of expert benefits officers who can be called in when there is high demand. They are also looking at IT solutions to automate things like Council Tax so they can focus on people claiming benefits.

Cllr Townsend established that the report is noted.

68 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT - FINANCE & RESOURCES

Nigel began by stating that there has not been a significantly different picture quarter on quarter.

They have 5 KPIs to deliver. Council tax customer response. Technological advancement. New housing benefit claims, which is improving, even though it's difficult to get people to come in. Investment income, Cabinet will see the Treasury's report next week. Time taken for debtors, which is a double-edged sword. They have no power with debtors at the minute, which means it's a combination of people taking and chance and some people who genuinely can't pay. This is in terms of business traffic. It is improving, but there is also a 25% increase in delayed payments. The solution generated has been payment plans.

Cllr Townsend questioned if this is a 20% or 25% increase. Nigel responded that debt has increased by £300,000, and there has been a 25% increase in payment plans. But, they have allowed for this with a 35% provision.

It was confirmed with Nigel that they cannot take the commercial area to court until April.

In response to Cllr Tindall's question about whether the collection of Council Tax is behind or ahead of expectations, Nigel replied that the collection is 1% more than it was at this time last year, but 1% down on a standard, pre-Covid year.

Cllr Symington noticed that the presentation looked slightly different, and that some of the figures are incorrect. Nigel explained that they moved to a new information system and this is the first reporting cycle. This will be fine-tuned going forward. They confirmed that investment income is not as bad as it looks currently, and they are about £200,000 short. They also confirmed they will circulate the correct figures.

69 **QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT - CORPORATE & CONTRACTED SERVICES**

M Brookes opened up the floor to questions on the report.

They promised to look up the next dates for the second round of the Green Community Grants.

Cllr Douris checked whether the costs on page 37 were costs that the Council kept. The response was that the fine would go to the Treasury, and £30,000 would come back to the Council.

Cllr Symington wondered if M Brookes had any sense of why car parking income is failing to recover in line with traffic movements. They posited that one of the car parks was closed for the whole of September, and people are still working from home. Another member noted that the car parks are mostly for shoppers, and there has not been a return to the same level of in-person shopping.

70 **QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT - PERFORMANCE, PEOPLE & INNOVATION**

Linda presented the quarterly report as well as the monthly view. Sickness is still an issue, long term absence has increased. The sickness scrutiny group are working to pick up as much as they can.

Over 200 staff have asked for Flu vaccinations, far more than previously.

Support from the team has come in the form of mental health first aiders, encouraging managers to look at stress and anxiety, and organising exercise classes.

A health and wellness area is being set up on the second floor.

Staff turnover is higher than in previous quarters. HGV drivers have been encouraged to stay.

Ben explained that primary performance was amber, 85%. They are somewhat short staffed and running at 50% capacity.

Linda spoke about the continued essential work, such as the migration of the intranet, moving the data centre, and looking at solutions to the garages project.

The number of website users has dropped slightly, but the number of My Dacorum users has increased.

The complaints process is something they have been working hard on, they have managed to resolve them within 15 days.

Cllr Guest asked about the qualifications held by Occupational Health, and what input they had on long-term sickness, repeated short-term sickness, or departments which

have a lot of sickness. Linda responded that Occupational Health is a service which is bought in, and all of them are qualified nurses or practitioners. Ben elaborated on the referrals process, and how the officer who is on sickness meets with Occupational Health, which culminates in adjustments being made. Linda commented further that if someone is sick for a day consistently then this will trigger a conversation with their manager about whether they need Occupational Health. Trends in sickness are monitored and an agreement is reached by Performance, People and Innovation about what is needed to be done, like the new training they commissioned to avoid musculoskeletal injuries.

Cllr Claughton mentioned that they heard other members of the refuse collection wanted a similar uplift in money to the HGV drivers. They asked to move to part 2 to discuss this. This was proposed, seconded and unanimously agreed.

(Part 2 discussion can be found in the Part 2 Minutes).

Cllr Townsend declared that the meeting was now in part 1.

Cllr Tindall expressed concern about the manual workers of the Council being overlooked and asked if there was a breakdown of long-term sickness amongst them. Linda remarked that the musculoskeletal numbers had gone down due to the training provided. The nature of the work they do means that there will always be people who suffer, but they are careful to make sure everyone is picked up by Occupational Health.

When asked by Cllr Tindall whether officer workers use the European Six Pack guidelines about screen breaks, Linda replied that they do.

Cllr Douris checked that the employer provided eyesight tests, and this was confirmed by Linda. Cllr Tindall was hopeful that this might apply to councillors also.

Cllr Townsend established that the report is noted.

71 BERKHAMSTED SPORTS CENTRE

Mark Brookes, RT and DM gave an update on the new Sports Centre in the form of a presentation. The outcomes of stage 2 of the process were reported. At the end of the month, authority to proceed to stage 3 will be sought.

Previously, 2 facility mixes were presented to the Committee, essential and desirable. What has emerged is a hybrid facility mix, including a smaller sports hall, but bigger studios and a nursery and spa on site. The site slope will be incorporated in the design, including an active roof space. There may be a residential element.

A visual depiction of the site itself was shown, with colour-coded buildings. The nursery and 5-a-side pitch will be demolished. Elements pointed out on the graphic were the utilities crossing site, the construction zone, the footprint connecting to Lagley Meadow, the new car park, and new access. There will be 3 floors and an outside fitness zone.

Decisions have not been made on Lagley Meadow, this will be subject to public consultation. RT proposed keeping the grass pitch, but building a plaza, a play space, landscaping, and terraced seating.

It was established that the existing site will be kept going and will be built around. Phasing will be significant from a delivery aspect.

Low energy principles have been considered in these plans. Passive House certification will make the building airtight and efficient. This will create a capital impact.

M Brookes detailed the ongoing effort to move football provision off-site on a permanent basis. If it is moved to a school, this would be on a dual use agreement.

M Brookes reassured a member that there has been a discussion with Highways, and a discussion with DEFRA will take place regarding water.

Cllr Townsend declared that concept designs and consultation, and forecast project costs and approval strategy were noted. Also, the contractor procurement strategy was noted and endorsed, and the provision of further information was endorsed. However, they asked for clarification on what authority was being sought. The response was that authority was being sought from Cabinet, not from this meeting, and Cllr Townsend suggested addressing the wording to reflect this.

A question on where disabled parking will be was raised by Cllr Tindall. RT informed the Cllr that they have met with the accessibility officer during this period. There will be accessible and drop-off bays, a fully compliant ramp, and both sides of the building will be accessible.

Cllr Tindall urged that the public consultation take place before the residential element is firmed up. It was confirmed that both things would be done during the next stage, and that public consultation would take place early in stage 3. This will probably be a combination of a drop-in and some online sessions. Cllr Tindall requested a copy of the Gantt Chart on this matter. **Action: M Brookes**

Regarding sustainability, a question was raised about how the pool will be heated. The response was that there will be air-sourced heat pumps in the building, but the water will use a gas boiler. The technology does not exist to generate enough power to heat the water through heat pumps. However, all systems will be built with the ability to switch to new technology when it becomes viable. Energy prices have been taken into consideration, and the full sustainability scheme will be developed in the next stage.

M Brookes commented that they don't expect significant changes in stage 3, so it is anticipated stage 4 will be moved onto without returning to the Council. Cllr Tindall returned to his point about public consultation, and how the public consultation should come back to the committee between stages 3 and 4.

Cllr Guest asked for clarification on the dimensions of the swimming pool. The pool will have 6 lanes and be 25 metres. The learner pool will be 12.5 metres by 10 metres. The floor is moveable with adjustable depth. There will not be enough

spectator seating to make the pool suitable for national competitions, but the size of 25 metres will make it an excellent training facility.

A question about whether the size will be similar to the current facility was raised by Cllr Symington. The answer to this was not known, but it will be just shy of 7,000 metres. The answer to the Cllr's question on capacity was also not known, but it is anticipated that there will be in excess of half a million visitors per year. The teaching pool and the larger studio spaces will accommodate more members.

Cllr Symington expressed their belief that the hybrid option may be a misnomer, and that the only thing reduced from the desirable mix was the number of courts. RT responded that the splash pad area has also been halved.

In response to a question by Cllr Symington about how to make sure the public are engaged and understand, M Brookes said that they were conscious not to go to the public too early, but that this is the right course of action for the next stage. Cllr Symington wished to see the process segmented and presented to the public as soon as possible.

Cllr Symington requested to know what the long-term view of leisure centres is, regarding people coming back after Covid-19. DM elucidated that they are seeing healthy recovery, especially from parents who want to get their children in for swimming lessons as they weren't able to learn during the lockdown. The plan embraces outdoor space. Sport England are confident of membership returning to pre-Covid levels. A key opportunity built into the centre is de-medicalised interventions.

Cllr Tindall suggested a 7th recommendation. 'That the Committee note that public consultation is to take place in stage 3, and the Committee requires a further report at the completion of stage 3, including a report on public consultation prior to stage 4. Notwithstanding the provisions of recommendation 4'. There were no objections. The Chair thanked Cllr Tindall.

Cllr Townsend didn't believe that Tring Town Council was consulted.

Cllr Townsend noted but didn't endorse the procurement strategy, as there was not enough detail.

Cllr Townsend asked to move in to Part 2. This was proposed, seconded and unanimously agreed.

(Part 2 discussion can be found in the Part 2 Minutes).

72 WORK PROGRAMME

Cllr Townsend commented that the joint budget is coming up in December, and that they do not wish to add anything for that at this current time.

A request for a report on EV charging ports was made.

The request for the car parking report was reiterated.

There being no further business to discuss, Cllr Townsend closed the meeting.

The Meeting ended at 9.57 pm