

## **MINUTES**

### **FINANCE AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**5 SEPTEMBER 2023**

**Present:**

Councillor Freedman (Chair)	Councillor A Williams
Councillor Capozzi	Councillor Hannell
Councillor Gale	Councillor Pound
Councillor Reynolds	Councillor Elliot (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Santamaria	Councillor Cox
Councillor Adeleke	Councillor S Hobson
Councillor Guest	Councillor Stewart

**Officers:**

Catherine Silva Donayre (Strategic Director, Corporate and Commercial)  
Aidan Wilkie (Strategic Director, People and Transformation)  
Nigel Howcutt (Chief Finance Officer)  
Ben Hosier (Head of Commercial Development)  
Matt Brookes (Assistant Director, Legal and Democratic Services)  
Chris Baker (Head of Revenues and Benefits)  
Kelvin Soley (Head of Communication)  
Trudi Angel (Democratic Support Officer)

**Also in attendance:**

Councillor Carole Weston (Portfolio Holder for People and Transformation)  
Councillor Sally Symington (Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Commercial)

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

**1                    MINUTES**

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

**2                    APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

**3                    DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The Chair declared that he had solar panels installed as part of the first round of the Solar Together scheme.

No other conflicts of interest were declared.

**4** **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

None.

**6** **ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

None.

**7** **QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT - CORPORATE AND COMMERCIAL**

C Silva Donayre introduced the item and said she would handover to each of the responsible officers to highlight any key areas in the reports.

B Hosier took the report as read, noting that it has been a busy quarter with significant work on parking. B Hosier focused on KPIs and percentage of garage and parking income, noting that these are both slightly above Q1 budget.

Cllr Gale referred to paragraph 2.9 on page 15 of the report and asked for clarification on the market forces policy and new menopause policy. The Chair noted the question and suggested that this be answered under item 8.

M Brookes noted that Q1 was dominated by the local borough and town parish elections, which included a corporate effort of around 400 staff who performed well. M Brookes also highlighted the two member induction days and said he was pleased with how they went.

N Howcutt referred to the performance review, noting that one red KPI had been raised regarding the timetable for debtors to pay, which continues from last year, and the improvement in the service has been around 20% since last year. There was one red KPI in the operational risk report regarding the collection of council tax and was an ongoing challenge in terms of achieving pre-Covid levels. N Howcutt confirmed that performance had improved on last year though they are yet to reach expectations and part of this will be reviewed as part of the MTFS that will be brought to the committee next month in a more detailed report.

Cllr Santamaria referred to page 18 of the report and the average days taken to respond to a council tax-related and benefit-related contact and noted that no targets for these are listed. C Baker advised that this was recorded for the first time last year and that targets should be in place by the Q2 reports to allow performance to be monitored.

A Wilkie presented the report. He advised that sickness had reduced during the quarter and the turnover rate remained healthy compared to the sector with notable success in recruitment across the board. This has been assisted by the market forces policy that allows the Council to pay slightly above pay scales in cases of particular roles that are more challenging to recruit, such as for specialist roles.

A Wilkie referred to Cllr Gale's previous query regarding the new menopause policy and advised that it would provide support for any members of staff experiencing menopause. This is currently going through the staff consultation stage and will then proceed through standard policy approval process over the coming months.

A Wilkie commented on customer call handling times and advised that work was taking place to improve this through recruitment, training and analysis. Work is underway to review the interactive voice recognition system (IVR) to provide a better service for residents. A new team is in place to focus on the climate and environmental emergency work and a more focused programme of work will be produced.

K Soley noted the large scale community events that took place over Q1, including The King's Coronation events, Armed Forces Day, Windrush 75 celebrations and the annual staff recognition awards. There were also a number of digital initiatives, including the weekly digital newsletter and positive growth across all social media channels.

Cllr Guest referred to paragraph 2.2 of page 14 of the report and the reduction in sickness absence. The main contributors to sickness absence is musculoskeletal, cold and flu and mental health, and Cllr Guest asked if musculoskeletal absence is primarily seen in the refuse collection service and Clean, Safe and Green staff. A Wilkie confirmed that this absence was primarily seen in these areas and that this was why initiatives such as the on-site physio have been introduced to help staff and reduce numbers.

Cllr Guest asked how else sickness absence has been reduced other than introducing an on-site physio. A Wilkie referred to the sickness management policy and health and safety training, and that managers are made aware of any issues to help prevent issues becoming worse. A Wilkie stated that evidence suggests these measures are working as sickness rates are reducing, though there was more work to do.

Cllr Guest referred to paragraph 3.1.3 on the IVR and asked how this is being improved. A Wilkie explained that technology providers have been engaged to help improve voice recognition and that residents should soon experience improved

customer journeys where they will reach their intended point much quicker. Work has taken place with both services and residents to understand how they describe the issues they want to talk about to help understand the terminology used.

Cllr Guest asked if the project manager referred to on page 17 of the report under paragraph 5.1 was a replacement for Melanie Parr. A Wilkie confirmed that it was.

Cllr Guest referred to page 18 of the report and paragraph 6.3, noting that the target performance was achieved in June despite a continued vacancy in the digital team. Cllr Guest asked for an update on recruitment of this role. A Wilkie advised that the role is currently being recruited for and that he would provide members with an update on progress.

The Chair commented on the publicly accessible AI tools being deployed by organisations to assist with self-learning of how people describe their systems and he hoped these are also being investigated for IVR.

The Chair thanked officers for the performance reports and the information contained within them.

#### Actions

To update members on progress regarding recruitment for vacancy in the digital team (A Wilkie)

## **9                      FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE QUARTER 1 2023-24**

N Howcutt presented the report, noting that there was currently a general fund surplus of £0.8m, predominantly due to significant investment returns and interest rates. There were pressures around the commercial programme in terms of customer strategy and planning fees, which are detailed within the report. There was pressure on the HRA (housing revenue account) of £0.4m due to increased staffing and interim staffing to cover senior posts and significant pressure comes from the backlog of repairs, the average cost of which has increased this year, causing a financial pressure of around £1.3m. The service was working to mitigate spending by looking at a longer and more detailed maintenance programme.

On capital, N Howcutt highlighted the re-phasing of the capital programme with £24m of re-phasing, including large projects around leisure that were currently under review by the new administration. Some delayed HRA programmes that were delayed last year due to the planning moratorium are running behind expectations this year and will be subject to re-phasing. DBC saw its largest capital programme in 2023-24 in the last 6 years.

Cllr Guest referred to paragraph 3.5 on page 28 of the report and asked what the Council proposes to do with the forecasted surplus of over £2m of treasury

management income. N Howcutt advised that this year it offset some of the outlined pressures and if there is a surplus at year end then decisions and proposals will be made in the final outturn report. Cllr Symington advised that the Q1 net figure is closer to £0.8m and not the £2.4m figure stated in paragraph 3.5.

Cllr Hannell commented on the capital programme monitoring lines, specifically lines 73 and 107 regarding the spending on public conveniences. Cllr Hannell suggested that there were £35,502 across the two lines to be spent over the next financial year and he asked where this money had been spent. N Howcutt advised that line 73 shows a budget of £20k and no funds have been spent this year. These were funds put aside as work comes up with much going on repairs and maintenance. On line 107, N Howcutt advised that this was a prior slippage of the budget and that he would confirm where the £4k was spent.

Cllr Hannell queried why Bennetts End toilets had remained closed for the vast majority of this century and commented that the absence of toilets was clearly contributing to reduced footfall. Cllr Hannell asked if money could be spent on opening up these toilets. N Howcutt confirmed that he would take the comments to the portfolio holder and administration, stating that public conveniences cost a lot to upkeep and tend to be vandalised, and they would therefore need to assess the overall cost and benefit.

Cllr Hannell next referred to lines 84, 90 and 93 and noted that only 36% of the total budgeted for refurbishments of Bennetts End Shopping Centre was subject to slippage from the previous year and he asked if residents could be confident that there would be no further slippage this year. N Howcutt confirmed that he would ask the corporate property team to provide further details on this item. N Howcutt advised that committed spend for this year was where the project leaders expect to spend funds and that he would expect a significant proportion of the budget to be completed this year.

Cllr Elliot commented that the green bin income had been successful but was £700k over budget. N Howcutt stated that the initial budget was £650k and that they are currently at £1.35-1.4m for this financial year. Cllr Elliot asked how this compared to other boroughs. N Howcutt suggested that Dacorum potentially has the highest subscription numbers for its first year and that the successful take up was partly due to how the project was managed and rolled out by the team.

### Actions

To clarify where the £4k on public conveniences was spent (N Howcutt)

To investigate the closure of Bennetts End public toilets (N Howcutt)

To ask the corporate property team to provide further information regarding budget slippage on Bennetts End Shopping Centre (N Howcutt)

## **10                    REVISIONS TO COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FOR 2024/25**

N Howcutt took the paper as read, advising that the council tax support policy was reviewed on an annual basis and that it had to be approved by December as part of the council tax base setting support. The paper outlined proposed revisions to the existing council tax support policy and will look to benefit around 1,000 homes at very little cost to DBC.

Cllr Santamaria thanked officers for their work, noting that whilst it is a modest programme, it affects those most in need and officers were asked how much it will save in terms of administration and collection costs. C Baker stated that it was not possible to put a figure on this, though it is expected the requirement of using debt services and communications with individuals will be reduced.

Cllr Guest referred to paragraph 2.7 on page 40 of the report and asked if the calculation was a sustainable way to fund the proposed revision. N Howcutt advised that the MTFS (medium term financial strategy) will outline the financial plan and sustainability and that when it is brought to committee in October, members should see that MTFS shows a balanced and sustainable financial plan, including this change in policy. On the reduction in council tax, N Howcutt advised that the estimated reduction is around £38k on around £14.6m and whilst it had minimal impact on the council, it could significantly impact individuals who will benefit from this.

Cllr Williams noted the requirement to consult with other major precepting authorities and asked if these authorities have a vetoing role. C Baker advised that it was a decision for the billing authority to make and the legal requirement was for precepting authorities to be consulted.

The Chair suggested that the receipts that parish areas get from a precept was derived from the net collectable percentage for the borough and asked if doing this would mean that the council tax base now has a higher percentage of collections due to having fewer people affected by a lack of ability to pay. C Baker advised that a tax base is calculated for each parish and the calculation includes a question of how much the tax is being reduced by through the support being paid in that parish, therefore increasing the level of council tax support will bring the tax base down. It was more likely that the council tax base will reduce, though changes to parishes are likely to be particularly small.

## **11                    PARKING SERVICE TARIFF & BUSINESS CASE PROPOSALS**

C Silva Donayre advised that the item followed on from the previous paper presented in July and that the item was open for questions.

Cllr Guest commented on the minimum stay of 2 hours and asked if this was being consulted on with businesses and individuals. C Silva Donayre advised that this had been consulted on throughout the borough and that businesses and residents can respond to the consultation once it goes out.

Cllr Guest noted the reduction of the free parking sessions in The Forge and Frogmore car parks from 1 hour to 45 minutes and asked if further reductions are anticipated until free parking is removed completely. C Silva Donayre advised that there were no policy decisions being announced on this, though to ensure financial sustainability there will continue to be decisions that need to be made, including on feasible appropriate charges.

Cllr Guest asked what the rationale was behind reducing free parking down to 45 minutes in the listed car parks. Cllr Symington advised that there was strong demand for free parking in Tring and the consultation will look into which car parks are being referred to. Feedback so far suggested that Tring car parks are used by local people for local journeys and therefore the cross-subsidy from the rest of the borough has to be balanced for these car parks against the needs of local people.

Cllr Guest commented that the reasons behind reducing free parking in Tring were to raise money for the council and deter people from using their cars. Cllr Guest suggested that these reasons were contradictory and asked how these were being reconciled. Cllr Symington stated that the proposal wasn't to deter people from using their cars but to obtain a return on capital for the assets that the council owned, as well as raising income. In the longer-term, it will be to encourage more active travel.

Cllr Guest welcomed Cllr Symington's U-turn on parking charges for Gadebridge Park following pressure from Conservative councillors. The Chair stated that the committee does not recognise that previous submissions of the paper belong to any singular councillor.

The Chair reminded the committee that, should the paper go to public consultation and the council proceeds as stated, there was nothing in the paper that gives any intention for future changes. Any further developments would come through the OSC and would need to go back out to public consultation. The Chair highlighted the cost of public consultation.

Cllr Williams commented that members take responsibility for the decisions put forward and that a report came to the Committee in June in the name of Cllr Symington proposing to remove free car parking and that a report could not come to the Committee from officers without Cllr Symington's approval. Cllr Williams suggested that, after the paper received negative feedback on social media, senior members of the administration have stated it was wholly to do with officers and he stated it was inappropriate to 'throw officers under the bus' when the report that they commissioned was negatively received by the public. Cllr Williams stated that it was

appropriate for the administration to have its own policies and discourage the use of car parking and increase revenue, though it was also appropriate to own difficult decisions and not blame officers.

The Chair noted Cllr Williams' comment, adding that he was unaware of what was being referred to. The Chair clarified that the Committee has a scrutiny responsibility and that points of feedback were provided, which has evolved into the change of report being brought to the Committee today. The Chair stated that the Committee adds value to the decision-making structure and that scrutiny or challenges means that it is entirely appropriate for officers and the cabinet to make changes based on these.

Cllr Symington noted a correction, stating that they had always said they will consult and that this is an informal consultation that is clearly demarcated as an informal consultation. The amendment on free parking was not exclusive to Gadebridge Park.

Cllr Symington agreed that social media was not the correct place to discuss this and reassured members that they remain on course to have a consultation. The questions have been adjusted slightly to take feedback into account and the key change was to remove the suggestion that free car parks are withdrawn. Cllr Symington stated that she hoped that all members could support an important move forward for the whole council in terms of securing a sound financial position going forward.

Cllr Elliot referred to item 2.3 and asked for clarification on inclusion of e-bikes. B Hosier advised that the council are potentially looking at e-bikes and e-scooters for travel around the borough and may be included in the consultation to gauge interest on what level of demand there would be.

Cllr Elliot referred to item 2.4 on technology and parking. Cllr Elliot commented on tariffs and suggested that electric vehicles produce pollution through their braking systems. C Silva Donayre advised that this was part of a wider commissioning review on how smart technology can be incorporated and policy decisions would need to be made on how this is used to differentiate tariffs or other benefits.

Cllr Williams commented on the number of recommendations going to Cabinet and public consultation and noted the suggestions to current practice that are not outlined in the report. Cllr Williams asked if there will be a more detailed report that will explain all proposals. B Hosier confirmed that the consultation will be an informal public consultation and that from the results of this there will be a requirement to set out what will be included in any notice of proposals, which will be set out as part of a formal consultation to clearly stipulate all changes.

## **12                    WORK PROGRAMME**

There were no changes or additions to the work programme.



The Meeting ended at 8.35 pm