

Finance & Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee Annual Report

For the period June 2023 to May 2024

Introduction

Following is a sequential summary of matters brought to the Finance & Resources Oversight and Scrutiny Committee for the period since to appointment of a new council at Dacorum. (5th May 2023). These summaries are not intended to reduce or simplify the questions, challenges and details behind the topics discussed, and this report should be read in conjunction with the published minutes of the committee which can be found on the council's website.

As chair, I have been regularly impressed with the quality of reports and presentations given by the officers which cover very broad and detailed topics. The quality of dialogue and cross party co-operation in understanding these issues from all committee members is similarly appreciated. Particular thanks must be given to the member support officers (Trudi Angel) for the timely communication of these reports and the prompt adoption of suggestions to improve the vector and comprehension of the vast amount of data and information contained within.

Down to business:

June 2023-

Format of officer reports, particularly concentration of key areas of concern (staff turnover, staff absence, communication with residents)

Strategic Asset Review – approved proposal with indicative costs to take to cabinet.

Performance reports and analysis – particular focus on staffing issues and dependence on agency staff and concerns in regards to cash collection driven by wider economic environment.

Introduction to the risk register

Financial outturn report presented showed favourable developments; this meant council was under less economic pressure than previously modelled but no significant change that would allow the council to reasonably commit to additional undertakings. All favourable developments were understood to be one off bonuses, and could not be expected to replicate in future periods.

July 2023-

Parking Charges Plan – officers brought a proposal constructed with the objective of bringing DBCs parking charges into line with neighbouring councils and a view to include inflationary increases for covering the last 4 years. Proposals were drafted with (previous) cabinet direction to apply a consistent approach to council parking across the borough, which included the removal of free parking in some areas of the borough. Concerns & questions were to be addressed by officers before progressing the report to cabinet.

September 2023-

Performance reports and analysis – particular focus on cost of living/leaving effect on staff & operations, leading to proposed Market Forces Policy to address staff vacancies and turnover.

Revision to Council Tax Support Scheme – proposals to close a loop hole blocking off non-pensioner residents to council tax support for economic hardship. Support from committee as proposal would have minimal impact on the council whilst having a significant impact on the small number of households effected. Proposals were taken to Herts County Council, where they were not supported.

Parking Charges Plan – further to proposals raised in July, the report and concerns raised by the scrutiny committee were taken to cabinet.

October 2023 –

Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) – Nigel Howcutt presented and defended an MTFS which acknowledged a large amount of challenge and uncertainty from external economic pressures, but which recognised the likely resilience of the council to remain competent to deliver the existing level of service throughout the period. The nature of uncertainty was such that any significant change of policy or direction was unlikely to be in the interests of our residents or staff. The leader of the council confirmed that a policy of consistency featuring only marginal change and not seeking early exit from any previous agreements was being pursued by the organisation.

November 2023 –

Performance reports and analysis, focusing on efforts and improvement in previous areas of concern including sickness, staff vacancies and customer complaints & communication. Updates on the transformation plan in workstreams/projects that are addressing these areas. Several councillors raised new concerns in regards to capital programme slippage, and the risks of further delays. Causes of the are external economic pressures and residual effects of the planning moratorium from the Chiltern Beechwoods protection concerns.

December 2023-

Budget Proposals 2024/25 – annual budget constructed consistent with the MTFS presented in October. Nigel Howcutt presented and defended the proposals

Menopause Policy – committee supported officer proposals that a staff Menopause at Work policy be developed and implemented.

Parking Service Tariffs – further to proposals initially presented in July, the revised proposals were presented and defended by portfolio holders and officers. The committee agreed that these proposal could be communicated publically and form the basis for the statutory public consultation on revisions.

Feb 2024 –

Budget Proposals 2024/25 – annual budget constructed consistent with the MTFS presented in October. Nigel Howcutt presented and defended the proposals, with committee feedback added the proposals were taken to cabinet.

Key Performance Indicators (KPI) proposals – in support of the councils transformation programme, a revised suite of enterprise KPIs were proposed and explained by Aidan Wilkie and other senior service officers. The translation from previous KPIs to the proposals, as well as explanations around initial targets and benchmarks were explained to the committee.

Parking Service Tariffs – further to proposals initially presented in July, the revised proposals were presented and defended by portfolio holders and officers. The committee remained concerned in regards to a number of proposals, for example the effect of increased charges

in Kings Langley, but recognised that most concerns previously raised by the committee and raised in the public consultation had been addressed.

Climate and Environmental Emergency Programme – officers and the portfolio holder presented and defended the first CEE Programme plan, and invited the committee to scrutinise its efforts and progress in this area against the plan in future meetings.

March 2024 -

Performance reports and analysis, focusing on efforts and improvement in areas of debt collection and bad debt write off.

Deep dive into People (Staff) data, including recent trends showing improvements in previous areas of concern, and identifying successful strategies leading to these improvements.

Deep dive into Customer Service data, including recent trends showing improvements in previous areas of concern, and identifying successful strategies leading to these improvements as well as proposed systems and technologies identified but not yet implemented to address contemporary challenges in this area.

Conclusion

The change of administration at Dacorum Borough Council, as well as the Executive Leadership Team's roll out of a number of change strategies to address the contemporary challenges on a public body (including several new appointments at senior level) has meant that a continuing review of the effectiveness of these new strategies has been of particular importance, as well as the objective consideration of pertinent matters that affect residents and relate to the responsible custodianship of public resources.

Councillor Rick Freedman, Chairman of Finance and Resources OSC