

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - VALUE FOR MONEY &
CUSTOMER SERVICE - 20 JANUARY 2020

(To be read in conjunction with the Agenda for the Meeting)

Present

Cllr Peter Martin (Chairman)
Cllr Roger Blishen
Cllr Jerome Davidson
Cllr George Hesse

Cllr Jerry Hyman
Cllr Peter Nicholson
Cllr Julia Potts

Apologies

Cllr Joan Heagin and Cllr Stephen Mulliner

42. MINUTES (Agenda item 1.)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 November 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed.

43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTES (Agenda item 2.)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Joan Heagin and Stephen Mulliner. Councillors Richard Cole and Simon Dear were present as substitutes.

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Agenda item 3.)

Councillor Peter Martin declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 7 as he was a part of the Property Investment Board. He would stay in the Chair but would not take part in debate.

45. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Agenda item 4.)

There were none.

46. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS (Agenda item 5.)

There were none.

47. GENERAL FUND BUDGET 2020/21 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN
(Agenda item 6.)

The Committee received a report outlining the latest Medium Term Financial Plan and the draft General Fund budget for 2020/21/ The Financial Plan set out the key work streams for the Council to focus on which, collectively, aimed to address the significant shortfall in annual budget projected

Peter Vickers, Head of Finance and property, introduced the General Fund budget and medium term financial plan (MTFP) report to the Committee. The report of the Budget was also considered alongside this item which the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Councillor Mark Merryweather introduced.

The Committee was advised that the MTFP had been updated to include the latest General Fund projections, emerging pressures, spending priorities, risks and opportunities. The Plan also set out Waverley's strategy for addressing the projected budget shortfall over the next four years and for putting the council in a strong, sustainable financial position.

The Committee noted the report and discussed the five recommendations as outlined.

In relation to the proposed increase in Waverley's element of the Council Tax, there was much discussion around whether or not this should be set to the maximum or to the rate of inflation. Councillor Jerry Hyman questioned the latter and felt that if they had said they would not raise council tax, why were they doing it now. The proposed increase was not a huge percentage but 1.3% was the rate of inflation, of which, this was above. He also questioned where the Council was with the staff pay negotiations and the real costs of appeals and judicial reviews. It was confirmed that although appeals were not a budgeted item, this did account for some of the council tax. An estimate of the cost of a pay award plus other inflation commitments, were incorporated within the draft budget.

Councillor Simon Dear asked about the proposal to increase fees and charges for car parking which was a particularly sensitive issue, this concern was also raised by Councillor Julia Potts. The car parking review had yet to be published but officers were already proposing a 2.9% increase. Officers advised that this income would not be generated from a blanket increase in all car park charges. Some charges would rise and some could reduce to increase usage and improve the environmental impact. The Council would take a strategic approach to charges in the light of the independent review recently commissioned, the outcome of which was expected to be considered by members early in 2020 and to take effect in 2020/21 although still in progress during the 2020/21 budget setting process. Of the additional income generated, some £100k, was earmarked to pay for the ongoing costs of delivering Waverley's climate change emergency action plan.

The Committee was pleased to note that there would be no increase in charge for the green waste subscription. This charge would remain frozen at £65 which supported and in spirit of the Council's climate change emergency declaration.

Councillor Jerome Davidson asked about investment properties and income streams arising from that, with particular concern in relation to Brightwells. He was advised that the MTFP included an assumption that WBC would succeed in increasing its property income by £300k p.a. for each of the next four years (20/21 to 23/24).

Councillor Jenny Else raised concern about the increase to planning application fees and asked for reassurance that they could give an upgraded service. Zac Ellwood, Head of Planning and Economic development, advised that the fees were set nationally but it was acknowledged that performance should be improved to reflect the increase in charges.

Councillor David Beaman raised concern about business rates and how little was retained by Waverley. It was felt that they should campaign to retain more.

Councillor Carole Cockburn raised concern about the number of uncertainties and Councillor Peter Martin concurred and questioned whether the budget was robust enough. Tom Horwood, Chief Executive, agreed that there were a number of uncertainties and it would be a challenge. He, alongside other South East Councils, would be lobbying government and there were some serious debates to be had.

Following discussion, the O&S Committee generally supported the following recommendations from the Executive to Council:-

- 1. Support a 1.9% increase in Waverley's element of the Council Tax Charge for 2020/21, equivalent to around 7p a week on a Band D property;**
- 2. Support to make no change to the Council's existing Council Tax Support Scheme;**
- 3. Support the proposed Fees and Charges as shown at Annexe 4;**
- 4. Support the General Fund Budget for 2020/21 as described in this report, and in Annexes 2 and 3; and**
- 5. Support the General Fund Capital Programme as shown at Annexe 6.**

Thanks was given to the Budget Strategy Working Group for the work it had done and contributions to the recommendations.

48. SERVICE PLANS 2020-2023 (Agenda item 8.)

The Committee was presented with the service plans covering the period between 2020-2023. The Service Plans had been prepared by Heads of Service in collaboration with their teams and Portfolio Holders to set out the service objectives for the coming three years in line with the new Corporate Strategy 2019-2023 and the Medium Term Financial Plan 2020-2023.

It was noted that last year the Council reviewed its approach to service planning, changing them from annual plans, to three yearly rolling plans. This approach allowed not only for an easier alignment with the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), but also a better transparency on delivery of multi-year projects and other initiatives.

The Service Plans specific to the Value for Money and Customer Service O&S were as follows:

- Business Transformation Service Plan
- Finance and Property Service Plan
- Policy and Governance Service Plan
- Building Control only from Commercial Services Service Plan
- Economic Development only from Planning and Economic Development Service Plan

Councillor Jerome Davidson asked to be kept informed of the progress with the business transformation project and the savings that this achieved. It was agreed that this should be carefully monitored by the Committee.

Councillor Jerry Hyman raised concerns around balancing the budget and aligning with the corporate strategy. Concerns were also raised by the Committee regarding the Policy and Governance outcome of "Committee papers are provided and read electronically, ensuring better data protection, lower costs and lower carbon footprint". It was felt that for larger agendas/documents, using an ipad was difficult and made it less accessible. For a Chairman it was also more difficult to follow the agenda.

Zac Ellwood advised that there was the omission of a review of the Economic Development Strategy and he would be looking to make the outputs and actions more 'smart' prior to it being received by the Executive.

49. PLANNING APPEALS PERFORMANCE AND COSTS ARISING FROM JUDICIAL REVIEWS (Agenda item 9.)

The Committee was advised that this report had been prepared in response to Councillor interest in the cost implications of both planning appeals and judicial reviews relating to planning matters. The purpose of the report was to inform Members of the cost implications of planning appeals. The report made recommendations for improvements in respect of planning decision-making and there was a brief commentary in respect of the costs associated with the judicial review into the Waverley Local Plan Part 1.

Concern was raised that for informal hearings applicants were starting to bring legal representatives. Officers advised that informal hearings should not require external counsel but they would do the same if something required a strategic defence. Concern was also raised about the additional costs which were not noted in the papers in terms of administration of appeals. It was noted that there was a budget for dealing with costs of appeals but this was sometimes exceeded. Figures would be shared. It was noted that there was a varying number of appeals across the four areas and additional training to Councillors should be provided to aid more informed decisions.

During consideration of this item, it was noted that there still appeared to be issues with the new online planning system and Members requested that this be looked at to make it more accessible.

50. CAPITAL STRATEGY 2020/2021 (Agenda item 10.)

The Committee received the Capital Strategy which brought together the Council's detailed policies, procedures and plans relating to cash investments and property assets. It incorporated the Treasury Management Framework, prudential indicators and Property Investment Strategy for 2020/2021.

The Committee discussed the Council's Investment Strategy in particular and there was some concern of the proposals to reach into residential schemes. There were more considerations that commercial properties and there were risks but they would be considered carefully.

The Committee broadly accepted the Corporate Strategy but there were concerns over move to investment into residential property.

51. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME (Agenda item 11.)

It was noted that the work programme would be put first on the agenda in future. Added to the work programme were business transformation, economic development review and outcomes of the car parking review.

The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and concluded at 9.30 pm

Chairman