

SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE – ECONOMIC GROWTH AND COMMUNITIES

Thursday, 18th January, 2024

Present:-

Councillor Flood (Chair)

Councillors Bagley
Jacobs
Wheeldon

Councillors Hollingworth
Ogle
Yates

*Matters dealt with under the Delegation Scheme

36 DECLARATION OF MEMBERS' AND OFFICERS' INTERESTS RELATING TO ITEMS ON THE AGENDA

Councillor Flood declared an interest in agenda item 4, in her capacity as Chair of the Law Centre.

37 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dyke, Niblock and Twigg.

38 BUDGET CONVERSATION WORKSHOP

The Service Director – Corporate presented a report outlining the current budget challenge faced by the Council and the budget strategy implementation plan. This enabled members to explore the emerging themes from the budget conversation and be updated on specific consultation activity relating to the remit of the Scrutiny Select Committee – Economic Growth & Communities.

It was reported that like all authorities, Chesterfield Borough Council continues to face significant financial challenges. The sustained period of austerity since 2010, the ongoing risks and uncertainties over future funding arrangements, the budgetary impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and a sustained period of exceptionally high inflation, have all impacted the Council's financial decision.

Longer-term reform of local government funding has been delayed until the next Parliament and a structural solution is needed to meet the many statutory duties and demands placed on local authorities. Local authorities continue to lobby strongly for a long term sustainable financial settlement, but it is becoming less likely that this will occur in the short term.

Recent analysis by the Local Government Association (LGA) reveals that Councils in England face a funding gap of £4 billion over the next two years. This is a £1 billion increase since the LGA's initial analysis in July 2023 as cost and demand pressures continue to rise.

In response to these challenges, the Council has already made significant savings over many years and taken steps to manage demand and deliver services in the most economic, efficient, and effective way. It is against this context that the Council developed its approach to balancing the 2024/25 budget and to achieving the same over the period of the mid-term financial plan.

Following the Budget Strategy's approval by Council in July 2023, a detailed approach to addressing the £2.5m budget gap was developed and approved by Cabinet in November 2023. The implementation plan was developed in line with the thematic interventions set out in the Budget Strategy:

- Identifying General Efficiencies
- Increasing Income and Establishing Stronger Commercial Operating Principles
- Transforming how we Deliver Services
- Reducing Service Offers/ Stop Doing
- Statutory and Non-Statutory Services
- Rightsizing the Organisation
- Asset Rationalisation and Effective Asset Management

Stage 1 of the plan included largely officer operational decisions or decisions delegated to portfolio holders. Stage 2 proposals are ones which require further development, shown in Appendix 1 of the report.

The Council launched a general budget conversation to assist the Council to deliver on the budget implementation plan themes. The budget conversation ran from 17.11.23 to 15.12.23 and was available to

complete either via the Council website or in a hard copy. The Derbyshire Times also ran articles highlighting the opportunity to take part.

The first theme was 'Identifying General Efficiencies'. Answers received from respondents concentrated on CBC staffing and structures i.e. pay and vacant posts, the digitalisation and transformation of services, alternative delivery plans and asset management.

In the second theme of 'Increasing income Establishing Stronger Commercial Operating Principles', 45% agreed, 37% disagreed and 18% were undecided.

In the theme of 'Transforming how we deliver services', 53% agreed with enhanced transformation and digitalisation of services.

In the theme of 'Reducing Service Offer/ Stop Providing', 44% of respondents disagreed, 33% agreed and 23% were undecided.

51% of respondents were in favour of 'Rightsizing the Organisation', with 29% against and 20% undecided. There was concern however from respondents over the quality of services if sizes are reduced, and for the wellbeing of staff.

There was agreement of 60% for 'Asset Rationalisation and Effective Asset management', with 20% in disagreement and 20% undecided.

There was concern from members around there only being 154 responses to the budget conversation so whether the responses could really be representative of what the residents of the borough were thinking. The Service Director - Corporate explained that this was a budget conversation to consider key themes and ideas rather than a representative consultation regarding specific proposals. It was reported that the same promotional tools were used to advertise specific consultations (i.e. garden waste) and these had received over 1400 responses.

Members expressed concerns over digital exclusion and equalities issues, especially for sometimes already marginalised groups. The events programme was discussed, in particular the potential cancellation of the fireworks display at Stand Road Park. It was reported that this was a suggestion that had arisen on multiple responses to the budget conversation. Throughout the budget conversations the health and

wellbeing of residents was considered to be extremely important, and the Council must be mindful of this.

It was felt by Members to be important to use the responses gained from the budget conversation as a starter, and to continue looking at the ongoing budgetary plans throughout the year.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

39 ADVICE AGENCY PROPOSALS

The Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing outlined the background to the phasing out of voluntary sector advice agency grants. It was explained that the funding that CBC provides to the voluntary sector is discretionary. It was noted that the Council has been engaged in consultations with the voluntary sector organisations that it currently funds. However, rather than stop all funding immediately the Council would like to transition the funding over two years, or longer, to help the organisations secure other funding sources. Engagement so far was reported as being positive. It was noted that the Council has been very generous over a very long period.

The Service Director – Corporate noted that many local authorities have never funded these voluntary sector advice agencies and others have reduced or pulled out of funding arrangements many years before Chesterfield BC have considered this action. It was reported that there will be a 12-week consultation period with a decision on 19.03.24. Productive conversations had been held with all four agencies (Citizens Advice Bureau, Derbyshire Law Centre, Derbyshire Unemployed Workers Centre, and Link CVS).

The Chair felt it important to note that lots of residents had benefitted from these agencies over many years. She felt that it was the Government that had placed the Council in their current position, and it was the people of Chesterfield who would ultimately suffer. It was noted that it was to this council's accolade that they had been funding these agencies when other councils had not. It was requested that a written outcome of the negotiations be given to this Committee once a decision had been made.

RESOLVED –

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a written outcome of the negotiations be given to this Committee once a decision has been made.

40 PARKS AND OPEN SPACES (PRESENTATION)

The Service Director – Leisure, Culture and Community Wellbeing presented a report on the budget implementation plan strategy proposals in the sector of Parks and Open Spaces. Decisions would be made on each area over the next two months with proposed savings of between £100,000 and £200,000. To review and reduce costs areas being looked at are ground maintenance, public toilet provision, evening park closures, Stand Road fireworks, In Bloom competition as well as other activities. Ways in which this would be done were through a discretionary services review, looking at the options available, how technology can help, equality impact, impact on the Council Plan, Deliverability, Sustainability and the feedback from the budget conversation.

It was reported that each area has its own impact as we go through the implementation plan. It was noted that the services are valuable to the public, especially in terms of health and wellbeing, but they are discretionary services, so the Council needs to look at what options are available to them. This may mean reimagining how services are delivered, are there opportunities for technological advancements to help i.e. new equipment (this may mean a capital cost but in the long term would provide savings). Across all areas as a Council, it was recognised that we have an enabling role i.e. the possibility of getting other agencies to deliver events in our Parks or holding a more Community led In Bloom competition, for example. The Council recognises how much value there is in our open spaces for the residents of Chesterfield, but there was a need to review and reduce operational costs so this is a very sensitive area.

Members were pleased to hear that the Parks and Open Spaces and Play Strategy would not be affected as there is a delivery plan to maintain this. Discussion also focused on the acknowledgment of cost implications where vandalism of play equipment had been experienced, and how a proposal of securing parks earlier in the evening may reduce the anti-social behaviour. The Cabinet member for Health and wellbeing thanked the officer (and his predecessor in the Cabinet role, Jill Mannion-Brunt) for

the 5-year play strategy and looked forward to the prospect of more green flag parks in the borough in the future. The Chair looked forward to the reports at the end of the consultation process.

41 SCRUTINY PROJECT GROUPS PROGRESS UPDATES

It was noted that progress was being made in regards to a project group focussing on Climate Change. A formal plan would be in place after the on-line briefing on 08.02.24.

The changes coming to Health Scrutiny on 31.01.24 were reported to the committee. Although it is at County level that Health and Overview Scrutiny Committees take place it is important for members of this committee to remain informed.

42 SCRUTINY MONITORING

This is a standard agenda item.

RESOLVED –

There was no scrutiny monitoring schedule to be noted.

43 FORWARD PLAN

It was noted that priorities on the Forward Plan can change and dates can be brought forward. The Chair requested that anything that arises between Committee meetings could be emailed to her so that a date could be arranged for it to be dealt with. It was noted that issues arising had already been timetabled for scrutiny.

RESOLVED –

That the Forward Plan be noted.

44 WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEE - ECONOMIC GROWTH AND COMMUNITIES

It was noted that this document had been updated and sent out to Members.

RESOLVED –

That the action be noted.

45 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Select Committee – Economic Growth & Communities on 7th December 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.