

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Monday, 31st January, 2022

Present:- **Councillors** Winston Duguid, Mark Elliott, Lucy Hodge, Hal MacFie, Alastair Singleton and Sally Davis

Apologies for absence: Councillors: Karen Warrington and Andrew Furse

65 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair Councillor Duguid (Vice Chair of the Panel) welcomed everyone to the meeting and read the following statement:

“Due to the ongoing Covid situation and a desire to retain a level of social distancing at Council meetings at this time, we are holding this meeting virtually. We will review this approach for any future meetings, in line with government and health guidance at that time.”

66 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Warrington and Councillor Furse sent their apologies.

67 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

68 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

69 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

Ms Katherine Howells made a statement to the Panel objecting to the proposed parking charges in Midsomer Norton and Radstock. *A copy of the statement is held on the Council minute book at attached to these minutes.*

Councillor Hughes asked if Ms Howells was aware of any consultation on this proposal from the Council. Ms Howells stated that she had not.

Councillor Hodges asked if Ms Howells had any figures around her impression that the cost to enforce this proposed scheme would outweigh the income to the Council.

Ms Howells did not have full figures on this but pointed out that the costs in the report show £20k for a parking warden.

The Chair thanked Ms Howells.

70 MINUTES

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record.

71 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Richard Samuel, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Resources updated the Panel on the following:

- The City Region Sustainable Transport Strategy has involved a lot of Cabinet discussion and negotiation with WECA on the detail.
- Also an interface relating to Bath Quays – the programme is challenging in bringing together a number of funding schemes to achieve the scheme on the ground with the new bridge elements coming together between July-November this year. Invitation to tender has been issued. Construction on the Bath Quays South side is progressing well.
- Work is coming to conclusion on the 4 local High Street projects (Weston, Moorland Road, Twerton and Southdown)
- We are in the final stages of the Milsom Quarter Master Plan work.
- A lot of the above are heading to the WECA meeting in April.

72 COUNCIL BUDGET

Councillor Richard Samuel, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Resources, Will Godfrey, Chief Executive, and Andy Rothery, Chief Finance Officer (S151), introduced the report.

Councillor Richard Samuel explained that since last bringing the draft Budget papers to this Panel on 10th January 2022, work had been done on refining the numbers but there were no significant changes. He reported that footfall figures for Bath in January had been extremely low, he explained that this shows the pressure on our High Street and also on Heritage Services (Roman Baths). The Council does need the income from its commercial and heritage estate. He stated that he is still listening to representations on the Budget proposals and still pulling together public feedback.

Will Godfrey, Chief Executive, stated that the last 18 months/2 years have seen the most difficult financial position the Council has ever faced. He explained that the foundations that have been built mean that the Council is in a relatively strong position. He added that the Budget proposals show that officers have fulfilled their responsibilities that will help deliver the Corporate Priorities. A huge amount of activity sits behind this Budget and there will be challenges but there are firm foundations.

Andy Rothery, Chief Financial Officer (S151), explained to the Panel that they have the core elements of the Budget papers and Annexes that will go on to the Cabinet meeting on 10th February and the Council on 15th February 2022. He added that we are in year 2 of a 5-year strategy and that the Budget has been significantly informed by Covid. He informed the Panel that the consultation on the Budget proposals has been more extensive this year than in previous years. There have been two sessions with this Panel and presentations at other PDS Panels along with a budget Webinar.

Panel members asked the following questions and made the following points:

Councillor Karen Walker, Chair of the Climate Emergency and Sustainability PDS Panel gave a brief outline of the comments from her Panel's meeting on 17th January 2022 regarding the Budget proposals:

'The budget is unrealistic and will put further costs on residents; more transparency is needed in the papers; there are concerns about parking charges in Midsomer Norton and Radstock; concerns about the Garden Waste Service; concerns about cuts in Street Lighting and a request for reassurance that the staffing issues in the Climate Emergency team be addressed'.

Councillor MacFie asked about the Council's reliance on external commercial income to fund the Council's base budget and if we are seeking to reduce this. He also queried the fact that BANES is the third lowest rate for Council Tax. Councillor Richard Samuel, Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Resources, explained that over many years the Council has been fortunate to have strong external income streams (eg from the Roman Baths and large commercial estate). The downside of this is that this income was greatly reduced during the pandemic. There has been some compensation, but Government support has now dropped away. The reduction in our external sources of income has been hard to wrestle with while we get back to a stable level of income. Income levels will likely not return to pre-pandemic levels for the next 3 years.

Andy Rothery, Chief Finance Officer, added that Council Tax and Core Spending Power information shows we are lower in the funding spectrum than other Councils. The reason for this is that we have always performed extremely well with commercial income. We don't want over reliance on commercial income in the future as this is also a risk – this is the transition.

Councillor Sally Davis asked about the level of confidence in the savings in the Children's budget eg. Foster Care Services. Councillor Richard Samuel stated that the projected savings had been through an internal assurance and challenge process. The officer agreed that the process had been rigorous.

Councillor Shaun Hughes stated that the speaker (Katherine Howells) had raised the issue of proposed parking charges in Midsomer Norton and Radstock and stated that her view was shared by thousands of residents. He explained that in a semi-rural area a car can be a necessity rather than a luxury. There are rises in the cost of living and to put parking charges on top adds another burden to residents. He further stated that the Council was seeking to encourage people to use their local facilities and that proposed parking charges could do more harm than good. He added that

funding set aside for the Fashion Museum (for example) did not seem more important than protecting a local facility. Councillor Richard Samuel stated that everything in the budget is draft at the moment and public reaction is being gauged. He added that the Fashion Museum funding would be Capital Budget rather than Revenue.

Councillor Hughes stated that he was pleased to hear that the proposed parking charges in Midsomer Norton and Radstock were not confirmed yet. The chair suggested that given the statement by Ms Howells, the comments by Councillor Hughes and the chair's own knowledge, through his WECA role, of Midsomer Norton and Radstock going forward that the panel could suggest to Cabinet to reconsider their car parking proposal for Midsomer Norton and Radstock. The Chair asked Panel members and a majority felt this would be appropriate (see resolution below).

Councillor Lucy Hodge asked the following questions (*Cabinet Member/Officer responses shown in italics*):

- Regarding the savings – can you explain the realigning of the borrowing requirement and how it appears in the report. *The officer explained that the saving comes from a historic capital programme profile which had built up an underspend so reflected realignment to the reprofiled programme.*
- What is 'customer services' budget spent on? *The officer stated that he would come back with further information on this.*
- Park and Ride – is the funding allocated for an extension of the contract? *The officer explained that the adjustment was due to changes in patronage.*

Councillor Mark Elliott asked for confirmation that there were no proposals to reduce street lighting. The officer confirmed that this is the case and explained that there is no planned reduction only a change in the maintenance cycle.

Councillor Hughes asked for more information on the review of the delivery of library and information services. Councillor Richard Samuel explained that post pandemic there have been changes in people's habits and how they want to interface with the Council (more concentration on online and phone service). This is not a substantial change to the Library Service.

Councillor Alastair Singleton stated that a lot of work had gone into the work on the report. He explained that he had an uneasy feeling regarding interest rates/inflation and whether this has been fully taken into account. The officer reassured the Panel that some inflation risk is embedding in the numbers, and he feels confident that the numbers are right.

Councillor Winston Duguid asked what 'vacancy turnover factor' means. The officer explained that each role has a budget and BANES has historically budgeted for 100% whereas others have built in staff turnover which we are now proposing. Councillor Mark Elliot confirmed with the officer that we are aligning the budget to the reality with regards to the vacancy rate.

Councillor Lucy Hodge asked the following questions (*Cabinet Member/Officer responses shown in italics*):

- Explanation of the Covid Contingency reserve. *The officer explained that this is a combination of one-off money. There is some roll forward of grant funding. The contingency is carved out of retained grant and topped up from the Financial Planning reserve.*
- What is the HR post referred to on the Funding Table? *Councillor Richard Samuel explained that this referred to the employment of a senior recruitment specialist which will mean we do not rely on external agencies.*

The Chair, Councillor Winston Duguid thanked the Chief Finance Officer and his team for the hard work on the Budget report.

The Panel **RESOLVED** to ask the Cabinet to:

- Take their comments into account and
- Reconsider the proposed parking charges for Midsomer Norton and Radstock.

73 **PANEL WORKPLAN**

Panel members noted the future workplan.

Councillor Duguid asked that an item on ADL be discussed at the next agenda briefing and added to the workplan.

The meeting ended at 5.30 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services