

Cabinet
Wednesday 24 November 2021

Comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Commission
at its meeting on Monday 22 November 2021
OSC/298

1. Cabinet Agenda Item 7 – Budget Strategy 2022/23 – 2026/27

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report FIN/537 of the Head of Corporate Finance.

The Commission received clarification on a number of points during the discussion with the Leader of the Council, Head of Corporate Finance and Chief Accountant.

Councillors made the following comments:

- Harsh decisions taken last year have resulted in an acceptable outcome, however it was acknowledged that the final settlement from central government was still outstanding.
- It was noted that any costs associated with the climate change action plan would have to be fed into future budget processes and may result in savings being sought.
- Query sought on the decline in retained business rates and estimated NNDR compared to the assumed projections. This was due to an assumption of a business rates reset in 2025/26 and the business rates equalisation reserve being utilised in the first few years of the strategy.
- Acknowledgement that the pension fund was fully funded as it had exceeded targets over the last three years, the saving in 2022/23 would be £145,000.
- It was noted that the waste collection changing to fortnightly household waste whilst not approved would save £250,000. It was commented that as COP26 had just ended it would be a beneficial time to lead by example and implement food waste collection and fortnightly rubbish collection.
- Recognition that resources had been impacted over the course of the pandemic, financial resources, funding and grants available and it was clear that the financial pressures were going to continue for several years.
- Acknowledged that it still uncertain as to when the position with regards to Natural England and planning applications would be resolved.
- Disappointment was expressed that if there was a slower than anticipated take up of floor letting for the new Town Hall as a result of the impact of the pandemic and the new ways of working, savings may have to be sought in future.
- It was commented it would be beneficial to include the income being made from each investment property within the appendices.
- Officers were thanked for providing detailed reasons for reserves within the report.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

2. Cabinet Agenda Item 8 – Treasury Management Mid-Year Review 2021-2022

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report FIN/538 of the Head of Corporate Finance. During the discussion with the Leader of the Council, Head of Corporate Finance and Chief Accountant, Councillors made the following comments:

- Confirmation sought and obtained on the lease surrounding Kingsgate car park. It would now be run as a Council owned car park once essential works were carried out and it was hoped it would be opened shortly, being in a prime location to the shops and the new town hall.
- Praise was offered for the in-house investments.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

3. Cabinet Agenda Item 9 – 2021/2022 Budget Monitoring - Quarter 2

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report FIN/535 of the Head of Corporate Finance. During the discussion with the Leader of the Council, Head of Corporate Finance and Chief Accountant, the following comments were made:

- Acknowledgement that the council currently had a favourable variance against the original budget largely due to government grants, although it was noted this was likely to be short term.
- Confirmation provided regarding the improved offer for the surrender of the lease on Kingsgate car park.
- Recognition of the additional income from interest on deferred receipts from shared equity properties.
- The Commission expressed its thanks to the Finance Team for its continued hard work throughout the pandemic and beyond.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

4. Cabinet Agenda Item 10 – Crawley Homes Rent Overcharge

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report DCE/11 of the Deputy Chief Executive. During the discussion with the Cabinet Member for Housing and the Deputy Chief Executive, Councillors made the following comments:

- Acknowledgement that the report documented a historical error with regards to tenants' rents, reasons and rectification.
- Important that the council was seen to be doing the 'right thing' in repaying tenants and to ensure consistency with natural justice and transparency.
- Recognition that the analysis process was significant and complex along with the process for rectification for the teams involved, not just for the council but external organisations.
- By rightly applying the principles of natural justice there was a return of the money that has been overcharged, placing the financial impact at 'status quo', but it was noted that there was a financial impact in terms of resource analysis of the data and that required to rectify the issue which should be made open and transparent. It was subsequently confirmed that costs were borne out of existing hours.
- Acknowledgement that the implementation of the policy seemed simple (48 to 52 weeks) compared to the cost of the resolution which appeared overly complicated. It was important to learn how to avoid similar situations in the future as it was noted the Regulator for Social Housing contacted the council following its first mandatory data return.
- Acknowledgement that the change was made by dividing the existing rent by 52 and then multiplying by 48. Actual rents were changed but the target rents on the system were not. Confirmation that the information was now fed into the housing system.
- It was queried whether the rent charging may not have been consistent with the decision taken in October 2013. However that decision reflected the 52 week charge for actual rent and it was noted the targeted rent was set by central government.
- Recognition that the Council actively monitored actual rents received versus the level forecast and regularly checked and sought reasons for variances. The year that the decision was made the council had 101 RTB properties. The Council budgeted for a similar level the following year (the first year of the new 52 week rent), however sold 66. When completing the budget monitoring the rental income was higher than anticipated but at the time this was put that down to having more properties paying rent than anticipated.

- Confirmation that the costs would come from the HRA once the process was complete. The budget would be adjusted next year and be reflected in the quarter 3 budget monitoring report.
- It was noted that existing tenancies would not be affected by this change, and neither were new tenancies within properties built since April 2014. Reconciliation had taken place for the current rent to ensure they were correct.
- Confirmation that rent credit would be transferred into rent accounts and also that the Corporate Debt Team would be liaising with tenants for any outstanding debt.
- It was noted that communications for tenants would continue over the next few weeks and Housing Advisors would be available to assist with any queries and support. Correspondence will be issued for former tenants but the priority was to the current tenants.
- It was felt it would be important for the Cabinet to acknowledge openly, ways to build some degree of public confidence in the council's ability to minimise this similar error in the future.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

5. Cabinet Agenda Item 11 – Unsupervised Play Investment Plan

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report HCS/33 of the Head of Community Services. During the discussion with the Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and Head of Community Services, Councillors made the following comments:

- Recognition that the proposed investment programme had been devised based on the safety grounds and need of the sites throughout the town. The works were re-scheduled and prioritised due to condition.
- Acknowledgement that the sites had featured cross-party agreement through the working group.
- Confirmation that the current budget identified in table 6.7 was the remaining budget.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

6. Cabinet Agenda Item 12 – Climate Emergency Action Plan

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report PES/390 of the Head of Economy and Planning. During the discussion with the Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Sustainability, Head of Economy and Planning, and the Sustainability Manager Councillors made the following comments:

- Acknowledgement that the carbon dioxide emissions reduction target was at least 45% by 2030 and zero by 2050. It was highlighted that this was a target and it was hoped to reach this prior to this date.
- It was noted that a funding plan would need to be brought forward to ensure the action plan would be fully budgeted and costed. This would build on future investigations and audits to inform the full costs of driving down emissions.
- Recognition that procurement plays a key role in carbon dioxide emissions equating to the supply chain, construction, manufacturing, goods and services.
- It was commented upon that it was a useful intention to review the essential car user policy but it was commented that it may be difficult to revise staff terms and conditions.
- Other options should be considered for improving the waste fleet, together with waste services in general. It was felt that the reduction in emissions for waste collection could be instigated by implementing food waste collection ahead of the timescales indicated in the plan and fortnightly rubbish collection.
- Acknowledgement that under provision on car parking, particularly in the town centre, was a deterrent for take up of electric vehicles as only a small percentage have off-street parking. It was noted the

infrastructure was important and the EV charging network contract was in place in partnership with WSCC to install a network of charging points across the town. In addition, some petrol stations had installed EV charging points. Compressed natural gas was not an alternative as it still produced carbon dioxide and consequently its use had not fully materialised.

- It was noted that through government policy and Local Plan policy there could be significant influence on planning applications in the future to assist in achieving sustainability. Recognition that there was a balance between residents' perception, feasibility and achieving net zero.
- Recognition that there was a need to encourage modal shift and behaviour change and the council should be leading on this and had a moral obligation. The Core Principles for Action (appendix A) stated the Carbon Emergency communications and engagement plan would engage and influence staff, councillors and externally with residents and stakeholders. However the Commission felt that further publicity would be beneficial in order to encourage the wider community and following a unanimous vote it was agreed that the Cabinet be requested to consider this additional recommendation:

Request the Cabinet complement the Climate Change Emergency Action Plan with a public educational programme.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet with the additional recommendation above.

7. Cabinet Agenda Item 13 – One Town Crawley Economic Recovery Plan – Consultation Findings & Final Version

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report PES/391 of the Head of Economy and Planning. During the discussion with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development and Head of Economy and Planning, Councillors made the following comments:

- Acknowledgement that the 'One Town' Crawley Economic Recovery Plan was an overarching strategic framework for Crawley's economic recovery and for the following existing economic regeneration programmes and policies: Crawley Growth Programme, Crawley Town Investment Programme, Crawley Town Centre Regeneration Programme and Crawley Employment & Skills Programme.
- Following the conclusion of the consultation a glossary of terms had been created together with a timeline for the delivery of the interventions and the funding allocations.
- Key partners were recognised and highlighted throughout the individual projects within the specific documents.
- It was commented it would be beneficial to see quantifiable contributions from the different partners as a reminder of the amount from each contributor.
- Recognition that the recovery plan would tie in the needs and actions of the climate emergency action plan.
- Acknowledgement that there was firm commitment to invest in modernisation of the Crawley College campus and education programmes including degree syllabus, STEM centre along with new apprenticeships and identifying future employment opportunities.
- It was felt the 'joined up approach to recovery' lacked some other stakeholders and partners representation. The Crawley Growth Programme was one of four initiatives referenced. WSCC and Metrobus were key deliverables in this and yet they did not feature to the same extent. As a result, it was moved by Councillor Lanzer (seconded by Councillor Pendlington) that:

"the partnership contributions of Metrobus and WSCC to the Crawley Growth Programme should be more explicitly referenced in this document (the One Town Crawley Economic Recovery Plan – Consultation Findings & Final Version)".

Following a vote being put to the Commission, the proposal was declared as carried.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet with the additional recommendation above.

8. Cabinet Agenda Item 17 – Crawley Innovation Centre – Draft Business Case

(Exempt Paragraph 3)

Information relating to financial and business affairs of any particular person (including the Authority holding that information)

Comments and Recommendations

The Commission considered report PES/392 of the Head of Economy and Planning.

During the discussion with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development and the Head of Economy and Planning, the following comments were made:

- Recognition that the option proposed enabled the Council to acquire a suitable property should one become available to enable delivery of the Crawley Innovation Centre project.
- There was overall support for the proposal which potentially could result in exciting opportunity for the town.

RESOLVED

That the Commission noted the report and requested that the views expressed during the debate, were fed back to the Cabinet through the Commission's Comment sheet.

Councillor T Belben
Chair, Overview and Scrutiny Commission
22 November 2021