

CORPORATE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 23 March 2017

Present:

Councillor Sheldon (Chair)
Councillors Warwick, Ashwood, Baldwin, Hannan, Harvey, Lamb, Musgrave and Robson

Also present:

Assistant Director Finance, Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support and
Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (MD)

In attendance:

Councillor Edwards (Leader)
Councillor Pearson (Portfolio Holder for Support Services).

11

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Holland.

12

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on the 26 January 2017 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable interest were made.

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QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 19

One member of the public, Mr Andy Vowden, had submitted a question under Standing Order 19, in relation to the Public Engagement in the Democratic Process and Web-casting of Council meetings.

Councillor Ollie Pearson, as Portfolio Holder for Support Services, responded and a copy of the response was appended to the minutes.

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QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL UNDER STANDING ORDER

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In accordance with Standing Order No 20, ten questions were put by Councillor Musgrave in relation to public engagement and revenue. A copy of the questions had been previously circulated to Members, and together with the responses from Councillor Pearson, the Portfolio Holder for Support Services and Councillor Edwards, the Leader, were appended to the minutes.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND WEB-CASTING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support presented the report on greater public engagement in the democratic process and webcasting of Council meetings in response to the motion passed by Council in February 2016. He advised the motion had been divided into the following:

Meetings being held elsewhere

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support advised that all of the Council's official meetings take place in the Civic Centre meeting rooms with Council meetings being held at the Guildhall. Both venues were setup to hold the meetings with appropriate equipment and capacity. It was rare to be unable to accommodate members of the public. A recent exception was at Extraordinary Council meeting held at the Guildhall which cannot incorporate the same numbers as the Civic Centre. He highlighted the Guildhall, the oldest municipal building in the country that was used for its original purpose for local government. Both the Civic Centre and Guildhall are based in the city centre and have excellent access to parking and public transport links.

He commented that the concept of holding meetings in other parts of the city was not unrealistic with the following matters having been taken into account:-

- Finding suitable accommodation elsewhere (including the availability of all necessary equipment), including accessibility requirements;
- Transportation of necessary equipment which may not be available at the venue (e.g. microphones);
- Ensuring the appropriate public notice is given of the different location;
- The costs associated with the hiring of the venues;
- Staff time and costs in administering the booking of suitable venues, and ensuring their set up in time for the meetings themselves;
- The availability of accommodation elsewhere up to 18 months ahead of the meeting itself – there is no guarantee that the accommodation booked, would be suitable for the meeting required by the time the meeting came to take place.

He explained there had been no call to hold meetings away from the Civic Centre or Guildhall and recommended to continue to hold meetings at these locations.

Broadcasting of meetings

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support advised that the Council does not currently broadcast its meetings and recognised that some facilities were being used by more local authorities. He confirmed there was public interest in broadcasting, so members of the public could be kept up to date with news and events, however there appeared to be little interest in Council Meetings.

Another issue was that the meeting rooms at the Civic Centre were not permanently setup for meetings and were used for other meetings. The Guildhall was a Grade 1 listed building which prevented the installation of fixed equipment.

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support recommended trialling a system such as Facebook Live for a six month period at public committee meetings.

Question time to the Leader of the Council at Council meetings

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support informed Members there was currently no opportunity for questions by members of the public to be asked to the Leader of the Council at full Council meetings and referred to a council meeting held in 2015, in which a motion about this had been put to the vote and lost. He commented that not much had changed and referred to the report which highlighted numbers of public speaking at various committee meetings over a two year period.

The figures indicated that, apart from planning meetings, there was little interest from members of the public to address formal council meetings. He expressed his thanks to a member of the public who had attended this meeting and spoke understanding order 19. However, he recommended, no new changes be made to introduce public questions at Council meetings.

Greater publicity

The Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support discussed the minimal public attendance at council meetings. There was little interest shown from members of the public with the exception of the Planning Committee.

He advised that he would be working closely with the recently appointed Director of Communications & Marketing to maximise publicity and suggested adding meeting agendas to the weekly bulletins produced by the Director of Communications & Marketing to promote the meetings. He also referred to the question raised from the member of the public who spoke about the difficulty of using the Council website to locate information. He would liaise with the Director of Communications & Marketing to develop an engagement plan to help improve this.

In response to Members' questions, the Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support responded:

- Questions to the Leader could be trialled, but it would need to go through the process of being put forward as a suggestion and would need approval at Executive and Council;
- The Guildhall was the council chamber and must be used for council meetings, including larger meetings. This could not be adjusted without changing standing orders;
- A larger venue such as the Corn Exchange or Riverside would be difficult to hire, as the council didn't manage the Riverside and the Corn Exchange was very busy;
- Improvements were being made to access information, whilst the first priority was to improve public knowledge and interest;
- The recommendations, if adopted, should be given a six month trial period to obtain more information and be fed back to the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee in six months;
- That in relation to other premises within the city which could accommodate Council meetings, the Corporate Manager Democratic & Civic Support as Returning Officer, struggled to find accommodation which met all the necessary accessibility requirements. It was felt that this would be the same when searching for suitable accommodation for Council meetings.

Councillor Musgrave raised a proposal to take the recommendations to Executive and have the opportunity to build on it further along. The motion was seconded by Councillor Baldwin.

Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee supported the report and requested Executive and Council to note and approve:-

- (1) The current arrangements for the holding of all public meetings of the City Council be maintained;
- (2) A simple trial for broadcasting of some Council meetings being undertaken with a view to the monitor the levels of interest taken up and report back to a future meeting of this Committee;
- (3) The suggestion for public questions the Council Leader at the commencement of full Council meetings not be supported;
and
- (4) The Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support, work closely with the Director of Communications & Marketing to maximise publicity of the decision making process, including items on committee agenda as appropriate.

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OVERVIEW OF THE REVENUE BUDGET 2016/17

The Assistant Director Finance presented the report on the Revenue Budget, which outlined the overall projected financial position of the HRA & General Fund Revenue Budgets for the 2016/17 financial year and to seek approval for a supplementary budget.

He discussed the Council's estimated financial position and the requirement for approval of additional expenditure during the financial year based on the under-spend outlined in the report. He commented that a supplementary budget totalling £59,000 had been approved previously by Council.

The Assistant Director Finance explained that the House Revenue Account had an opening balance of £7,068,670 with a projected surplus of £816,053. He commented on the underspend of management units and highlighted that £320,000 had been underspent on the repairs and maintenance.

He outlined the General Fund which indicated that the service committees had an under-spend of £153,519 against the revised budget of £15,028,649. He summarised the spending of the three Scrutiny committees indicating:

- People Scrutiny Committee had an under-spend of £14,950;
- Place Scrutiny Committee had an over-spend of £127,821;
- Corporate Services had an under-spend of £266,390.

The Assistant Director Finance reported that the car parking under-spend for the Place Scrutiny Committee was £501,370 based on income from parking fees. He commented on the Supplementary Budgets informing Members that there was a requirement for further supplementary budgets in 2016/17. The General Fund supplementary budget was £59,000.

In response to questions from Members, the Assistant Director Finance explained:

- The parks and green spaces had an under-spend of £108,770 which had been caused by vacant posts. Some income had come from park assets but the parks and open spaces team would be able to provide more information on this
- Car park use across the city had increased which had caused an under-spend of £501,370. Had this not have happened the take from balances would have been closer to the revised estimate £850,000;
- The car park machines would be adapted to be able to take the new £1 coins. The machines would initially be adapted to accept the new coins and then at a later date, be adapted again to ensure older pound coins could not be used. The cost was not known at this time but will not be significant.

Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee noted the report and requested Executive and Council to note and approve:

- (1) The General Fund forecast financial position for the 2016/17 financial year;
- (2) The HRA forecast financial position for 2016/17 financial year;
- (3) The additional supplementary budget listed in Appendix C;
- (4) The outstanding Sundry Debt position as at December 2016;
and
- (5) The creditor's payments performance.

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CAPITAL MONITORING STATEMENT TO DECEMBER 2016

The Assistant Director Finance presented the report on the Capital Monitoring Statement which advised Members on the current position of the Council's revised annual capital programme and the expected future deferred expenditure. He advised that the report required approval from Members to amend the annual capital programme in order to reflect the variations.

The Assistant Director Finance discussed the performance of the revised capital programme and reported the revised capital programme for the current financial year.

The Council had spent £5.956 million of the revised programme. He commented that major schemes had not been spent in this financial year and would be included in the next financial year. The schemes would be reviewed to ensure they could be delivered in 2017/18. He noted the spend would normally be a lot higher for this time of year.

The Assistant Director Finance commented on the approved budgets for 2017/18 with the 2016/17 budget to be carried forward to 2017/18 and beyond which required Executive and Council to consider for approval.

The Chair commented that he had spoken with the Deputy Chief Executive who suggested that resource concerns would need to be raised to him to reduce impact on delivery.

In response to Members' questions, the Assistant Director Finance explained that normally the Council had spent around 50% percent of the programme after three quarters. If schemes were deemed to be viable, they would be checked to ensure they could be delivered and be added into the next financial year. Profiling had to improve to provide Members with realistic expectations.

Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee supported the report and requested Executive to recommend to Council to approve the revision of the annual capital programme to reflect the reported variations detailed in Expenditure Variances and Schemes to be deferred to 2017/18 and beyond.

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BUDGET MONITORING FOR QUARTER 3

The Assistant Director Finance presented the report which advised Members of the differences to the revised budget and presented a quarterly financial update in respect of the Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee. He advised Members that local authorities had a statutory duty to set and monitor budgets during the year and to action potential overspending or income losses.

He discussed the financial resources required to deliver Corporate Services during 2016-17 and informed Members that net expenditure would decrease from the revised budget by £283,650 after transfers from reserves and revenue contributions to capital. This would include a supplementary budget of £854,990, which had already been agreed.

The Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee noted the content of the report and were satisfied that prudent steps were being taken to address the key areas of budgetary pressure highlighted in this report.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.30 pm)

Chair

PUBLIC QUESTIONS RECEIVED Under Standing Order 19 for Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee – 23rd March 2017

Question for Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee From Andy Vowden:

“The quest to find the information on the website for this meeting shows there are some clear issues with communication and transparency to the public.

Now unfortunately we don't all have GCHQ standard web skills so In light of this fact, this motion and a councillor recently crossing the floor due to the lack of democracy and accountability, can someone tell me, why there appears to be resistance from the administration to implementing these proposals in full? I understand I will have a right to respond also?”

Response by Councillor Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Support Services

Councillor Pearson as Portfolio Holder for Support Services responded to the question by informing that there was no resistance on the part of the administration to these proposals, but what was being suggested reflected a realistic position, and was, in itself, a step forward in attracting more public interest in the Council's decision making process.

For the first time the council was moving towards measured levels of public engagement, where our output could be monitored and refined according the needs and demands of our residents.

Response by Mr Vowden

Mr Vowden expressed his thanks for the response and informed that the navigation on the Exeter City Council, especially in comparison to other Local Authority websites, was very difficult to navigate to find what he was looking for. There was too much clicking to navigate the website. He commented on the proposal from February last year. He asked that finding relevant information, policy processes and decisions be made more accessible which would improve public participation at committee meetings.

Response

Councillor Pearson and the Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support explained that the proposal in the report under agenda item 7, showed that meetings varied on how they functioned and numbers of attendance. It was understood there was an issue of making the public more aware of council meetings and would look at the website functionality to improve user experience.

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MEMBER QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER at Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee – 23 March 2017

From Councillor Musgrave

- (a) Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me, contrary to the sentiment in this report, continuing to restrict public participation at scrutiny is not going to encourage the public to attend meetings?
- (b) How does the administration intend to actively promote this new initiative and change the culture of poor public engagement? Can this be a future task and finish project?
- (c) Has any consideration been given to setting up ward councils, much like town or parish councils in other district councils? If not, why not?
- (d) Why has there been an under-spend of £533k on property maintenance?
- (e) Reference the £70k overspend on PR consultants, can the Portfolio Holder confirm now we have a new Communications Director in post, going forward such work will be completed in house, thereby negating the need for PR consultants?
- (f) Reference the overspend of over £66k on agency staff, can the Portfolio Holder explain why so much money has been spent on outside staff when we are making Council employees redundant and/or not replacing posts?
- (g) Can the Portfolio Holder provide a breakdown of how this budget has been spent?
- (h) Does the Portfolio Holder conceded, this £66k overspend is contrary to the Leader's stated position to the joint trade unions to reduce overall agency spend?
- (i) What has the reaction from the recognised trade unions been?
- (j) Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me, urgent steps need taken to reduce and negate agency spend?

Responses by Councillor Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Support Services

- (a) Councillor Pearson explained that the report made no reference to restricting public participation at Scrutiny. What it did suggest was maximising the publicity surrounding all the council meetings so that more members of the public were aware of the meetings and the business to be transacted.
 - Councillor Musgrave asked about Leaders question time and having public to read questions.
 - Councillor Pearson responded by informing that members of the public can ask a question. The report in Item 7 refers to workable proposals and addressing ways of reporting at meetings.
- (b) Public engagement, creating and maintaining two way conversations, was a core part of the strategic direction and focus that was being brought in under the new Director of Communications and Marketing. For the first time the council was moving towards measured levels of public engagement, where our output can be monitored and refined

according to the needs and demands of our residents. A task and finish project would duplicate.

- (c) I'm not quite sure what is meant by this question. The consideration of what would be another tier of local government within the City goes beyond the remit of the report, and even if it was to be considered, would need extensive public consultation before anything could be taken further forward.

Response by Councillor Edwards, Leader and Councillor Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Support Services

- (d) Due to prioritisation of emerging in year demand it has not been possible to complete all planned works given the limited officer resource available. A proportion of the Property Maintenance fund is an allocation for reactive repairs, the nature of this spend requirement prevents accurate spend forecasting. In this financial year a reduced demand has resulted in reduced spend; in future years this demand may increase or exceed allocation.

The following schemes, which were still in design stage at the point of reporting to committee, would be committed by year end: Civic Centre heating alterations to enable stagecoach occupation; RAMM Lightning Conductor improvements; Verney House damp mitigation works; Alphington Community Centre roof repairs; Mary Arches MSCP lift shaft repairs; Customer 1st entrance door safety improvements; Civic Centre Fire Door Repairs; General LPS faults; Multi-storey car park fire risk assessment works; Retention payment for historic asset decorations contract.

Within the reported £533,000 underspend, the current envisaged requirement for roll forward to fund the schemes detailed above was in the region of £283,000; with a resultant underspend in line with previously reported predictions in the region of £250,000.

- Councillor Musgrave enquired about what happened to the ring fenced money and was it spent on other projects.
 - Councillor Edwards informed that where money was spent, was a decision of the authority.
- (e) All corporate communications, referred to in this budget heading, would be undertaken in house by a team led by the Communications and Marketing Director. There would also be a comprehensive review of communications, PR and marketing activity by other departments across the council.
- Councillor Musgrave commented that the figure of £70,000 was a large sum in the public eye, would there be more spent externally?
 - Councillor Edwards stated that money would be spent on in-house and was very proud of the Council's record.
- (f) The over-spend relates to Procurement. As Members were aware, we had tried to recruit to the post twice and failed to attract a suitable candidate at the salary budgeted. We had therefore decided to undertake a review of our requirements and put in place a suitably qualified Agency worker to undertake the review, support the one existing member of staff in post and support services in procurement requirements. There were no suitably qualified internal staff available to undertake this work.

- Councillor Musgrave enquired if the £66,000 was spent on the procurement vacancies?
 - Councillor Pearson referred to Councillor Musgrave's next question which the response to answer this question.
- (g) Over the year there have been up to two agency staff working on procurement.
- (h) The situation was unusual in the Council and results from the limited market of suitably qualified staff. To rectify this we were developing a more attractive offer, but it does take time to deliver this via the organisational development approach agreed with the trade unions.
- Councillor Musgrave asked if there had been a reaction from the trade union.
 - Councillor Edwards informed that he had spoken with unions and the agency staff, who don't work for the council. Unions were happy with the recruitment but he would always look at vacant posts and make necessary checks. He noted that there were five new jobs, which three had been through agency recruitment, but had now become full time posts. It was more expensive to employ agency workers.
- (i) The trade unions were fully involved in the organisational development process for the new team.
- Councillor Musgrave asked whether agency staff were being offered roles?
 - Councillor Edwards explained he would like to offer agency staff more roles and was working to find a way to hire them. There was an issue of recruitment with not being able to pay staff enough for the roles and be unable to keep them in post. This was being looked at.
- (j) As stated above, this situation had developed to support the implementation of a new team of staff employed by the Council.

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