

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 10th January, 2013

6.00 - 7.40 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Duncan Smith (Chair), Klara Sudbury (Vice-Chair), Nigel Britter, Andrew Chard, Rob Garnham, Colin Hay, Helena McCloskey, Ian Bickerton and Jo Teakle
Also in attendance:	Councillor Penny Hall, Councillor Charles Stewart, Councillor Anne Regan, Councillor Steve Jordan, Councillor Peter Jeffries and Councillor Roger Whyborn

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Andrew Wall who was substituted by Councillor Andrew Chard and Councillor Barbara Driver who was substituted by Councillor Rob Garnham.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Chard declared a personal interest in Agenda item 5 – Rickshaw Call-in as a personal friend of the applicant.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS, CALLS FOR ACTIONS AND PETITIONS

None received.

4. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting held on 26 November were approved as a correct record.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

6. CALL IN RICKSHAW DECISION

The Democratic Services Manager advised that a call-in request had been received regarding the decision made at Cabinet on 11 December 2012 concerning the licensing of rickshaws in Cheltenham. As it had not been possible to convene all the witnesses requested for this meeting at short notice, it was proposed to deal with the call-in at the special meeting of this committee arranged for 23 January 2013 to consider the recommendations of the scrutiny task group - JCS.

The chair confirmed that this proposal accorded with the rules set out in the Council's constitution for dealing with call-ins.

A member commented that in normal circumstances, everything possible should be done to consider a call-in as quickly as possible in order not to cause unnecessary delay to the democratic decision-making process. However in this

situation, as the Cabinet decision had been effectively to defer any decision, it was acceptable.

Resolved that the call-in request be considered at the next meeting of O&S on 23 January 2013.

7. BUDGET 2013/14

The chair explained that at this stage in the budget cycle, the committee would normally expect to receive a report from the Budget Scrutiny Working Group on the budget proposals together with any recommendations they wish to make to Cabinet. For the reasons previously given by the working group, they were not in a position to do this for 2013/14 however they had received a presentation on the budget at their meeting earlier this week.

The Director of Resources as Section 151 Officer gave a brief presentation on the Cabinet's Interim Budget Proposals 2013/14 for consultation. The presentation outlined the budget assumptions, funding sources, the impact of the late settlement and areas of uncertainty in the MTFS.

He explained that the council had only been notified of the final government settlement on the Wednesday before the Friday 21st December Cabinet meeting. The impact of the settlement had been assessed and a revised version of the budget summary in appendix 2 of the budget papers had been circulated at the meeting on 21 December. The settlement had been better than expected in 2013/14 but was significantly worse in 2014/15. Consequently there was still further work to be done in remodelling the MTFS following the late settlement.

The Cabinet Member Finance referred to the Bridging the Gap strategy set out in appendix 4 of the budget papers. He gave some context to the budget challenges by highlighting that since February 2008 the Council's net budget had fallen by about two and a half million pounds in less than five years and if inflation was factored in, this was a fall of around 25%. Over the next four years this figure could rise to a 40% cut in core government support since 2008.

Longer term, the financial challenge was to bridge the projected funding gap over the period of the MTFS. This was why a detailed, quantified five-year strategy for cutting costs and maximising income and bridging the medium term funding gap was being developed as outlined in Appendix 4 of the report. Overall he felt the council had been successful to date in dealing with significant cuts in resources without cutting essential services and whilst holding down council tax and parking charges. However he warned next year's budget would be a far greater challenge.

The Director of Resources reported that the budget scrutiny working group had expressed some nervousness about the increased worth of

efficiency savings yet to be identified in 2014/15 which took the savings required from £275,000 to approximately £624,000. They had asked whether there was any opportunity to bring forward savings from future years. He advised that this would be the biggest topic for the bridging the gap meeting later this month.

The Cabinet Member Finance explained that the way that the New Homes Bonus (NHB) was used had been rethought and last year it was accepted that it needed to be treated as a regular source of income so part of it was taken into the revenue budget. He indicated that the council would have to look carefully at the use of the NHS bonus going forward as the funding was cumulative and could be a way of making up the shortfall in government funding.

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member Finance advised that the colours highlighted in the bridging the gap summary were an indication of the current assessment of the level of deliverability of each of the savings. Green indicating that the saving was almost there through to red indicating there was a lot more work to be done. The chair asked what contingency plans were in place if the savings highlighted in red, amounting to almost £800,000, failed to deliver. The Cabinet Member advised that the red savings were not necessarily difficult to deliver but simply that there was a lot more work to be done before they could be firmed up. For example, he was comfortable that the senior management team review could deliver that quantity of savings but it was not yet planned out how they would be achieved.

The following responses were given to additional questions from members?

- Regarding the advantages of pooling business rates across the county, the Director of resources advised that they had been working with the other Gloucestershire authorities and the financial modelling supported pooling and appeared to demonstrate that it would be advantageous to Cheltenham Borough Council and more rates would be retained in Gloucestershire. However there were still one or two issues to be resolved and the final decision was due to be taken on 15 January.
- The options for debt rescheduling to maximise investment income had largely been exhausted. Income from Icelandic Banks was coming in but the flow was unpredictable so consequently it was difficult to predict the levels of interest in the financial plans.
- The Cabinet Member Finance advised that the council was adopting a carrot and stick approach to vacant properties. Although the council had the power to compulsory purchase vacant properties, the preferred strategy was that the new vacant property officer would engage with property owners and encourage them to get empty properties back into use. The target would be a reduction of 26 empty properties per year and he considered this would be a good rate of return for the investment in the new post and would in turn increase the amount received in the New Homes bonus.
- The Cabinet Member Finance advised that the £20,000 saving in economic development would be achieved through a restructure rather than any cuts in the service. In terms of encouraging growth of new business in the town, one of the key objectives of the pooling of

business rates was to set up an economic growth fund which could be used to stimulate growth at both county and local level.

- Asked whether the stated 1% freeze p.a in staff pay could be backed up by a guarantee that there would be no compulsory redundancies, the Cabinet Member Finance said that they were not in a position to give a guarantee however they would continue to work hard to avoid the need for any compulsory redundancies. He was pleased to advise that to date, staff savings had largely been achieved through natural wastage, voluntary redundancies or early retirement and ongoing management of vacancies.
- Asked for an update on the potential savings from the accommodation strategy set out for 2015 to 2017, he advised that this was very much work in progress. The rationale for moving out of the Municipal Offices would become increasingly apparent as the core organisation continued to transfer staff out to shared or commissioned services.

In terms of recommendations regarding the budget, a member requested that a budget be allocated to ensure that all members of Planning Committee receive essential training and attendance is made compulsory. He considered this was an invest to save initiative considering the cost of appeals if decisions were made incorrectly.

The chair also requested that the Cabinet Member consider allocating a budget to support the overview and scrutiny process.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member Finance note these requests when finalising the budget proposals.

8. FEEDBACK FROM OTHER SCRUTINY MEETINGS ATTENDED

None attended.

Councillor McCloskey advised that members of the Police and Crime Panel were meeting on 14 January when they would have the opportunity to endorse the appointment of the new Chief Constable.

9. UPDATES FROM SCRUTINY TASK GROUPS

The chair referred to the update which had been circulated and the Democratic Services Manager talked through the significant points.

After some discussion it was agreed that work on the community governance review should commence in 2014 in order that any outcomes could be implemented in time for the elections in 2018. The task group update and scrutiny workplan would be amended accordingly and the first stage would be to agree the revised terms of reference and the membership of the working group. The discussions at Council had highlighted some major issues with this review and it would be important to learn the lessons when it was restarted.

10. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY TASK GROUP - EVENTS

The chair invited Councillor Penny Hall, as chair of the working group to introduce the report of the scrutiny task group.

Councillor Hall thanked the committee for providing the opportunity to take their report to Council as this had given all members a greater awareness of the report and its recommendations. She thanked all the members of the working group and commended the efforts of Saira Malin and Rosalind Reeves from Democratic Services who had supported the review along with Grahame Lewis, Louis Krog and other officers from Parks and Gardens, One Legal, Integrated Transport and Public Protection.

In responding to the report, members commended the working group and acknowledged the great deal of work that had gone into producing their final report and were happy to endorse the recommendations and forward them to Cabinet.

Resolved that the recommendations of the Events scrutiny task group be endorsed and forwarded to Cabinet.

11. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY TASK GROUP - ALLOTMENTS

The chair of the scrutiny task group, Councillor Anne Regan, introduced their final report on allotments. In her introduction she thanked members of the working group and the officers who had contributed to this review, in particular Beverly Thomas from Democratic Services and Adam Reynolds and Emma from the allotments team who had helped the working group understand the complexities of allotments. The working group had produced a comprehensive set of recommendations which they hoped recognized the needs of the public, allotment holders and those on the waiting list. The chair also added that allotment holders should be encouraged to join the Allotments Association, not least because it offered good value insurance.

As this was such an important issue, the working group wished to add a further recommendation 11 -that the scrutiny task group should be reconvened after a period of 12 months to review the implementation of the recommendations.

In the discussion that followed, members commended the task group for an excellent report and particularly liked the inclusion of photographs. They welcomed the clarity on the legal requirements for provision of allotments which had confirmed that the responsibility for the provision of allotments in parished areas rested clearly with the parish councils. They were satisfied that the original terms of reference had been met.

Councillor Garnham suggested some additional wording in recommendation 9 given that the emerging Cheltenham Local Plan was some way off. The amended recommendation would read as follows:

Rec 9 : that consideration be given to an allotment provision and enhancement policy in the emerging Cheltenham Local Plan and in the meantime planning officers should include the provision of allotments as a subject for discussion with developers at the pre-application stage.

Adam Reynolds advised that there had already been discussions with some developers about including allotment space in their proposed developments and there was a willingness to consider this and a positive response had been received for the new development in the south of the town.

Councillor Hay, as a member of the working group, had reflected further on the recommendations since their report had been finalised. He thought it was important that the authority should encourage people to grow their own food on allotments both for the health benefits but particularly in the context of global food shortages in the medium to long term. He suggested that this could be brought out more strongly in the report. The working group had also considered the use of smaller parcels of land for the provision of both statutory and non-statutory allotments and he felt that the Cabinet Member should be recommended to look into this further.

Another member suggested that there could be more information on the council's website to encourage and guide allotment holders which could help avoid some of the problems of allotments falling into disuse.

Resolved that

- 1. The recommendations be endorsed with the amended recommendation 9 and noting the additional points regarding the health benefits of growing food and the use of parcels of land for statutory and non statutory allotments.**
- 2. The report be forwarded to Council for debate and then on to Cabinet to consider the recommendations.**

12. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The workplan was noted and it was agreed that follow-up of recommendations would be included.

There was some discussion about the approach to receiving the recommendations from the scrutiny task group regarding household formation rates at the next meeting on 23 January 2012. Whilst acknowledging the wider member interest in this matter, the chair reminded members that the remit of this committee was to consider whether the working group had met their terms of reference and had asked the appropriate questions of the consultants. Consequently he would not expect the committee to get into the detail about the report and 30 minutes should be sufficient time to deal with this item.

A number of suggestions were made regarding how all council members could have the opportunity to ask more detailed questions on the report.

The Chief Executive suggested that the co-optees on the scrutiny task group and any other interested parties should be given the opportunity to attend the O&S meeting.

The Democratic services manager agreed to follow both these points up with the chair of the scrutiny task group and the sponsoring officer, Pat Pratley.

13. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Date of next meeting : Wednesday 23 January at 6 pm

Duncan Smith
Chairman