
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the Virtual Meeting Via held Skype on Wednesday, 21 July 2021 from 7.00 pm - 8.16 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Cameron Beart (substitute for Councillor Ken Pugh), Lloyd Bowen (Chairman), Steve Davey, Mike Dendor (Vice-Chairman), Oliver Eakin, Tim Gibson, James Hall, Carole Jackson, Denise Knights and Pete Neal.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Martyn Cassell, Jo Millard, Larissa Reed and Phil Wilson.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors Roger Clark, Alan Horton, David Simmons, Roger Truelove and Tony Winckless.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Hannah Perkin, Ken Pugh and Corrie Woodford.

166 INTRODUCTION

In welcoming everyone to the meeting, the Chairman explained which officers were in attendance. He advised that, due to changes in political groups, Councillors Richard Darby and Bill Tatton no longer sat on the Committee and that Councillor Corrie Woodford had replaced Councillor Tatton on the Committee.

167 MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2021 (Minutes Nos. 76 -81) were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

168 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

169 FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Chairman thanked and acknowledged the former Chief Financial Officer who recently left Swale Borough Council (SBC) and welcomed the Head of Finance and Procurement. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance joined the Chairman in his thanks of the former Chief Financial Officer.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the report which outlined the revenue and capital outturn position of the Council for 2020/21, and he advised that the report had been agreed at Cabinet and the outturn position discussed at the Policy, Housing and Finance Cabinet Advisory Committee.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance drew attention to the headline figures at paragraph 1.3 on page 6 of the report and highlighted the overspend due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He acknowledged that whilst SBC had been well-funded from Government grants during the pandemic, as shown at tables 4 and 5, going forward

the Government might not be as financially supportive. He said that Cabinet had agreed that the £1.3m underspend would be allocated to a Covid Recovery Fund.

Drawing attention to the underspend in shared services, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that officers would be looking at whether spending could be more easily predicted.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance referred to the lower than forecast business rates and council tax income received in 2020/21.

The Chairman thanked to all SBC staff, giving particular praise to the staff who had administered grants during the pandemic. The Chief Executive praised the work of staff throughout a challenging year.

Members asked questions and made general comments including:

- Clarification on what the net other items (£57k) were;
- more detail on loss of income on Garden Waste Collection on Table 1;
- which budget did the Barton Hill, Minster litigation costs come out of?
- clarification on CCTV underspend on Table 1;
- more detail on the underspend on community halls;
- did SBC get any money back from spending if there were legislative changes?;
- would SBC receive any money to offset the loss of income from the leisure centres during the Covid-19 pandemic?;
- would SBC be able to recover historic debts from Council Tax?; and
- clarification on the unrecovered costs on the Network Rail Scheme in the Sittingbourne Regeneration project.

In response, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that the litigation costs for Barton Hill Drive would come out of the General Fund which would impact on reserves. The Chief Executive advised that if there were significant changes to legislation then funding would be given. The Head of Environment and Leisure said that a one-off payment from the National Lottery of £375k had been received for loss of income from the leisure centres. He also said that there was no loss of income on garden waste and the Council had achieved more income than budgeted. The Head of Finance and Procurement advised that historic Council Tax payment debts would remain and would look to be recovered in the future. He explained that the unrecovered costs from Network Rail were as a result of the Council being unable to recover costs as originally anticipated, now that the scheme was nearly completed.

The Chairman went through Appendix I, the Financial Outturn Report 2020/21 with Members.

Table 11

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Finance and Procurement clarified that overall there was underspending on shared services due to a number

of factors including lower than anticipated use of services, spending reductions and additional income.

Table 15

In response to a Member's question on how much of the £1m from the Special Projects Fund had been spent and had been allocated to future projects, the Head of Finance and Procurement referred to Table 7 on page 13 of the report.

In response to a Member's question on the funding for the Murston Bus Lane, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance confirmed that the funding allocation was still there, but might come back into reserves if it was not used.

Table 16

A Member referred to the Beach Huts – Capital Receipts which had been taken off the Forward Plan. The Head of Environment and Leisure advised that works were still planned, and the item would be added to the Forward Plan in due course, but resource was an issue.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance advised that Milton Creek Country Park Access Road was still in the capital programme. The Head of Environment and Leisure confirmed the figure was for maintenance when the road was constructed.

Table 17

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance advised that the costs for EV Charging in Swale House car park were funded by the Special Projects Fund as the Council addressed the Climate Change Emergency.

In response to a Member's question on why Minster Cliffs capital receipt was being used to fund redevelopment of Master's House, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said the money was not inclusive to the ward or ring-fenced and the Master's House project would benefit the whole of the Isle of Sheppey.

A Member asked about the reassessment required on Open Spaces/Play Area projects. In response, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said a report was still being worked on. The Head of Environment and Leisure added that the projects will be based on RAG rating which considered a range of elements and he agreed to circulate the updated report to Members when completed.

The Chairman thanked Financial Services. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance joined the Chairman in thanking the Head of Finance and Procurement.

170 UTILITIES - VERBAL UPDATE

The Chairman referred to a previous visit to a Scrutiny Committee meeting by a representative from SGN in February 2019, who had given an interesting and informative presentation to Members about projects in Swale. The Chairman

suggested that other utility companies could be invited to attend to share future plans in Swale in a positive way, not to critique.

In the discussion that followed, the recent pollution court case involving Southern Water was raised. A Member spoke about the provisions and responsibilities of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Chief Executive advised that she met quarterly with Southern Water.

Members were supportive of inviting utility companies to attend a Scrutiny Committee meeting and suggested Southern Water, BT Open Reach and other power networks.

The Chairman said he would work with officers to invite utility companies to attend a future meeting.

171 CABINET FORWARD PLAN

The Chairman advised that due to a recent change in staff since the Forward Plan had been published, some Lead Officers had now changed. The Chief Executive advised that the interim replacement for Anne Adams was Jeremy Pilgrim.

A Member asked why the Master's House item was not on the Forward Plan?

The Chief Executive advised that written responses to questions unable to be answered at the meeting would be provided.

Chairman

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All Minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel