

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday 10 January 2024.

PRESENT: Councillors M Storey (Chair), J Kabuye (Vice-Chair), I Blades, E Clynch, S Dean, J Ewan, M McClintock, J Platt, J Ryles, J Young and D Coupe (Substitute for M Smiles)

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Nicky Walker

OFFICERS: C Benjamin, S Bonner, L Grabham and J Savage

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Banks, M Smiles and J Walker

23/45 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

23/46 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 20 DECEMBER 2023**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 20 December 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

23/47 **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chief Executive submitted a report which identified the forthcoming issues to be considered by the Executive, as outlined in Appendix A to the report. The report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Board with the opportunity to consider whether any item contained within the Executive Forward Work Programme should be considered by the Board or referred to a scrutiny panel.

NOTED

23/48 **COUNCIL BUDGET 2024/25 AND MTFP REFRESH - FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

The Chair welcomed the Executive Member for Finance and Governance, the Director of Legal and Governance, the Head of Strategic Procurement and Commissioning and the Head of Resident and Business Support to the meeting.

The Board was advised that, in terms of Finance, there were several customer facing services such as Council Tax, as well as support functions within the department. It was commented that during austerity there was a move to reduce the size of back-office functions rather than front-line services. While this was the correct approach at the time, there was also a point when this became damaging for the Council.

The Board was then provided with the details of the budget proposals that could have affected front line services in Finance, as detailed in the presentation circulated to Members.

In terms of proposal FIN08 this was in two parts. The first was the Small Grants Programme, which was available to small community groups and residents. Valued at £127,000, it was proposed this stop. However, as these were one-off grants it was commented nobody would lose funds that had already been allocated. It was also commented that small organisations and residents might be able to secure alternative means of funding.

The second part of the proposal concerned three funding streams: the Community Chest, Development Grants and Core Grants. While the proposal stated a 20% reduction to these funding streams this would require some negotiation with the voluntary sector.

At this point the Executive Member invited questions from the Board.

A Member asked how this proposal impacted Community Councils. It was clarified that funding for Community Councils sat with a different department but there was no intention to cut this. The Council had an experienced grants officer, with the intention they could assist third sector organisations secure funding from places other than the Council.

A Member commented that grants such as those described were important to small grassroots organisations. It was clarified the proposal to eliminate one-off grants would not impact community grants. Rather, grants available to such organisations would be reduced by 20%. The Head of Strategic Commissioning and Procurement stated there was a potential for funding to be redirected to Community Councils and that other sources of funding needed to be examined.

While reducing the grants was not ideal, evaluation of the core grants to MVDA would need to be assessed to see if anything could be re-directed to the grants pot.

A Member queried if the Members Small Scheme allocation existed and where it sat. It was clarified this was a capital scheme and its rationale was the ability for Members to apply for Capital funding. It was limited, with £15,000 per award, per Member, up to a maximum of £60,000. The Executive Member stated she was unsure about the status of the scheme but confirmed it sat in another department.

A Member stated that grassroots community groups, and the grants they were eligible to apply to, were crucial. Residents being able to apply for small grants to undertake small scale community work could have much larger impacts. The Member stated they had contacted the Executive Member separately on this issue and would be disappointed to see such small schemes reduced. The Executive Member commented that other sources of funding may have been available for such schemes, such as Thirteen Group. However, it was suggested that where there was a surplus of Community Council funds, this could be redirected into a separate pot for small grants.

The Chair advised Members that OSB's objective was to consider the budget proposals for Finance and Legal and Governance services and establish if any alternatives could be proposed.

A Member stated there would be a saving of £166,000 by reducing payments to the voluntary and community sector and queried how confident the service was the Grants Officer could secure this money from other sources. It was anticipated the Grants Officer would be able to recover this amount and potentially more. However, it was also commented the Council may not have been maximising its income potential due to a lack of resources with regards to grant funding.

The Executive Member continued with her presentation, explaining proposal FIN11 regarding the closure of cashiers at Middlesbrough House. There were several alternative locations where residents could make payments to the Council, such as pay-point outlets.

The Executive Member proceeded to outline proposals that had minimal impact on frontline service delivery levels. It was suggested that scrutiny examined the rates by which the Council collected debt.

A discussion took place about Single Person Discount and fraudulent activity associated with this. It was confirmed that a third-party solution would be utilised going forward to carry out checks to ensure discounts were applied appropriately.

A Member queried the workings of the table contained in the presentation delivered to OSB. On the one hand the proposals suggested investment in additional staff but also indicated a reduction in staff. It was agreed that clarification on this would be sought and fed back to Members.

The Executive Member continued with her presentation and moved to the Legal and Governance element of the proposals. Like Finance, Legal and Governance were seen as a key enabler for the Council. It was also commented the savings proposals for Legal and Governance did not require any consultation.

A Member commented that staff in Legal and Governance Services, particularly, Democratic Services, were experiencing workload pressures especially with additional tasks surrounding the governance improvement journey. The Member asked this be taken into consideration when discussion budget proposals.

The Executive Member stated she understood that position, but it was unwise for Members to comment on services they had direct contact with as staff across the Council were experiencing similar challenges. The Director of Legal and Governance Services clarified the review being carried out in Democratic Services was associated with the 2023/24 budget and did not fall within the scope of the current budget proposals. It was also clarified that Legal and Governance's budget was largely staffing and that pressures had been experienced in discrete areas. Members were advised that financial difficulties were acute across the Council.

The Executive Member suggested that scrutiny provide feedback on the on the budget consultation process for 2023/24. The Chair agreed that feedback about the budget consultation be brought back to a future meeting of OSB.

AGREED that:

1. Council debt collection rates be considered as a future scrutiny topic for OSB.
2. Clarification be provided relating to staff reductions, especially where investment in staff was cited and to include headcount reductions as well FTE.
3. That feedback about the budget consultation process be brought back to a future meeting of OSB.
4. The information presented be noted.

23/49

SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE

The Chair invited updates from individual Scrutiny Panel Chairs.

Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel had not met since the last meeting of OSB and as such there was no update to provide.

Environment Scrutiny Panel.

At the Panel's last meeting Members received a presentation from Boro Doughnut, a community interest company, about their work in the community. The Panel also discussed a recent site visit to the South Bank recycling centre which proved to be very informative.

Health Scrutiny

At its last meeting the Panel discussed its Final Report into Dental Health and received an update on women's health services from the Integrated Care Board. This included the gaps and stresses placed on the NHS in relation to women's health services. The Panel's next meeting on 16 January would consider the Council's budget proposals as well as information relating to avoidable deaths and preventable mortality.

Regeneration

The Panel had not met since the last OSB meeting and was scheduled to meet on 17 January where the Panel would consider Regeneration's budget proposals and discuss the Panel's review into Planning capacity.

A Member queried if OSB would return to its work programme once budget considerations had been completed. It was confirmed this would be the case.

NOTED

23/50

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED.

10 January 2024

The Chair sought to clarify a point raised at the previous meeting of OSB, where the Health Scrutiny Panel's Final Report into Dental Health and the impact of Covid-19 was considered.

At that meeting OSB endorsed the recommendations in the report with the proviso that any budget implications be included in the recommendations.

The Chair advised that proviso would not be included in the recommendations submitted to Executive as the identification of budget implications was not the role of Scrutiny. Identification of cost or budget implications for scrutiny recommendations was instead the purview of the relevant Service Area and Executive.

NOTED.