

**Minutes of a meeting of Scrutiny Committee for Leader, Finance
and Performance
held on Wednesday, 17th June, 2020
from 4.00 - 5.15 pm**

Present: J Knight (Chair)
M Pulfer (Vice-Chair)

A Bennett	A Eves	L Stockwell
H Brunsdon	S Hicks	C Trumble
R Cartwright	R Jackson	R Whittaker
P Coote	Andrew Lea	
R Cromie	C Phillips	

Also Present as Cabinet Member: Councillors J Ash-Edwards, R Bates, J Belsey, P Bradbury, P Chapman, R Clarke, R de Mierre, I Gibson, S Hatton, J Henwood, S Hillier, C Laband, J Llewellyn-Burke, A MacNaughton, A Peacock, D Sweatman, N Walker and N Webster

Also Present: Councillors J Ash-Edwards, R Bates, J Belsey, P Bradbury, P Chapman, R Clarke, R de Mierre, I Gibson, S Hatton, J Henwood, S Hillier, C Laband, J Llewellyn-Burke, A MacNaughton, A Peacock, D Sweatman, N Walker and N Webster

1 ROLL CALL AND VIRTUAL MEETINGS EXPLANATION.

The Chairman carried out a roll call to establish attendance at the meeting. The Solicitor to the Council provided information on the format of the virtual meeting.

2 TO NOTE SUBSTITUTES IN ACCORDANCE WITH COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 4 - SUBSTITUTES AT MEETINGS OF COMMITTEES ETC.

None.

3 TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE.

None.

4 TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS IN RESPECT OF ANY MATTER ON THE AGENDA.

In relation to item 7 on the agenda, Councillor Andrew Lea and Councillor Brunsdon declared an interest as they are both West Sussex County Councillors.

5 TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15 JANUARY 2020.

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2019 were agreed as a correct record and electronically signed by the Chairman.

6 TO CONSIDER ANY ITEMS THAT THE CHAIRMAN AGREES TO TAKE AS URGENT BUSINESS.

None.

7 FINANCIAL IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS ON THE COUNCIL.

Kathryn Hall, Chief Executive introduced the report and acknowledged that the impact of the Covid 19 crisis is unprecedented, both economically and socially and acknowledged the impact it has had on residents of Mid Sussex.

As the Council has been required by Government to focus all available resources to respond to the crisis, the Chief Executive noted that work in the Corporate Plan has not progressed as intended. As such as revised Corporate Plan is required and the purpose of the report is to provide the Committee with an early opportunity to consider the underlying financial context that will be so important to both the revised Plan, and preparations for the 2021/22 financial year. The Committee will have the opportunity to review things further in August, prior to it being considered by the Cabinet and Full Council in September.

The Leader of the Council noted that the pandemic is not a party-political issue and considering the significant financial impact that is faced from a loss of income, Members need to plan proactively to support the District as a whole. He acknowledged that no organisation can adequately support people unless it has a strong financial position and urged Members to focus on key principles and effective use of resources to prioritise key services that can be provided for local residents.

It was noted by Members that reviving the local economy needs to take high priority. Discussion was held on support that has been provided to businesses and the Head of Corporate Resources confirmed that the Council is using every means possible to contact businesses who are not yet claiming the basic Government grant. Whilst it is too early to assess the impact on unemployment in the District, the Council is seeing an increase in the take-up of support offered to families and households in terms of Council Tax support and benefits.

Discussion was held on shielding numbers which fluctuate during the pandemic, and the impact on housing and homelessness. The Assistant Chief Executive confirmed that the Council is working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government to find longer term solutions for rough sleepers. Work is also continuing with Housing Associations who have mobilised quickly to provide properties to use for temporary accommodation. The Council is also seeking to continue and extend its own initiative to directly provide temporary accommodation. The Cabinet have agreed in principle to make the relevant funds available and a report is being presented to Council in June.

A number of Members sought clarity on the tax base and the Head of Corporate Resources confirmed that both the increase in council tax support claims and the extent to which new building has been halted all contributes to the reduction in the tax base. This affects the District Council and the Town and Parish Councils. He also

noted that there is lobbying within the sector for the Government to remove the cap on a Council Tax raise.

The subject of Leisure Centres was discussed in detail. The Leader noted that the Government's closure of centres is the single biggest financial issue for the Council. With the leisure centres closed there is no income generated, but significant contractual costs related to keeping the centres closed and cost implications for reopening. Local Authorities are lobbying the Government for assistance in meeting these costs. It was noted that there is still uncertainty on how and when centres will open and what services will be practical to provide, as well as uncertainty over the demand from the public. It was noted that the centres provide a key service in terms of the health and wellbeing of residents and the priority is to reopen as soon as it is permitted and safe to do so. In clarifying details of the contract with Places Leisure, the Assistant Chief Executive confirmed that the Council commissioned expert advice and worked with Sport England when establishing the contract and continues to carry out transparent negotiations with Places Leisure, supported by experts, to agree the costs associated with closing and re-opening the centres. A suggestion of a working group was put forward however the Leader noted that the Council needs to act at pace on a short-term solution which may not lend itself to that form of governance.

Discussion was also held on environmental health resources, and close working with contractors and West Sussex County Council in terms of initiatives for safety in the highstreets and litter picking.

In terms of the financial impact faced by the Council, Members sought clarity on the criteria that will be used to prioritise things going forward. The Leader confirmed that the Committee can provide views on priorities for the Cabinet to consider, but noted that it is a dynamic process and too early to be able to provide specific criteria at this stage.

Discussion focussed on the need for close working relationships with West Sussex County Council to ensure a better understanding of each Council's budget implications. A Member requested a review of the paid membership the Council has to various bodies, to ensure that they are value for money. Discussion was held on the use of reserves. The Head of Corporate Resources advised that whilst reserves have not yet had to be used, it is anticipated that some use of reserves in FY 2020/21 will be required, and it would be far greater than has ever been used before, if the current situation continues. A Member suggested that reserves are used advisedly and continue to find innovative solutions to increase income. Caution was advised in considering the realisation of assets in the current economic uncertainty. A report will be presented to Cabinet on 6 July setting out the position of reserves for 2020.

A Member suggested that the Capital Programme is reviewed at the same time as revenue, and that there is focus on waste services, in the hope that the food trial will be resumed, leading to knock on benefits of reduction of the number of waste collections.

The Chairman permitted comment from a Member observing the Committee, who reiterated the need to work closely with the County Council, contractors and Town and Parish Councils when considering priorities going forward.

The Chairman took Members to the recommendations as contained in the report which were agreed unanimously.

RESOLVED

That the Committee discussed the report and request that Cabinet take the minutes of this meeting into consideration to help guide work on the revised 2020/21 Corporate Plan and (in due course) the 2021/22 Corporate Plan and Budget.

8 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR LEADER, FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21.

Tom Clark, Solicitor to the Council introduced the report, informing Members that there will be a special meeting convened in August to discuss the Corporate Plan in further detail. He also corrected an error regarding the date of the March meeting which should read '3 March 2021'.

The Chairman took Members to the recommendation which was agreed unanimously.

RESOLVED

The Committee:

(i) Agreed the Committee's Work Programme as set out at paragraph 5 of the report.

9 QUESTIONS PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 10.2 DUE NOTICE OF WHICH HAS BEEN GIVEN.

None.

The meeting finished at 5.15 pm

Chairman