

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Budget Scrutiny Task and Finish Group meeting with the Leader and Assistant Cabinet Member for Finance

10 January 2023

Councillors: Cllrs Ian McCord, Andrew Grant, Jamal Alwahabi, Sally Beardsworth, Paul Clark, Maggie Clubley, Rupert Frost, Keith Holland-Delamere, Mark Hughes, Koulla Jolley, Ken Pritchard, Azizur Rahman, Danielle Stone

Cabinet Members: Cllr Jonathan Nunn (Leader of the Council) Cllr Kevin Parker (Cabinet Assistant – Finance)

Officers: Martin Henry – Executive Director – Finance (and Chief Finance Officer)
Tracy Tiff – Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Richard Woods – Democratic Services Officer

Overview and Scrutiny Involvement and Engagement

- The Leader of the Council outlined that Budget setting had been extremely difficult this year due to unprecedented challenges beyond the Council's control, namely the cost of living crisis, an increase in demand for services, the cost of purchasing and operating services, a decrease in Covid funding from central Government, and significant inflationary pressures caused by the conflict in Ukraine.
- The Council had reviewed every single penny it spends and receives in order to maximise income and cut down on any unnecessary expenditure, part of this work had been met via the spending restrictions panel, which reviews every single itemised expenditure over £500 across all departments to determine whether it's necessary to delivering the Council's core statutory services.
- A star chamber process had also been undertaken with directors, heads of service and managers in order to identify and maximise possible savings within services.
- Councillor McCord conveyed to the Leader the general consensus among Committee Members was that the scale of the Council's financial deficit was not shared in full with the Committee when the size of the deficit began to become apparent in September 2022. Sharing this information earlier would have led to more transparency and perhaps a more open and coordinated response for all staff and Members to work together to tackle the issues at hand.
- Councillor McCord also added that Cabinet needed to work with Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to improve information sharing, so that when challenges arise in the future they do not come as a surprise, this will improve preparedness, collaboration, and resilience of the wider Council along with establishing more trust between the Cabinet and the backbenches.
- Councillor Beardsworth highlighted that, particularly from an Overview and Scrutiny perspective, the Cabinet should look beyond itself and make use of the knowledge and experience of all Members of the Council.
- Councillor Stone added that a strong relationship between Cabinet and the rest of the elected Members could lead to an improvement in the Council's understanding of the impact its decisions make on the local economy, for example, social value in our contracts.
- Martin Henry, the Executive Director – Finance and Section 151 Officer, added that the Procurement Team now enforce social value principles in all of the Council's contract awards.

- Members of the Committee also expressed a desire to receive an overview of the Council's procurement process, which could be delivered by Gus De Silva, Head of Procurement at a future meeting of the Committee.

Draft Budget Consultation Process

- Members requested that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be provided with the details of the interim consultation reports on the Draft Budget for 2023-24 that have already been provided to Cabinet, in order to provide detail on the emerging themes of the consultation.
- As a result of this request, multiple sets of results detailing responses to the interim Draft Budget Consultation have already been shared with the Committee on a strictly confidential basis.
- The purpose of sharing this information with the Committee was to allow Members to understand how the consultation is progressing and for detailed recommendations on the emerging themes to be drawn up as part of the Committee's response to the draft budget proposals.
- Each update incorporates the most up to date position on the consultation.

Corporate Plan, Strategic Vision and Business Intelligence

- In response to how the strategic plan would deliver the Council's commitment to becoming carbon neutral by 2030, the Leader of the Council advised that West Northamptonshire Council is now a member of UK100, which is a network of local leaders who have pledged to lead a rapid transition to Net Zero with Clean Air in their communities ahead of the government's legal target.
- The Council will be publishing its energy efficiency report on a regular basis in order to understand our carbon footprint, emissions, and progress towards the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.
- In response to questions from the Committee regarding whether there were any capital projects in progress in order to assist in achieving this goal, the Leader of the Council advised that work was underway to understand how Capital Budgets could be earmarked for such work, however in the immediate future there were plans to add more solar panels to the roof of One Angel Square, and to make the best use of our buildings estate as part of the ongoing office optimisation project.
- Members of the Committee requested that the Leader of the Council set out what the role of the Business Intelligence Team is, and whether the Cabinet is content that the Council is using the Business Intelligence function to its maximum in setting the draft budget for 2023-24.
- In response to this point, the Leader of the Council explained that the Business Intelligence service interacts with all other services Council-wide, in order to pull together performance data to ensure that services are performing well and that identified priorities are being monitored and delivered against.
- The Executive Director – Finance also explained that performance was monitored within services and owned by service directors, and that performance data was also fed into the Executive Programme Board and Executive Leadership Team.
- The Committee also requested further information on the Council's strategic vision regarding transport, in particular collaborative working in relation to home to school transport.

- The Leader of the Council explained that the Home to School Transport service for the whole County was hosted by West Northamptonshire Council and provided to North Northamptonshire Council, however this had recently been disaggregated.
- Home to School Transport currently provided the following services:
 - *Home to school transport for pupils of statutory school age (4 – 16 inclusive) under s509 of the Education Act 1996.*
 - *Pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) of statutory school age*
 - *Students aged 16-18 in further education and continuing students aged 19 and over*
 - *Children’s Social Care Transport, including respite care transport and family visits*
 - *Adult Social Care Transport*
- A number of different services were dependent on the Home to School Transport Service, which included but were not limited to:
 - *Northamptonshire Children’s Trust (NCT)*
 - *Adult Social Care Service*
 - *Schools and Colleges*
 - *Respite Centres*
 - *Adult day centres*
 - *Children’s Contact Centres*
- Following disaggregation, a collaboration agreement was entered into between WNC and NNC to enable support between each team to ensure that expertise from both teams is shared collectively whilst the new teams for West and North establish themselves.