

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 January 2014

PRESENT – Councillor Long (in the Chair); Councillors Baldwin, Carson, Cossins, Harman, L. Hughes, Lawton and Wright. (8)

APOLOGIES - Councillors Grundy, Lewis and E.A. Richmond. (3)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillor Hutchinson. (1)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson, Assistant Director – Community Services, Steve Petch, Head of Strategy and Commissioning and Lead Officer for Place Scrutiny, Brian Graham, Head of Environmental Services, Sharon Raine, Head of Organisational Planning and Karen Graves, Democratic Services.

P31 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS – There were no declarations of interested reported at the meeting.

P32. MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2014/15 – 2019/20 – Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet, at its meeting held on 13th November, 2013, proposing a Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2014/15 to 2019/20 for public consultation.

It was reported that, if approved, the Plan would put in place a two year sustainable plan together with proposals that would significantly contribute to bridging the budget gap in years three and beyond and would give the Council, its partners and the public, the opportunity to test out new approaches and build learning and capacity to deliver financial sustainability beyond 2016/17.

Particular reference was made to the use of reserves over the next two year to bridge the budget deficit and it was highlighted that the Council was carrying a very significant risk in terms of the need to reduce expenditure and that it was essential that cost reductions were delivered on time so that the level of reserves did not become inadequate in future years. It was reported that there were options available if the proposals were not achieved to further reduce expenditure by looking at the future provision of discretionary services which, at this point, it was still proposed to retain if the proposals were not achieved. Officers were, however, optimistic that the proposals would be achieved and there was a clear intention and vision to ensure they were. It was requested that Scrutiny Committees, as part of their work programmes, look and highlight any additional potential areas which could be identified to bridge the gap from 2016/17 and beyond and the vigorous and pro-active approach needed by this Scrutiny Committee to support the implementation.

The submitted report also made reference to the three building blocks of Building Strong Communities, Spending Wisely and Growing the Economy. Members discussed the changing role of Councillors in assisting with Building Strong Communities and some of the difficulties which might be encountered in particular wards and

communities in taking forward community leadership and ownership and how Officers could support them in that changing role.

It was also stated that each Scrutiny Committee had a role in looking at specific areas within their individual remits. It was reported that the findings following any work would be reported back to a special meeting of Efficiency and Resources Scrutiny Committee which would co-ordinate a response to Cabinet and also to formulate an early view on the strategy and the direction of travel; the use of reserves and the risks over the next two-year period.

The Head of Organisational Planning tabled the current feedback received from the public consultation on the budget proposals which ends on 10th January 2014. Members noted that there had been 167 responses received to date and that a full analysis of the responses would be carried out after the consultation had closed and shared with Members. The highest percentages of responses in support of the proposals were in relation to restructuring the Council's workforce, reshaping services at the Dolphin Centre and Eastbourne Sports Complex and CCTV. The highest percentage of responses not in support of the proposals related to reducing the hours at Crown Street Library, increasing the Council Tax to two per cent and above.

Members expressed concerns at the low level of responses and felt that it would be difficult to analyse and gauge a full picture of public opinion across the Borough. The Head of Organisational Planning agreed advising that it provided a sense of the feeling of some residents and that there were no surprises in relation to the Council Tax proposals. It was also stated that the consultation was advertised on the Council's website, social media, Facebook, Twitter and the Darlington Together magazine and live immediately after the Cabinet meeting in November 2013.

Members were advised that in relation to environmental services the three key areas for today's meeting were public involvement and demand reduction in street cleansing and parks and open spaces, public sector collaboration and joint commissioning and service redesigns with savings of £1.2m needing to be made.

Members were advised that Alternate Weekly Collection had already been approved by Cabinet resulting in a saving of £400k per annum, discussions were being held with Tees Valley Councils for potential partnership working around waste collection and disposal, two projects were currently underway to encourage businesses and communities to take more responsibility for their environments by reducing the amount of litter dropped and taking part in litter picks and adopting parcels of land to maintain. It was also stated that it was proposed that a levy would be applied to new housing developments, through the planning process, to be used for maintenance of certain areas to ensure that open spaces would not always be maintained by Darlington Borough Council. Consideration was also being given to the transfer of assets to Community and Friends Groups for maintenance.

Scrutiny were advised of the establishment of a Project Team to give consideration to Grounds Maintenance and Litter Reduction which would be considered by this Scrutiny once the Project Initiation Documents (PID) had been agreed.

Discussion ensued on the need to make the public aware of the effects the austerity measures are having on the services provided by the Council and how they can help to

alleviate any associated problems. If the public need to get involved if the same level of service is to be provided however, some elements of certain services would need to be retained by the Council, such as gulley cleaning, due to the machinery involved. It was suggested that schools and colleges could be encouraged to undertake a project around litter and recycling waste as it was understood that children encouraged parents. Social media was recognised as an excellent tool for getting the message across which cost nothing and was accessed by many.

Reference was made to legislation in America whereby 5 cents was given to anyone who deposited an empty pop can into machines located in various areas, this initiative had greatly reduced littering and gave both adults and children, who collected empty cans for the reward, an incentive not to litter.

RESOLVED – (a) That the proposals in the Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/15 to 2019/20 in relation to this Scrutiny's remit be noted.

(b) That this Scrutiny Committee welcomes the ethos of Building Strong Communities, Spending Wisely and Growing the Economy throughout the MTFP proposals.

(c) That the findings of the Your Darlington Residents Survey consultation be submitted to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee and that any further Scrutiny be undertaken as necessary.

(d) That a Review Group be established to give consideration to Litter Reduction and Grounds Maintenance and a Quad of Aims be prepared for consideration by Monitoring and Co-ordination Committee.