

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 April 2016

PRESENT – Councillor Carson (in the Chair); Councillors MR Nicholson and Wright., (3)

APOLOGIES – Councillors Baldwin, Cossins, Donoghue, Grundy, L Hughes KE Kelly, Lyonette, and York. (8)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE –

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – John Anderson, Assistant Director – Economic Initiative, Bill Westland, Assistant Director – Regulatory Services, Elizabeth Davison, Assistant Director Finance and Human Resources, Steve Petch, Place Strategy Manager and Lead Officer, David Burrell, Private Sector Housing Manager, Eleanor Walker, Communications Officer and Karen Graves, Democratic Officer.

P47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – There were no declarations of interests reported at the meeting.

P48. MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2016/17 TO 2019/20 – The Scrutiny Committee met to discuss those proposals contained in phase 2 of the next round of spending reductions as contained within the Medium Term Financial Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20, which were specifically under its remit.

The Assistant Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources gave a brief presentation on the details within phase 2 of the Medium Term Financial plan 2016/17 to 2019/20, which was currently out to consultation.

Discussion ensued on the need for accurate forecasts as the proposals were for a four year budget. A planned approach was required as there were no guarantees of Government Grants during that period.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the following proposals in relation to the core Offer and the Impact Assessment Forms :-

ER1 and Mc1 – Planning Policy Development Management and Core Planning Team - Detailed information on the services which the Council was legally required to provide and how those services were currently provided and resourced were contained in the core offer.

It was reported that the core offer for the planning service reflected the minimum service requirements to fulfil the statutory duties of the legislation and was reflective of current workloads relative to the local economy, Local Plan making and other processes.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to a service review, leading to a team restructure and better use of IT Systems, could achieve savings of £180k but as there was no added resources for Neighbourhood Planning, or any initiatives emerging from the Housing and Planning Bill, additional pressures could be experienced.

Members were informed that the Council was currently exploring working with ATLAS, an independent advisory service established by the Government, which provided external help and support during preparation of the Local Plan.

ER9 – Tees Valley Unlimited – It was reported that the core offer for the Tees Valley Unlimited was an agreed contribution towards the core costs of the Tees Valley Combined Authority. The five boroughs within the Tees Valley make a contribution based on population and jobs and Darlington's contribution was £388,149.

Mc2 – Economic Initiative and Regeneration – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to cease economic initiative and regeneration activity achieving a net budget reduction in 2016/17 of £212,532 and £960,964 in 2020/21. Details were supplied of the risks associated with no economic initiative and regeneration activity including a decline in the economic momentum, reliance on a reactive planning service and constrained funding opportunities.

Discussion ensued on the impact of the skills agenda moving to Tees Valley Combined Authority and the need to retain an Economic Initiative and Regeneration Team to encourage economic growth in the Borough.

Futures Fund – Economic Regeneration Team - Reference was made to the proposal to include, in the Futures Fund, a budget of £350,000 to enable teams, smaller than the existing teams, to deliver external funding, business engagement and investments plans such as Central Park and bring forward new initiatives that would generate more private sector investment in the Borough to create jobs and increase business rates income.

Mc10 – Christmas Lights – Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to cease providing Christmas lighting for the Town achieving a net reduction in 2017/18 of £35,093 and £36,114 by 2020/21. It was stated that the cost covered management, storage, repair and installation of the lighting and that discussions were ongoing with Town Centre Traders and Distinct Darlington Board to retain the lighting.

Discussion ensued on the need to retain the lights as they encouraged retail shopping to the Town Centre during the festive period.

ER2 and Mc9 – Flood and Water Management – It was reported that the core offer budget was statutory to investigate and report on flooding incidents, to compile and publish a register of assets and features (such as weirs) that can impact on flooding, to process applications for consents to work on water courses, to develop strategies to deal with flooding and to assess drainage proposals for major developments. The duties are mainly delivered by Stockton Borough Council through a contractual arrangement.

It was reported that the Council was also required to contribute to the Local Levy, a fund held by the Environment Agency and managed by a regional committee, to pay for works to reduce flood risk.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce the Flood and Water Management Act budget by £20,000 as there has been underspending on the Stockton contract achieving a net reduction in 2017/18 of £20,665 and £20,633 by 2020/21. The Local Levy contribution will remain unchanged.

Following a question Members were informed that the Stockton contract contribution was £80k.

ER3 and Mc4 Trading Standards and Animal Health – It was reported that the core offer budget for trading standards and animal health was a duty of the authority to enforce Trading Standards legislation across several key areas. This is achieved by a mixture of reactive and proactive work. Reactive work involves investigating and responding to complaints and enquiries from residents and businesses; proactive work includes programmed inspections of businesses and farms in Darlington.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce staffing levels and budget subscriptions which it was expected would see a net reduction of £36,107 in 2020/21.

Following a question, Members were advised that, in relation to animal health and welfare, sufficient monitoring would still take place to alleviate any instances of disease such as foot and mouth, that there was always a presence at the Cattle Mart to ensure legal movement of animals and farms were visited regularly.

ER4 and Mc5 – Building Control – It was reported that the core offer budget for building control was a minimum officer resource to meet the Council's statutory obligations to enforce Building Regulations and associated statutory duties including safety of sports grounds, dangerous structures, demolitions, scaffolding and hoardings.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce staffing levels and to use the private sector when work peaks cannot be managed which it was expected would see a net budget reduction by 2020/21 of £5,158.

ER5 and Mc8 – Private Sector Housing – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for private sector housing which was a statutory duty under Housing and Public Health legislation to enforce housing and public health standards in all housing tenures. It was stated that Houses in Multiple Occupation and lower-end rentals created the most workload for Officers.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce staffing levels which it was expected would see a net budget reduction of £14,622 in 2016/17 and £19,601 by 2020/21.

Following a question Members were advised that there had been no significant increase in the amount of empty properties in the Borough, complaints averaged 20 to 30 per year and a basic advice and boarding up service was provided. Visits to some empty homes were currently undertaken by the Revenue and Benefits Team.

ER6 and Mc7 – Environmental Health – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for environmental health services providing enforcement of air pollution, smoke free legislation, contaminated land, noise, food safety, health and safety, pest control service, drinking water, public health and infectious disease and investigation of nuisance. The service also responded to consultations from Planning and Licensing Teams and implemented the Council’s unauthorised encampments policy.

Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce staffing levels which it was expected would see a net budget reduction of £30,982 by 2020/21.

Discussion ensued on staff reduction of 30 per cent over recent years resulting in the basic minimum of staff resources to undertake the functions of the service. It was stated that at peak times some programmed inspections may need to be outsourced, time was limited to work with businesses to develop their proposals and some external resource may need to be bought in to ensure that statutory minimum number of inspections are carried out.

In relation to infection control Scrutiny was informed a partnership approach existed with Public Health England, local NHS and Environmental Health and all had different roles.

ER7 – Civil Contingencies – Details were supplied of the core offer budget which was a statutory duty under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to risk assess, plan, train and exercise in preparation for emergencies. Costs have been reduced through the contract with Durham County Council to deliver services on our behalf.

ER8 – Licensing – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for licensing which was a statutory function to administer and regulate a range of licensable activities including the provision of taxis, licensing of premises (including the sale of alcohol, late night refreshment and gambling) and people (scrap metal dealers, taxi drivers and street traders).

Members were informed that the licensing function was income generated and cost neutral to the Council as licensing fees were either set by statute or based only on cost recovery. Each Licensing budget was ring fenced and if costs are reduced, non-statutory fees to applicants must be reduced accordingly. Savings cannot therefore be achieved from the licensing budgets.

ER10 – CCTV – Details were supplied of the core offer budget for the CCTV service which included the operation, maintenance and monitoring of the cameras in public areas, systems within the Town Hall, Department for Education building and Allington Way Depot. It also provides CCTV monitoring for the new Multi Storey Car Park and operates as the help facility for customers of the car park (24/7). The service provides intruder, fire, panic and lift alarm monitoring along with lone working and out-of-hours contact for Council staff. It also acts as the contact centre for the Lifeline service, emergency out of hours for Council functions including housing repairs, highways emergencies and stray animals.

The CCTV function also provides a number of commercial services through contracts with partners and external bodies and manages the electronic bollards to control access to the pedestrian heart within the Town Centre.

Scrutiny was informed that an Invest to Save proposal was currently being investigated by converting the cameras to a wireless network transmission which would ensure the continuing reliability of the service and eventually save £50k per annum on net cost

Following a question, Members were informed that Durham Constabulary respect and use the CCTV service but do not currently contribute, although a contribution of £25k had been received in the past, and that negotiations with the new Chief Superintendent were required to seek further contributions.

LLE7 – Coroners – Scrutiny Committee was advised that the Council was obliged to pay a percentage of Durham County Council's bill for the Coroners services that serve both Local Authority areas. The cost is not a fixed fee but reflects actual work done and is outside of Darlington Borough Council control.

Mc3 – Management Restructure Regulatory Services - Reference was made to the impact assessment in relation to the proposal to reduce staffing levels which it was expected would see a net budget reduction of £134,113 by 2020/21.

Members were informed that the proposal to delete three Heads of Service Posts in Regulatory Services, merge the functions under the remaining Heads of Service, upgrade one front line Officer post to a Principal Officer and merge CCTV Manager and Parking Enforcement Co-ordinator Posts would have little direct impact on front line services which was already at the statutory minimum.

It was stated that a review of the Public Events Safety Advisory Group would provide a leaner self-help service to small events.

RESOLVED – That the information provided at this stage be noted.
