

HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Friday, 10 January 2020

PRESENT – Councillors Clarke, Donoghue, Heslop, McEwan, Newall and Wright

APOLOGIES – Councillors Bell, Layton and Lee

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Paul Wildsmith (Managing Director), Elizabeth Davison (Assistant Director Resources), Pauline Mitchell (Assistant Director Housing and Building Services) and Hannah Fay (Democratic Officer)

HH38 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

HH39 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP)

Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 7 January, 2020 in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2020/21 to 2023/24, including setting a budget and council tax increase for 2020/21.

The submitted report outlined details of the core offer budget, which had been agreed following a significant consultation exercise in 2016 and allowed reduced expenditure and services to a risk based minimum level with a small investment fund (The Futures Fund) of £2.5 million per year. It was noted that in subsequent MTFP's unallocated balances of £4.7m was invested in five areas, namely Community Safety, maintaining an attractive street scene, maintaining a vibrant town centre, developing an attractive visitor economy and neighbourhood renewal.

The submitted report highlighted areas of saving within the plan and areas of pressure; and Members noted the projected expenditure for 2020/21 of just under £90 million.

Reference was made to projected income, including core grant funding to Local Government, additional funding announced in the Spending Review and increase in the Council Tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), all of which would provide an increase in income over the period of the MTFP. Members noted the projected income of £90 million for 2020/21.

The Assistant Director Resources highlighted that by 2023/24 the projected general fund balance was £6.075 million however this relied on building 430 houses per year, no significant overspending, assumptions of additional income in the spending review materialising, a Council Tax increase of 2.00% and an adult social care precept of 2.00% giving an overall increased to Council tax of 4.00%.

Reference was made to the Future Funds allocation, with £4.7 million allocated in 2018/19; to date £2.081 million had been committed to the futures fund themes with a balance of £1.019 million remaining; and Members noted that in order to stimulate growth and invest in our communities over the period of the plan, Cabinet had agreed

that the Futures Fund themes be bolstered by £1.8 million.

Members raised concern in respect of the Public Health funding and proposals to realign Public Health budgets which could result in a loss of funding to the Tees Valley.

RESOLVED – That this Scrutiny Committee has no comment to make on the proposed schedule of fees and charges for those services within its remit and supports the Council Tax increase of 2.00 per cent plus the 2.00 per cent adult social care precept for the next financial year and Futures Fund investment of £1.8 million.

HH40 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 7 January 2020, to propose the revenue budget, rent levels and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2020/21 in the context of the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan to 2023/24 and the 30-year Business Plan.

It was reported that for the first time since 2016/17 the Council had been given the discretion to inflate rents by CPI plus one per cent which equated to an average weekly rent increase of 2.7% for 2020/21, with average social rent of £71.30 and affordable rent of £82.55. Members were advised that 68% of tenants would have their rent and most services charges covered by Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.

The Assistant Director Housing and Building Services reported that the Government had also lifted the borrowing cap on the HRA, enabling the Council to borrow an extra £9million to fund the housing capital programme; and that this could be supplemented with Homes England grant with the overall plan being to provide 100 affordable homes per annum for the next ten years. It was also reported that over 220 households had already benefitted from the Council's current new build programme which had taken place at various locations around town and demand for these houses continued to be exceptionally high.

Details were provided on the priorities identified within the Housing Business Plan and particular reference was made to the investment in housing stock, with Northgate ward identified as a key area for investment.

A discussion ensued in respect of the feasibility of purchasing properties which had been subjected to recent drug raids in the town. It was reported that the Council would work with landlords to raise the standards of properties in the borough; had considered work undertaken to improve housing standards in other areas in the North East; and Members noted that two properties on Skinnergate had been purchased to be developed into a mixture of houses and apartments, helping to improve the general amenity of the Skinnergate area whilst increasing residential occupation.

RESOLVED – That this Scrutiny Committee supports the average weekly rent increase of 2.7 per cent for 2020/21, increases to the garage rents and services charges, the budget and Housing Business Plan, as appended to the submitted report.

HH41 COUNCIL PLAN 2020/23

Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 7 January, 2020 in relation to the Council Plan 2020-2023.

It was reported that the Council Plan set out a proposed vision for the Council and key actions the Council would take to achieve that vision; supported the key aims of the Community Strategy – One Darlington Perfectly Placed, building on the work undertaken in previous years; and progress against the plan would be reported to Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees on a 6 monthly basis.

Discussion ensued on the Darlington Oral Health Plan 2017-2022 and Members requested an update in respect of fluoridisation.

Following a question Members were advised that the Council commissioned a range of housing support services in order to prevent homelessness and a briefing session on homelessness had been arranged for Members.

RESOLVED – (a) That this Scrutiny Committee has no comment to make on the Council Plan 2020-2023.

(b) That Members receive an update on fluoridisation.