

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 6 January 2022

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS WAS NOT A FORMALLY CONSTITUTED MEETING, AND THAT THIS IS A 'NOTE' OF THE INFORMAL MEETING THAT TOOK PLACE.

PRESENT – Councillors Tait (Chair), Allen, Bartch, Cossins, Mrs Culley, Donoghue, Haszeldine, B Jones, McCollom and Willis

ABSENT – Councillor Wallis

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Dulston and Keir

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Elizabeth Davison (Group Director of Operations), Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources), Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services) and Hannah Miller (Democratic Officer)

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Assistant Director Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that Members give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2022/23 to 2025/26.

In introducing the report, the Group Director of Operations reminded Members of the MTFP Briefing that was delivered to Members in December outlining the overall position of the MTFP, and advised that Members now had the opportunity to ask questions relating to the remit of this Scrutiny Committee and to forward any views or comments to the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee for consideration at its meeting scheduled to be held on 20 January 2022.

The Group Director of Operations provided an update on the finance settlement which had been received subsequent to the draft MTFP.

It was reported that the Council Tax and Precept levels remained as expected at 2 per cent and 1 per cent respectively; that the £1.5B additional funding announced in the Autumn Statement had been split into £822M Services Grant and £636M Social Care Grant; the Council would be receiving £1.579M from the Services Grant and £1.162M from the Social Care Grant, which was higher than the estimate included within the draft MTFP; and Members were advised that the Services Grant was a one-off payment whilst a further review of Local Government funding was conducted.

Members were also advised that the New Homes Bonus had been extended for a further year, and that this would net a further £1.4M above anticipated levels. It was reported that there were also a number of deductions from initial draft figures, however overall there

would be an additional £1.073M funding for 2022/23.

Discussion ensued regarding staffing savings within Children's Social Care and the provision of home carers; and Members sought clarification regarding increased demand in relation to Highways - responsive repairs.

Following a question regarding the provision for increasing staffing levels on the ground, with particular reference made to the arboricultural team, the Assistant Director Community Services advised Members that there was provision in the budget to recruit additional arboricultural officers; recruitment to these posts had been challenging however the posts had been reviewed and recruitment would continue.

Discussion also ensued regarding the Futures Fund and impacts of this being mainstreamed into the budget from 2025/26 onwards; the anticipated allocation of the additional £1.073M from the settlement; and Members sought clarification in respect of the allocation of the £310M that the Tees Valley Combined Authority had been allocated from the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That this Scrutiny Committee has no comment to make on the MTFP 2022/23 to 2025/26.

(b) That the Chair, in consultation with the Lead Scrutiny Officers supporting this Scrutiny Committee, be given authority to agree the Notes of this Meeting of the Committee, to enable the Notes to be considered at a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, scheduled to be held on 20 January 2022.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES FUND

The Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the spend to date against the Stronger Communities Fund and requesting that Members give consideration to continuation of the pilot scheme into the next financial year.

In introducing the report the Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder advised Members that the fund had been introduced to give all Councillors autonomy within their community to support local projects and community groups at a grass roots level and Members were requested to provide feedback in respect of the process.

The submitted report stated that Cabinet agreed, at its meeting held on 13 April 2021, to establish a pilot scheme enabling Members to use an allocated amount of money to deliver the objectives of building stronger communities; that each Councillor had been allocated £1k; and details were provided of the spend against the £50k to date, together with information on what had been delivered in wards on an individual Councillor basis.

Following a question the Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder advised Members that the £1K should be spent before the end of the financial year; and that any funding not spent by Members may be carried forward to the next financial year however Members individual budget would remain at £1K.

Members felt that the deadlines and timescales for the process should be clearer and acknowledged the Credit Union and Democratic Services for their support with the process; and discussion ensued regarding the key themes from Members allocations.

Following a question regarding the possibility of training for Members to identify and access other funding opportunities to help local projects and community groups, the Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder advised Members that discussions were ongoing to identify how the Council could support not only Members but residents to access funding opportunities; and it was suggested that an All Member briefing be arranged to help Councillors identify and access support for local communities.

Members expressed their views regarding the continuation of the scheme in 2022/23.

IT WAS AGREED – (a) That the current spend against the £50k be noted.

(b) That the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee be advised that the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee support the continuation of the scheme in the 2022/23 financial year.