

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 November 2020

Present: Councillor J Williamson (Chair)

Councillors A Leech C Spriggs
JE Green T Usher
P Gilchrist T Anderson
P Cleary W Clements
M McLaughlin A Hodson
J McManus L Rennie
Y Nolan C Carubia
P Stuart

Deputy: Councillor J Robinson (In place of EA Grey)

13 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

14 APOLOGIES

The Chair announced that apologies had been received from Councillor Elizabeth Grey, and Councillor Jean Robinson was deputising for her.

15 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests and any other relevant interest and to state the nature of the interest.

Councillor Moira McLaughlin declared a personal interest in respect of agenda item 6 'The Provision of Food and Other Activities for Children in School Holidays during the Covid-19 Pandemic' by virtue of her being a trustee of Feeding Birkenhead, Supporting Wirral and the Citizens Supermarket.

Councillor Julie McManus declared a personal interest in agenda item 6 'The Provision of Food and Other Activities for Children in School Holidays during the Covid-19 Pandemic' by virtue of her work with the Little Centre Beechwood and her membership of the Gautby Road Play and Community Centre Joint Management Committee.

16 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 October, 2020, be approved and adopted as a correct record.

17 PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS

The Chair reported that no questions from either members of the public or Members had been submitted. Nor were there any statements or petitions to receive.

18 THE PROVISION OF FOOD AND ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN IN SCHOOL HOLIDAYS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Chair introduced this item and referred to the Government's recent reversal of its policy on provision of free school meals during school holidays, which had occurred after this report had been written and published.

The Director for Children, Families and Education, Paul Boyce, provided the Committee with an overview of the provision of free school meals (FSM) in school holidays during the Covid-19 emergency pandemic since March. The report also sets out proposals for the funding of FSM between Christmas and the end of the Easter holidays in 2021 and recommended a process for the development of a sustainable approach to the provision of FSM and support to eligible children in the medium and longer term.

With regard to the recent Government announcement he confirmed that there would be three separate funding streams:

- A Winter grant of £1.224m (from a £170m grant for English local authorities) for food, heating and wider support from Christmas to Easter for poorer families, including vulnerable families with children receiving FSM.
- A Holiday Activities and Food Programme of £220m, distributed between English local authorities to run from Easter to Christmas 2021.
- An extension to the 'Healthy Start' programme for low income pregnant women and those with children under 4, with an increase from £3.10 to £4.25 a week from April 2021.

Paul Boyce suggested that, as greater clarity with regard to the newly announced Government funding streams was yet to be provided, it would be prudent to agree the recommendations and set aside the £200,000 Tranche 4 of Government Covid-19 funding, as detailed in the report.

The Committee debated the matter at some length and expressed their gratitude to all those community groups, including Feeding Birkenhead, involved in supporting vulnerable residents. Members also acknowledged the support required by residents struggling in all areas of the borough, including more affluent areas and the need to consider support for families where children were not necessarily in receipt of FSM.

On a motion by Councillor Julie McManus, seconded by Councillor Phil Gilchrist, it was -

Resolved – That,

- (1) the proposal to provide funding for Free School Meals (FSM) during school holidays up until the end of 2021 Easter holidays, be agreed.**
- (2) the Children, Young People and Education Committee be asked to develop proposals for consideration by the Policy and Resources Committee on a sustainable approach for the provision of FSM and support to eligible children in the medium and long term, including children who are not necessarily in receipt of FSM.**

19 **COMMUNITY LAND TRUST LTD - TRANSFER OF 78-80 NEW CHESTER ROAD, NEW FERRY**

David Armstrong, Assistant Chief Executive, introduced a report from the Director of Regeneration and Place which sought approval to dispose of the freehold interest of 78-80 New Chester Road, New Ferry, at nominal value, to New Ferry Community Land Trust Limited (CLT), following the refurbishment and renovation of the property. This followed the purchase of the property on behalf of the CLT for the purposes of carrying out a scheme of refurbishment to bring the building back into use, using the Liverpool City Region (LCR) Combined Authority Town Centre Fund.

The Chair thanked David Armstrong and all the officers involved in the work at New Ferry and commented that all the ward councillor were supportive of this proposal.

Resolved - That the Director of Law and Governance, in consultation with the Director of Regeneration and Place, be authorised to enter into a legal agreement with New Ferry Community Land Trust Ltd which requires the property to be renovated and refurbished to an acceptable standard, following which, the freehold of the property will be transferred to the CLT at nominal consideration, subject to the recipient meeting agreed conditions.

20 **ESTABLISHMENT OF A LOCAL PLAN WORKING GROUP**

Vicki Shaw, Head of Legal Services, introduced a report from the Director of Law and Governance on the establishment of a Local Plan Steering Sub-Committee along with a Local Plan Working Group with the same membership.

The Committee, at its previous meeting on 7 October, 2020 had resolved to recommend to Council that, as with the previous Local Plan Advisory Group,

all political groups on the Council should be represented on the new Local Plan Sub-Committee. This recommendation was unanimously approved by Council, at its meeting on 19 October, 2020. This was on the understanding that the membership of the Working Group would mirror that of the Local Plan Steering Sub-Committee.

The Local Plan Working Group would enable a continuation of the detailed consideration, guidance and support for the production of the Wirral Local Plan previously undertaken by the former Local Plan Member Advisory Group.

On a motion by Councillor Anita Leech, seconded by the Chair, it was -

Resolved – That,

- (1) the Local Plan Working Group be established with the Terms of Reference as attached to the Director’s report at Appendix 1, subject to an amendment to the quorum required being three and not four Members;**
- (2) the Monitoring Officer be authorised as proper officer to carry out the wishes of the Group Leaders in allocating Members of the Policy and Resources Committee to membership and substitute membership of the Local Plan Steering Sub-Committee and the Local Plan Working Group and to appoint those Members with effect from the date at which the proper officer is advised of the names of such Members;**
- (3) for clarity, both the Sub-Committee and Working Group will be time limited until the adoption of the Local Plan by the Council.**

21 2020/21 REVENUE BUDGET MONITOR FOR QUARTER TWO (APR - SEP)

Shaer Halewood, Director of Resources, introduced a report which provided a summary of the projected year-end revenue position as at the end of Quarter 2 (September 2020) of the 2020/21 financial year, including:

- the financial risk profile presented by the COVID-19 pandemic
- a review of pressures and savings contained within the original budget position and
- an update to the Medium Term Financial Plan.

The year-end forecast recorded as part of September’s financial monitoring activity represented an adverse variance to revenue budget of £24.074m; this comprised:

- £21.448m adverse forecast variance in relation to revenue budget, stemming largely from matters arising through the COVID-19 pandemic.
- £2.480m forecast deficit on expected capital receipts, which support the revenue budget position via flexible use of capital receipts and;
- £0.145m gap in direct COVID-19 funding against forecast requirements.

The Government had recently announced further funding for Wirral of £5.428m for a Tranche 4 allocation, and £9.3m mitigations for Sales, Fees and Charges losses, which the Council was awaiting receipt.

The Council's financial position remained challenging and to a certain degree uncertain, with work underway to develop response activity following the initiation of Tier 3 status in the Liverpool City Region whilst details of the forthcoming Spending Round were awaited in relation to 2021/22 funding.

The financial position was fluid and developing with the government having stated its continuing support to the sector. That said, the Council continued to limit spending to essential areas of service delivery only and Corporate Directors were supported to mitigate the risk of overspending.

Shaer Halewood responded to a number of comments and questions from Members and agreed that she would circulate the letter which the Chief Executive had received from the Council's external auditors, Grant Thornton, in which concern had been expressed over the Council's financial position. She acknowledged the difficulties arising from the one year budget settlement which was due to be given on 25 November. Nothing had yet been received in writing from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the capitalisation directive application which had been submitted in the sum of £63.5m covering this year and next, 2020/21 and 2021/22, with an indicative plan to achieve this sum over the next five years based around outcomes for residents.

During the debate on this item, Members expressed their thanks to the Director of Children, Education and Families, all his staff and the two previous Cabinet portfolio holders for Children's and Families, following the recent announcement that Children's Services had now been brought out of special measures.

Paul Boyce, in response to a Member's comment, agreed that he would circulate a response on the number of children with special needs in residential care and where they had been placed and the alternative residential provision being pursued.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Anita Leech, it was -

A. Resolved - That the Policy and Resources Committee:

- (1) notes the year-end forecast position at Quarter 2 of £24.074m adverse;**
- (2) notes the risks posed to delivering on the savings proposals within the 2020-21 budget;**
- (3) notes the impact of funding and expenditure as a direct consequence of COVID-19, including the additional funding sources which have been identified, but as yet, not received;**
- (4) notes the revisions to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2020-2025.**

B. RECOMMENDED - To Council the increased budget in relation to Covid-19 funding of £42.538m, which is for Council use and note the additional £132.793m of funds that is to be made available to the Council for onward relay to other organisations as passported funding; a total sum of £175.33m is therefore the combined Covid-19 funding being received by the Council based on current information. This recommendation supersedes the recommendation made by Policy and Resources Committee on 7 October, following the recent notification of additional funding.

The Chair then adjourned the meeting at 7.45pm for 10 minutes.

The meeting resumed at 7.58pm.

22 CAPITAL MONITORING QUARTER 2 2020/21

Shaer Halewood, Director of Resources, provided an update on the progress of the Capital Programme 2020/21 at the end of September 2020. The report recommended that the Committee agree the revised 2020/21 Capital Programme of £95.1 million which took account of re-profiling, virements, additional funding requirements and grant variations identified since the Capital Programme was formally agreed on 2 March 2020.

Shaer Halewood responded to a number of comments in respect of some of the schemes to receive additional funding and David Armstrong, Assistant Chief Executive, clarified the position with regard to the reasons for additional expenditure from virements required for the West Kirby Sailing School.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Jeff Green, it was -

A. RECOMMENDED –

(1) to Council the approval of additional funding for the schemes detailed in paragraph 3.5 of the report as follows:

- Children’s System Rationalisation - £0.826m (over a three year period)
- Tree Strategy Delivery - £0.208m (over a four year period)
- Allotments Sites Expansion - £0.127m
- Birkenhead Temporary Market Pre-Development Costs - £50,000
- Concerto Development Asset Management System - £42,000 (over a two year period)
- Capitalisation of Salaries - £0.5m

(2) to Council the approval of the revised Capital Programme of £95.1 million for 2020-21, including the virements referred to in paragraph 3.7 of the report.

B. Resolved – That this Committee agrees that the outcome of the on-going review and reprofiling of the Capital Programme is reported to members in the next quarterly capital monitoring report.

23 **COUNCIL TAX BASE REPORT 2021/2022 (TAX BASE, DISCOUNTS AND EXEMPTIONS AND LOCAL COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME)**

A report by the Director of Resources brought together related issues regarding the proposed Council Tax Base for 2021/22 upon which the annual billing and Council Tax levels would be set; the proposed Council Tax Discounts including Local Discounts, exemptions for 2021/22 and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to be used during 2021/22. These needed to be approved by Council by 31 January 2021.

RECOMMENDED - To Council the following:

- (1) The figure of 94,198.6 be approved as the Council Tax Base for 2021/22 subject to the items below being approved;
- (2) The level and award of each local discount for 2021/22 be:

Wirral Women’s & Children’s Aid

To continue to award Wirral Women & Children’s Aid 100% discount. This remains unchanged from 2020/21.

Care Leaver's Discount

To award Care Leavers the requisite discount to reduce their Council Tax liability to zero until they are 25. This remains unchanged from 2020/21.

Empty Property Discounts

Discount category D = 0% Full charge on properties undergoing renovations.

Discount category C = 0% Full charge on empty properties from date they become unoccupied.

Both remain unchanged from 2020/21.

Empty Property Premium = 100% (200% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty for more than two years. 200% (300% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than five years. 300% (400% Council Tax) for unfurnished properties empty more than ten years.

Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme

The Council Tax Discretionary Hardship Relief Scheme, approved by Cabinet in October 2013, continues in its current format for 2021/2022. The Scheme offers help and assistance in exceptional cases of hardship.

(3) Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS)

The Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, be the approved Scheme for 2021/2022. This remains unchanged from 2020/21 apart from the following:

- a. Where an entitlement to the Care Leaver Discount/Exemption has ceased, Local Council Tax Reduction to be awarded without the need for a further application where their eligibility is known.
- b. The scheme is aligned to all of the DWP's upratings and changes for Housing Benefit and Universal Credit.

24 TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REPORT 2020/21

A report by the Director of Resources advised that the Authority's treasury management activity was underpinned by CIPFA's Code of Practice on

Treasury Management (“the Code”), which required the production of an annual Treasury Management Strategy Statement on likely financing and investment activity. The Code also recommended that Members were informed of treasury management activities at least twice a year.

The report fulfilled the Authority’s legal obligation under the Local Government Act 2003 to have regard to both the CIPFA Code and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Investment Guidance.

Whilst in past years Treasury Management had generated savings against budget the COVID situation had contributed to the current forecast being:

- A projected overspend of £2.3 million on Treasury activities was presented at the midyear point, which was attributable to 2020/21 budget savings that were considered to be of a high risk of not being achieved due to implementation delays emanating from COVID response activity and significant changes in interest rates on investments.

In response to a Member’s comment, the Director agreed to supply further information in respect of where the consultation, ‘Future Lending Terms’ (paragraph 3.36 of the report) was up to.

Resolved - That the Treasury Management Mid-Year Report for 2020/21 be noted.

25 **WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

A report by the Director of Law and Governance advised how the Committee, in co-operation with the other Policy and Service Committees, was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme. This work programme should align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which were within the remit of the Committee.

It was envisaged that the work programme will be formed from a combination of key decisions, standing items and requested officer reports. The report provided the Committee with an opportunity to plan and regularly review its work across the municipal year. The work programme for the Committee was attached as an appendix to the report.

Resolved – That the proposed Policy and Resources Committee work programme for the remainder of the 2020/21 municipal year, be noted.