

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Wednesday 10 July 2024 at 10.00 am in Council Chamber, Third Floor, Southwater One, Telford, TF3 4JG

PUBLISHED ON TUESDAY 16 JULY 2024

(DEADLINE FOR CALL-IN: FRIDAY 19 JULY 2024)

Present: Councillors R A Overton (Vice-Chair), L D Carter, Z Hannington, C Healy, S A W Reynolds and P Watling.

Also Present: Cllr T J Nelson (Conservative Group Leader) and Cllr W L Tomlinson (Liberal Democrats Group Leader)

Apologies: Councillor S Davies, R Mehta, K Middleton and O Vickers

CAB-1 Declarations of Interest

None.

CAB-2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 May 2024 be agreed and signed by the chair.

CAB-3 Leader's Announcements

The Deputy Leader congratulated the Leader, Shaun Davies on being elected as the new Member of Parliament representing Telford. He would be a strong advocate for Telford and be our voice in Westminster who would work with the Council constructively and delivering for local residents.

The Deputy Leader congratulated Sir Kier Starmer and the newly elected Labour Government and he looked forward to working with them on getting the best deal possible for Telford and Wrekin.

CAB-4 2024/25 Financial Monitoring Report

The Cabinet Member: Finance and Governance presented the 2024/25 Financial Monitoring Report which gave details of the latest financial monitoring position for the year in relation to the revenue budget, capital programme and income collection.

Since approval of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in February 2024, the economic climate had continued to be challenging and cost pressures, particularly in relation to the provision of Adult Social Care had been experienced.

The Financial Monitoring Report provided details in relation to the projected outturn position, the projected net revenue spend and progress against the approved 2024/25 capital programme. Key issues were highlighted in the report and included details relating to council tax, business rates and sales ledger income.

The funding outlook for the medium term remained uncertain and would continue to be challenging but the Council would continue to delivery quality services whilst ensuring a balanced budget.

Nationally, councils continued to face extreme challenges with unprecedented pressures driven by high costs and high demand for services – particularly in relation to Adult Social Care, Children's Safeguarding and School Travel Assistance. Local Government Association (LGA) analysis showed that councils in England faced a funding gap in excess of over £6b in the next two years and that councils required a multi-year and timely financial settlement and clarity over financial reforms to enable planned and informed decision making.

The projected year end position was summarised at 4.1.8 of the report and although currently set at 3.553 over budget at year end, following good financial management and specific contingency plans, it was expected that overall, there would be a balanced budget.

Key pressures were from Adult Social Care (ASC) with additional investment of £4.3m being required.

The report outlined details in relation to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which totalled £133.4m in 2024/25. In 2023/24 there had been an overspend of £1.82m due to pressures relating to High Needs provision which had been carried forward. This was a national issue with most upper tier councils showing a DSG deficit at year end 2022/23.

The capital programme totalled £150.4m for 2024/25 with a project spend of 84% at year end and some re-phasing into 2024/25 would be required to complete projects.

The report set out details in relation to Treasury and Prudential Indicators, together with governance arrangements in relation to borrowing.

Council Tax and NNDR (business rates) collection was within targets. Sales ledger was outside of the target, but recovery would continue in the new financial year.

The report showed that the council had a strong financial management and work would continue throughout 2024/25 to address any budget pressures.

Members welcomed the report and considered that the council were in a reassuring position. The report demonstrated the difficult challenges the

council faced but it was an absolute testament to the decision making of the administration and work of council officers. They would look to work with the new Labour government to address funding and longer-term financial settlements. In relation to Adult Social Care, they would continue to look at every opportunity to make savings whilst continuing to ensure the best possible services to local residents.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the report and expressed that there was a need to be flexible in relation to budget led services. In relation to the funding of social care, there was no magic wand, but it was hoped the revenue grant settlement would be received before Christmas. The council had a responsibility to look after the most vulnerable and find way to fund this service and the team had been a steady hand over turbulent water which reflected well on the council.

The Leader of the Conservative Group congratulated Shaun Davies on his recent success and wished Sir Kier Starmer well as the new government. He felt that in relation to the projected £4.3m overspend against the budget that the social care model was flawed and needed addressing in order that the council could meet demand and its statutory obligations.

RESOLVED – to RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL that:

- a) changes to the capital programme and all associated changes to the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Prudential Indicators be approved; and**
- b) the 2024 revenue budget position be noted;**
- c) the collection rates for NNDR, council tax and sales ledger be noted; and**
- d) the current position in relation to Treasury & Prudential Indicators be noted.**

CAB-5 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report

The Cabinet Member: Finance and Governance presented the 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report which set out the final outturn position for the year in relation to the revenue budget, capital programme and income collection.

Since the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was approved, the economic climate had continued to change with high inflation, high energy costs, increases in interest rates and increasing demand for many services partly fuelled by the cost of living emergency facing our residents, businesses and the Council itself.

The report set out the final financial outturn position for 2023/24 with the funding outlook for the medium term remaining very uncertain.

Despite the significant pressures faced during 2023/24 the Council ended the year within budget and clearly demonstrated strong financial management and financial resilience. Additional income received across leisure and highways and from grants was applied against the budget.

The gross revenue budget for 2023/24 was £481m and the net budget was £146m. The revenue outturn position was within budget by £0.015m. The year end position allowed a small number of one-off investments in key areas to be made which supported the Council's priorities and future financial sustainability.

The Council has not had to make any unplanned use of the budget strategy reserve, which remained at £21.7m.

The financial position was better than report to Cabinet in February due to additional income being received across several areas including leisure, highways and grants which was applied against the base budget. There had been capitalisation of costs across several areas which included the stringent management of vacancies and forecast costs being lower than expected in areas such as repairs and maintenance and transport costs in education and skills. This had allowed for a small number of one-off investments to support council priorities.

All of the £3.9m contingency fund had been used and additional reserves released to offset cost pressures during the year.

Adult Social Care was £8.377m over budget with £1.1m being in relation to the reablement services and pressure due to the discharges from hospital. Children's Safeguarding were £3.984m over budget with all other areas within budget.

Treasury Management performed better than expected providing a £1m benefit. Other one-off benefits had also been received from good robust forecasting.

The public health grant totalled £13.598m which in 2023/24 and was ring-fenced to support public health responsibilities and £2.27m would be carried forward to 2024/25.

Outturn against the Capital programme was £83.49m against an approved budget of £90.05m. Details of rephased schemes were set out in the report.

The report set out the position in relation to NuPlace Ltd and at 1 March 2024 the housing portfolio comprised of 500 homes with 23 acres of brownfield land being regenerated. The unaudited accounts showed that NuPlace generated an operating profit after interest and taxation of £0.253m in 2023/24. The company issued a dividend of £0.253m in 2023/24 which was paid to the Council as its sole investor. Including the dividend, the Council received a total of £2m from Nuplace during 2023/24.

In relation to income monitoring, Council Tax was in target with NNDR (business rates) and Sales Ledger being slightly behind target.

Thanks was given to the teams across the council whose robust performance had helped deliver high quality services against a balanced budget across the last 13 years.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the report and commented that this had been a really tough year for local authorities and noted that the council had need to go into the reserves to the value of £6m which equated to a 7.5% rise of council tax. He congratulated the council on their remarkable achievement of producing and publishing the accounts for year end 31 March 2024 and presenting them to the Audit Committee on 29 May 2024.

The Leader of the Conservative Group commented that net debt was £330m which was a significant burden in relation to interest. Capital slippages could have a beneficial impact in relation to lower interest outcomes.

RESOLVED – to RECOMMEND TO COUNCIL that:

- a) The revenue outturn position for 2023/24, which remains subject to audit by the Council's external auditors, and related virements be approved;**
- b) the transfers to reserves, and associated approval to the relevant members of the Senior Management Team (as determined by the Chief Executive) after consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member to spend the reserves be approved;**
- c) the capital outturn position and related supplementary estimates, re-phasing and virements shown in the report 2023/24 Financial Outturn Report be approved;**
- d) delegated authority to the Interim Director: Finance & HR to make any changes required, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, Customer Services and Governance be granted; and**
- e) the performance against income targets be noted.**

CAB-6 Better Homes for All Update 2024

The Cabinet Member: Homes, Enforcement & Customer Services presented the Better Homes for All update which sought to improve housing conditions in the private rented sector whilst tackling landlords who were not adhering to the rules. It also sought approval for amendments to the Council's Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy along with its associated fees and charges.

The private rented sector (PRS) had doubled in size over the last 10 years. Home ownership continued to be unaffordable for many while a decline in social housing meant that the private rented sector was plugging an essential gap in the market.

Nationally, there was a spotlight on housing conditions in the private rented sector. In Telford and Wrekin, the Council worked with tenants, landlords and external partners to improve conditions and supported landlords to ensure conditions were in accordance with national standards as well as tackling landlords who did not adhere to the rules.

This report set out an overview of the work undertaken by the council in the last 12 months which support residents in rented accommodation. The council would continue to work with partners to track progress on actions to ensure the Borough's housing needs remain compliant while seeking continued improvement.

It was reported that 156 enforcement notices had been issued as well as 12 civil penalty notices. The council had successfully prosecuted a letting agent. A further 44 HMO licences had been issued bringing the total to 217.

The council were working with the Ageing Well Strategy Board, Age UK and the Marches Energy Agency to support older residents living in poor conditions and had brought 55 empty homes back into use.

A Landlord Tenant Coordinator was provided by the council to support landlords and tenants as a single point of contact.

The Better Homes Loan scheme was an offer to residents on low incomes and landlords and owners of empty properties, to help improve conditions, essential repairs and energy efficiency measures.

Thanks was given to the teams across the council who were delivering to all local residents.

Members welcomed the report and expressed that a good quality home was the foundation of a healthy lifestyle and that it was good to see robust action being taken. The council were going beyond the statutory minimum bringing empty properties back into use and addressing the housing crisis and ensuring good living standards. It was hoped that the new government would provide more tools to local authorities in order that more could be done.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the report which helped to address rogue landlords. He asked that the council promoted the work they did as a welcoming friend for private tenants. It was hoped that the new stable government would help bring the pressures down in relation to the cost of rent and also end no fault evictions.

The Leader of the Conservative Group commented on the alarming statistics in relation to the doubling of private renting and the quality of housing was

really important. The Private Renters Bill failed due to the general election and it was hoped that this would be brought forward as quickly as possible. He asked that the council policed itself with regards to NuPlace and ensured that they were fair and did not compromise their judgment.

RESOLVED – that:

- a) the Private Sector Housing Enforcement Policy, including the updated fee structure for Civil Penalties and Electrical Safety Regulations be approved;**
- b) delegated authority be granted to the Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Homes, Enforcement & Customer Services, to make ongoing changes to the policy including fees, charges and fines as may be required; and**
- c) the new mandatory licensing conditions for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) and amenity standards for HMO's in the Borough be approved.**

CAB-7 Affordable Warmth Strategy Update

The Cabinet Member: Homes, Enforcement & Customer Services presented the Affordable Warmth Strategy update which aimed to address fuel poverty in the borough and the improve the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people in the community.

It was widely recognised that being cold at home could cause or worsen health problems and there was a clear link to mental health and social isolation. There had been a dramatic increase in the cost of energy prices and the resultant cost of living crisis meant that more households were threatened with fuel poverty.

During the last 12 months, the council had retrofitted 175 properties and approval has been granted for a further 104. It has supported 126 private rented properties suffering from cold, damp and mould. Eco grants had been issued to 79 businesses to reduce their energy costs and help them become more sustainable. The council had also supported residents to look for external funding from hardship funds and provide contacts to partners in order to provide them with consistent, up to date advice.

In partnership with the Marches Energy Agency the council was supporting the Future Ready Homes initiative. The council were the only local authority regionally who offer an emergency boiler fund to vulnerable residents who had a cold related illness and no form of heating. A sum of £500,000 had been used from the Climate Fund for the coldest homes and business grants. Warm and Well Telford had been launched as part of the Climate Change programme and 50 applications had been received to date.

Over the next 12 months, the council would deliver the next phase of the Home Upgrade Grant aimed at low energy efficient off gas properties. The Home Upgrade Grant was doing an excellent job of easing poverty in cold homes. It was hoped that by introducing clear energy by 2030 that fuel poverty would be cut.

Members welcomed the report and were delighted that the Labour government were addressing energy price shocks with 4.29% of households in fuel poverty. The Warm Homes national plan aimed to reduce fuel poverty and it was hoped to produce home grown energy from renewable sources. The Council had delivered over £1m retrofit programme to improve insulation and make homes energy efficient. It had been recognised that there were a group that sat outside the scope of the grant schemes and who were also in fuel poverty and the funding from the Climate Change agenda had been set aside to alleviate this. They were pleased with the work undertaken with self-funders who wished to make their homes more energy efficient, environmentally friendly and sustainable by navigating them around the services available. Joint working across the council, making available business grants and employing local contractors, would help to sustain the local economy.

The Leader of the Conservative Group felt that the ambition of the council for people to be able to live with a measure of warmth in the winter was a noble and civil ambition. Being cold has an adverse impact on people's health and has a wider impact. An observation was the scatter gun and piecemeal national grant programme being applied by central government which was affecting delivery and forward planning. There needed to be objective standards of what was a warm home, the type, use and source of energy was. He was in agreement in relation to self-funders and he asked that the council worked with Western Power to make the arrangements fair to all. It was his hope that the new Labour government would make a positive difference and in a timely manner.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the report. He was passionate about retrofitting and hoped the government would provide a retrofit scheme to grow the economy and bring in standards to the building regulations to provide affordable warmth when developments come forward so retrofitting is not required. He asked the council to work in partnership to and signpost residents to organisations to help them choose the most suitable energy provider for their personal needs.

The Cabinet Member: Climate Action, The Environment, Heritage and Visitor Economy confirmed that the government was looking at grid connection, reducing the backlog and removing those no longer required. This would not be a quick fix so the focus would be on insulation and energy efficiency.

RESOLVED – that:

- a) the actions undertaken in respect of the Affordable Warmth Strategy be noted; and**

- b) delegated authority be granted to the Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure and the Director: Finance & HR, in consultation with the Lead Cabinet Member, to enter into a consortium with other local authorities to deliver future capital retrofit programmes.**

CAB-8 Annual Customer Feedback and Complaint reports 2023/24

The Cabinet Member: Homes, Enforcement & Customer Services presented the Customer Feedback reports for 2023/24 which gave an update on feedback received by the council between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024.

The report sought to provide assurance that the council's response to complaints was effective and that services were learning from complaints and wider customer feedback in order to improve. It also detailed annual feedback on Children's Services and Adults Services complaints.

The Corporate Feedback Report showed there had been a sustained increase in the number of compliments received year on year. During the reporting period, 639 compliments had been received, up from 566 the year before. This was an increase of 13% in the reporting period and an increase of 120% over the last 5 years.

There had been 721 complaints received in 2023/24 which was a 10% increase from 656 in the previous year. Whilst this was an increase, this was well within 1% of all transactions undertaken by the council and was well within accepted customer service industry standards.

During 2023/24 the council had responded to corporate complaints and had reduced from an average of 11 days to an average of 10 days, which was well within the 15 working day target. An average of 87% of corporate complaints were responded to within the 15 working day target a significant improvement on the 80% achieved in 2022/23.

Response times for Children's Service Complaints reduced from 16 days to 14 with Adults Services responses being 29 working days up slightly from 25 working days in the previous year.

The report detailed the proactive insight work being undertaken over the last 12 months which included the mystery customer programme and expanding the customer satisfaction surveys. Satisfaction rates from the customer contact centre and 93% an increase on the 91% in the previous year. The satisfaction rate for Ask Tom, the council's digital assistant was 99%.

Improvements had been taking place across the council following complaints and feedback from local residents and customers and the council continued to demonstrate that they were learning from complaints and where Local Government Ombudsman and Social Care Ombudsman complaints were upheld, they were satisfied that the council successfully implemented their

recommendations. Where there was an upheld case, the council is taking their learning forward to improve the relevant practices.

Members welcomed the report and considered that all complaints were a learning opportunity and communication was an important learning tool. Compliments had risen by 13% in the reporting period and 120% over 5 years which was a testament to staff and the quality of work delivered to local residents. Mystery customers kept the council on its toes. The council would continue to look for better opportunities and what areas could be improved. The customer statistics for the contact centre and Ask Tom were good and the hours of the contact centre had been extended to 7pm when other local authorities were reducing their hours to the public. In relation to Children's Services, although complaints had been received, if this was put into the context of the transactions undertaken by the council, this was considered to be an amazing statistic as was the response rate back to families of 14 days. The council would continue to encourage residents to give feedback and have their voices heard.

The Leader of the Conservative Group commented that the council was in a good position. The feedback he received from residents on the council day to day services was that it was a well-run council and this was a testament to the officer core. Complaints were an opportunity to engage positively with the public.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group welcomed the complaints received as when people raise issues they could be resolved rather than resorting to social media and he encouraged residents to get in contact. He was pleased that residents could still phone the council as some people struggle to use online services. A new complaint framework had been launched which amended the times for responding to complaints which was welcomed for the public, although it put a lot more pressure on the local authority.

RESOLVED – that:

- a) the Customer Feedback Reports for 2023-24 in respect of Adult Statutory Complaints, Children's Statutory Complaints and Corporate Customer Feedback be reviewed; and**
- b) the improvement in complaint handling performance and the increase in positive feedback be noted.**

The meeting ended at 11.02 am

Signed for the purposes of the Decision Notices

Anthea Lowe
Director: Policy & Governance
Date: **Tuesday 16 JULY 2024**

Signed

Date: Thursday 19 September 2024