

Runnymede Borough Council

Corporate Management Committee

Thursday, 13 July 2023 at 7.30 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors T Gracey (Chairman), C Howorth (Vice-Chair), A Balkan (In place of M Nuti), D Coen, M Cressey, L Gillham, R King, I Mullens, S Ringham, P Snow, D Whyte and M Willingale.

Members of the Committee absent: None

In attendance: Councillors A Berardi and S Jenkins.

31 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

32 Apologies for Absence

No apologies were received.

33 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Coen raised a query about his role as Non-Executive Director on RBCI in relation to item 17. Cllr Coen sought advice and stayed in the room and voted on the item.

34 Citizens' Panel

The Citizens Panel was a key strand in the Council's Empowering Communities strategy. The budget to establish and maintain the panel was in place, and by utilising its existence for consultation purposes there was confidence that it would deliver savings. It was hoped that the Panel would involve around 1% of the borough's population, some 900 individuals.

Representatives from Royal Holloway University had compiled a report highlighting the value provided by such a panel, and presented its benefits at the Committee, advising that the recommended framework provided the flexibility to meet the Council's need, with studies showing that a Citizens' Panel provided significantly more in-depth feedback than forms of one-way communication. More frequent contact with the Panel also improved the chance of retaining membership.

It was recommended by Royal Holloway representatives to establish a steering committee to include key officers, elected members and experts to reduce any perception of predetermination.

It was acknowledged that the Panel would take time to set up, and addressing concerns of attrition rates, a professional research company would be employed to establish an appropriate representation for the Panel, and would be able to advise on continuity of membership, whilst it was anticipated that officers and members had the necessary contacts within the borough to establish and maintain a representative sample.

Committee members were keen to hear about locations where a Citizens' Panel had worked successfully, whilst consideration was also asked to renaming it a Residents' Panel.

Creative thinking was urged around incentivising participants, and one of the ideas under consideration was funding towards a community project, which was thought would be more desirable than giving individuals a gift card of negligible value. Furthermore, providing evidence that participants' feedback carried weight and influenced policy-making was considered the most effective form of incentivisation.

Additionally, the Panel would be one of a number of tools in decision-making. Feeding back on the occasions when their view were not interpreted in the way they had intended would be equally important.

The Committee were supportive of the creation of the Panel, but felt that a culture change was needed within the Council to ensure that officers possessed the skills, knowledge and capacity to engage in the most appropriate way, factoring in the essential need for it to be interactive and a two-way communication process.

It was confirmed that the Panel's work would be made available to make its outcome transparent, and the process would be as accessible as possible to ensure a representative sample was achieved.

Resolved that –

- 1. Committee recognised the value of a Citizens' Panel in gathering evidence on residents' views of council and potentially partner organisations' services.**
- 2. Approval was given to the establishment of a Runnymede Citizens' Panel.**
- 3. Committee approved expenditure of £10,000 Shared Prosperity Fund to recruit the membership of the Panel.**
- 4. Virement was approved for the remaining costs associated with the Panel from the central Community Budget, held by the Chief Executive. This would enable the authority to offer participants a small incentive for retaining their membership.**

35 Proposed Process for Achieving Savings and Efficiencies

The report followed on from the Medium-Term Financial Strategy and focussed on the process for savings and efficiencies, as well as the service review programme and financial risk mitigation measures around earmarked reserves.

The Council's Medium-Term Financial Forecast showed a budget gap of some £5.2m by the end of 2025/26, which was a figure that did not include growth.

Despite a cautious approach to expected government income and other grants, £5.2m was considered a realistic and significant underlying gap.

Given the number of local authorities who had encountered difficulties in recent times, government investment guidance was soon expected to be tightened, which could impact on borrowing, and even if this was not tightened additional revenue would need to be identified to support additional future borrowing.

A service review programme had begun, with SLT consulted about possible savings initiatives, whilst the more complicated savings would require Member approval. Some schemes would require invest to save.

The complete programme of work would be reported through the proposed Service

Review, Communications and Transformation Member Working Party, which would in turn make recommendations to Corporate Management Committee.

The final outturn position for 2022/23 would be reported to the next Corporate Management Committee, and would set out ways to utilise any underspend, which included adding additional funding to property income reserves given the importance of the commercial income stream to the Council, would also set out a different approach to accessing the planned underspend, and would provide details on the Service Transformation reserve that would drive the Council's income stream.

Whilst the Assistant Chief Executive confirmed that Members would be consulted as part of the process, which would include additional finance training sessions, there was concern from some Members about the prospect of not fully utilising service committees as part of the process, and they cited that decisions being exclusively made by Corporate Management Committee would be more akin to a Cabinet rather than Committee system.

The Chief Executive advised that the Council had continuously operated two years in advance with its budget planning and would continue to do so, which was what had allowed services to be maintained and grown, which had largely been achieved through commercial income. The proposed process would continue to income generate, as well as look at efficiencies, and if necessary would consider a reduction in some services.

It was added that Members would be involved throughout the process and any risks would be clearly explained, and a reporting mechanism would be established to ensure all parties were properly briefed.

Several Members pointed to previous examples of where they felt services committees had been sidelined in the decision-making process, however it was also confirmed by the Chief Executive that services committees would continue to be informed and involved, and reports would not come forward to Corporate Management Committee without the relevant service committee having the chance to contribute in whatever way was appropriate.

The Committee chair added that Corporate Management Committee membership included the chairs of all services committees, and it would not be intended to diminish or devalue those committees, but having one central committee with oversight of the process being shaped by the Member Working Party was an appropriate way forward, whilst Overview & Scrutiny Select Committee would also play a key role in tracking and challenging progress and delivery.

The regularity of reporting back was also discussed, and whilst it was considered too much of a burden to ask officers to provide an update report at every Corporate Management Committee, the Project Management action tracker being developed would track all corporate plan actions. A Member asked for appropriate transparency in order to know the detail rather than just the headline.

A named vote was requested on recommendation (ii) only and voting was as follows:

For (7)

Cllrs Gracey, Willingale, Balkan, Coen, Cressey, Snow, Willingale

Against (5)

Cllrs Gillham, King, Mullens, Ringham, Whyte

Abstain (0)

-

Resolved that –

- 1. Progress against the actions set out in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy was noted.**
- 2. The approach set out in the report to the identification and delivery of savings, income generation and efficiencies was recommended to full Council.**
- 3. The transfers to reserves as set out in the report and the creation of the Planned Underspend Reserve and the Service Transformation Reserve (subject to the final outturn position for 2022/23) was approved.**

36 **Councillor IT Hardware Refresh**

Five years on from the Council's elected members being issued with Surface Pros for their civic duties, the Councillor IT device refresh had been established to decide next steps.

Feedback from a recent Councillor survey had resulted in the desire to have larger screens and a better keyboard. The survey also revealed that Councillor devices were extremely well-used.

Officers recommended an extensive procurement exercise and to extend the life of devices from four to six years and establish an ongoing maintenance programme.

It was confirmed that the current Surface Pros would be replaced in May 2024 and the existing devices would be re-purposed.

Resolved that –

- 1. Committee noted the findings and outcome of the Members survey on IT devices.**
- 2. Approved the recommendation to begin procurement and rollout of replacement IT devices in early 2024. This would allow new devices to be deployed following the May 2024 elections.**
- 3. Approved the recommendation to extend the replacement cycle for councillor IT devices from four years to a minimum of six years. Devices may be replaced sooner if they are lost, stolen, or beyond economic repair.**

37 **Outside Bodies - third round**

In advance of the vote the Leader announced that he had requested dispensation from the chair of the Community Safety Partnership to appoint an additional borough councillor for this municipal year only, with future appointments being made from Community Services Committee.

In the meantime the terms of reference of the Community Safety Partnership would be updated, and the councillor who came second in the vote would be contacted by the chair of the Community Safety Partnership following discussions with key stakeholders to confirm acceptance of the additional appointment.

Resolved that –

The following appointments be made, in accordance with the arrangements set out in the report:

Organisation/Type of Representation	Appointee
Basingstoke Canal JMC – Member	Cllr Scott Lewis
Basingstoke Canal JMC – Deputy	Cllr Mike Smith
Community Safety Partnership	Cllr Alex Balkan
Egham Chamber of Commerce	Cllr Margaret Harnden
South East England Councils	Cllr Tom Gracey

38 **Social Media House Rules**

The purpose of the report was to introduce light-touch rules around the Council's engagement with the public and ensuring its channels were used appropriately. As audiences who accessed these channels continued to grow, a slight increase had been detected in individuals being abusive or going off-topic.

The rules would help to manage such occasions by providing sanctions to either delete posts that were accusational in nature or contained bad language, although authors would have the ability to re-post using more appropriate language. As a last resort, any users who consistently flout the rules could be blocked from a platform, but would still be able to access the Council's output in other channels or through the website.

The Committee was supportive of the house rules, however a Member flagged up a recent Council social media post that highlighted the work done to reduce carbon with electricity, when the Council merely benefitted from a national policy, and asked that every effort was made to ensure that all output was factual and accurate.

Resolved that –

- 1. The committee approved the adoption of a set of social media house rules, including that the Council values freedom of speech, and supported the reasons why in a very small number of cases comments might be deleted and users blocked.**
- 2. The committee delegated authority to the Head of Public Relations and Marketing and staff to make decisions on the application of the house rules on a day-to-day basis as required.**

39 **Standing Order 42 - Household Support Fund (1023)**

The Committee Chair briefed the Committee on a decision taken under Standing Order 42 to implement a policy to administer the next tranche of Household Support Fund to support the borough's most vulnerable residents during the current cost of living crisis.

In response to a Member's concerns that the amount provided would not be sufficient during winter, the Committee Chair advised that a number of other initiatives were under consideration as part of the Council's budget setting process.

40 **Standing Order 42 - Temporary Graduate Climate Change Officer (1025)**

The Committee Chair briefed the Committee on a decision taken under Standing Order 42 to provide additional support to the climate change team over the coming months, which would increase resources working on climate change to 6.2 FTE.

41 **Exclusion of Press and Public**

By resolution of the Committee, the press and public were excluded from the remainder of

the meeting during the consideration of the remaining matters under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that the discussion would be likely to involve the disclosure of exempt information as set out in Schedule 12A to Part 1 of the Act.

42 **Provision of Defibrillators**

A high number of defibrillators and cabinets throughout the borough were in need of replacement, and whilst a grant had been identified to assist with the process, the remainder of the funding would require a supplementary estimate to the current budget.

The future cost of replacing end of life defibrillators and cabinets would be built into the budget to allow for them to be replaced when it was necessary to do so without delay.

Committee noted that some of the defibrillators were in very close proximity to each other, however it was decided against removing any or finding an alternative location for them, partly because this included defibrillators not owned by the Council and therefore there was no guarantee they would be maintained correctly.

In response to concerns about a lack of database that contained all defibrillators in the borough, it was confirmed that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had recently written to all Councils encouraging them to reach out to partners to ensure such a database existed, and the Council were now in the process of actioning this request. Once compiled, this information would be made clear on the Council website.

Resolved that –

Committee agreed to proceed with the replacement of the defibrillators and cabinets, which required a supplementary estimate to the current budget. Maintenance cost of the equipment would be funded from the Assets and Regeneration budget, the Housing Services budget, and the Community Services budget.

43 **Q1 Project Portfolio Reporting**

The report provided a summary position on progress on the delivery of the Council's project portfolio up to the end of Q1 (April, May and June) 2023.

Two grade A and one grade B projects had been delivered during the quarter, with seven projects reporting amber, which meant that an issue had been identified that was being actively mitigated within project tolerances.

One of these projects was the play area remediation programme. Meetings would be taking place with ward members throughout the summer months, with proposed next steps going to September's Community Services Committee. Budgets were in place for urgent repairs, however the risk was amber to reflect that there was no budget provision to repair every single defect. The repair and replacement programmes were closely aligned and were not intended to be delivered in a single year but were a rolling programme over time.

It was clarified that if a project was running behind time for a legitimate reason a revised date would be issued and the status would become green, however the information about the initial date would remain for readers' awareness.

44 **Update on Abbey Groves**

Following a report to the previous Corporate Management Committee, a review of potential uses of the Abbey Groves site had been undertaken, and a triple tracking approach to

options for its future use was set out that included the possibility of rental, disposal or redevelopment.

Officers intended to get the property to market at the earliest possible opportunity, but conceded the property market was likely to be quiet over the summer months, and it was therefore desired to furnish the location to give potential suiters an impression of how it could look.

The Committee immediately ruled out the option of doing nothing, and were supportive of the triple tracking approach, utilising the proposed Property & Asset Task Force to make recommendations to a future Committee.

A Member felt that a significant part of any potential redevelopment could be done under prior approval provided each unit was a certain footage, and this, along with additional options for schemes that would require full planning permission, would be explored by the Task Force.

Responding to concerns about the time taken to bring these options before the Committee, the Committee chair felt that the creation of the Task Force would expedite similar issues in future to ensure the Council was getting the most out of its assets.

Resolved that –

- 1. Committee noted that the lease of the property had been disclaimed by the current tenant.**
- 2. Committee approved the triple tracking approach to marketing for the disposal of the site for both a letting or freehold sale, along with investigation of the redevelopment. The results of which would be brought back to Committee for consideration.**

45 Addlestone One Post Project Review

Following a Councillor request under Standing Order 27.4(d) of the Council's constitution, a post-investment appraisal of Addlestone One had been undertaken, which explained and highlighted issues faced during development and going forward.

One of the main drivers of the development was to generate additional revenue to replace revenue support grant, which government had withdrawn from local authorities. Residential units had been sold to generate capital receipts, which was initially successful, however a flood, the Covid pandemic and cladding issues had all adversely impacted residential sales.

During construction the retail market became stagnant, which was exacerbated by the economic downturn and Brexit, and led to the need to review the concept. It was ultimately decided to provide a more leisure-focussed development, which it was envisaged would protect income and reflected well on the Council's place shaping.

It was acknowledged that lessons had been learnt by the process, with service charge levels initially unrealistic and Combined Heat and Power – installed to allow recycled energy to be re-used and traded into the grid – not fully utilised.

Whilst acknowledging there was an element of bad luck, the Committee pointed to some alarming failures, including the poor record keeping and documentation trail, along with multiple basic construction errors that cost taxpayer money to be remedied, and had a detrimental effect in attracting retailers to rent units.

The Committee felt that a further lesson learnt was ensuring that a professional team was utilised during any future joint ventures rather than attempting to project manage the entire process in-house without the necessary expertise or capacity to carry out the task.

46 **Letting at Magna Square**

Officers recommended proceeding with the letting of the final vacant unit at Magna Square, which would be to a franchisee that would suit the vision for the location and was in line with the expected rental income.

It was added that the rental forecast on all units in the development were in line with the target rental income set out at the outset, and a lessons learnt appraisal and report for Magna Square, similar to Addlestone One would be presented to Committee in due course.

Resolved that –

- 1. Committee agreed to grant a lease on the terms outlined in the report.**
- 2. Delegated authority was approved to allow the Assistant Chief Executive, in consultation with Corporate Head of Law and Governance and Corporate Head of Assets and Regeneration to undertake additional financial due diligence.**

47 **Housing Benefit Overpayment Write Off**

The report had come about following a case of housing benefit fraud where the claimant was still in receipt of benefits, and ongoing deductions had been made at the highest level possible.

However following the claimant's untimely death it had been established that there were insufficient funds in the estate and the debt was therefore not recoverable. Committee was therefore recommended to write off the debt.

Resolved that –

The sum outlined in the report was written off as no longer recoverable.

48 **Enforcement Agent Contract Procurement**

The two-year extension to the enforcement agents contract, previously agreed by this Committee, would end in December 2023, and there were no further opportunities to extend the contract.

Authority was therefore being sought to go out to procurement, with a framework identified that had been endorsed by debt charities. It was hoped to widen the contract to provide further income generating opportunities beyond council tax and parking.

Resolved that –

- 1. The Committee approved the extension to the existing contracts to protect collection rates and ensure a smooth transition of cases to any new supplier.**
- 2. The Committee approved a procurement process via the CCS RM6226 (Lot 5) to award a single contract to undertake enforcement services on behalf the Council in relation to**
 - Council Tax**
 - Business Rates**

- Parking
- Sundry Debt

3. **The Committee agreed delegated authority to the Assistant Chief Executive (Sec 151) to consider and approve the three separate yearly extensions to the existing term of the contract where there were no material changes to the terms and conditions and the performance remains satisfactory to the Council.**

49 **Chief Executive, Paul Turrell**

The Committee thanked Paul Turrell, the Council's Chief Executive, who was attending his final Corporate Management Committee before his retirement later in the month.

(The meeting ended at 10:33pm.)

Chairman