

Runnymede Borough Council

Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee

Thursday, 1 February 2024 at 9.00 pm

Members of the Committee present: Councillors J Furey (Chair), A Balkan, T Burton, T Gates, L Gillham, S Lewis and S Ringham (In place of A King).

Members of the Committee absent: Councillors N Prescott (Vice-Chair) and M Singh.

In attendance: Councillors A Berardi, S Jenkins and S Williams.

**18 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership**

Cllr S. Ringham replaced Cllr A. King.

**19 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**20 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Cllr N. Prescott and Cllr M. Singh.

**21 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**22 Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25**

The Corporate Head of Finance presented the Treasury Management report, which had already been reviewed and approved by Corporate Management Committee.

There were no proposed changes to either the borrowing or investment strategies from the previous year, instead changes to treasury management stemmed from The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act and proposed changes to MRP regulations.

Additionally, there was also an impact from the implementation of a new accounting standard for leases that would mean that all leased and right of use assets would be added to the capital programme and be shown as being financed by borrowing. This had been due to come into effect in 2018 and following several delays would now be operational from 1 April 2024. Work was ongoing to identify all contracts that contained embedded rights of use assets contained within them.

During the debate the Committee noted the level of uncertainty around much of the strategy that was down to external factors such as the impact of the non-statutory best value notice, and it was asked that the Committee was regularly updated as further information came to light. Councillors also asked for more context to be given to large-scale international incidents that had a knock-on effect on borrowing and interest rates to enable them to explain the impact to residents.

Resolved that –

Committee noted the content of the report and recommended that the Council approve the following:

- i) The proposed 2024/25 Treasury Management Strategy encompassing the Annual Investment Strategy.
- ii) The Prudential and Treasury Management Indicators for 2024/25.
- iii) The Authorised Limit for external borrowing by the Council in 2024/25, be set at £723,443,000 (this being the statutory limit determined under Section 3 (1) of the Local Government Act 2003).
- iv) The MRP Policy for 2024/25 as set out in paragraph 7.15.

## 23 **Work Programme – Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)**

The Committee noted the response from Royal Holloway University to the questions provided since the previous Committee meeting. There was concern that student numbers and accommodation being in such a state of flux would lead to uncertainty and misplaced rumours.

It was agreed that any new strategy would have far-reaching consequences for the community and would be encouraging the university to engage at an early stage with the Council. Committee members would notify officers of further questions to be asked and it was agreed to provide a further invitation to representatives of Royal Holloway University to attend the next meeting of the Committee.

The existence of the Runnymede Group Forum was also discussed, which consisted of a wide range of bodies, however members felt it primarily consisted of a status update with minimal debate or discussion about issues. A request had been made to form a working group to enable more detailed discussion on issues.

The long-term prospect of an Article 4 Direction was discussed, and whilst planning officers had noted suggestions from the previous Committee meeting to inform the local plan review, there was no guarantee that it would form part of the council's planning policy and therefore might not be a long-term solution.

The Committee were advised of the requirement to provide an end product from the programme of work for the consideration of another body of the Council. Whilst recommendations would be finalised at the final committee meeting of the municipal year, a member expressed a desire to consider options around HMO licensing similar to other local authorities, in particular recommending the consideration of licensing all HMOs rather than those with 5+ occupants, as well as additional conditions to licenses around noise nuisance antisocial behaviour, garden maintenance, and refuse and rubbish.

Officers advised Committee that any such action would have resource implications, and the likely need to employ more private sector housing officers would have a knock-on effect elsewhere in the Council and would mean having to sacrifice another activity to ensure a balanced budget.

Officers were also keen to establish what the Committee wanted to achieve in order to consider whether there were different and more cost-effective ways of achieving it, with the upcoming bin allocation policy potentially dealing with waste issues cited as an example. Committee members were strongly encouraged to follow up with the Corporate Head of Environmental Services for her advice and for them to understand their options to empower them to make recommendations at the next Committee meeting.

Whilst it was acknowledged that increasing fees to cover the cost of administering an enhanced scheme would be costly for landlords and tenants, a member advised that in a dip sample of some 20 local authorities around the country Runnymede was currently charging the lowest amount.

The Committee would consider next steps ahead of the next Committee meeting, but the initial thoughts on some of the likely recommendations flowing out of this workstream were as follows:

- Planning Committee to continue to consider the introduction of Article 4 direction.
- Environment & Sustainability Committee to consider the extension of licensing HMOs beyond those already licensed.
- Environment & Sustainability Committee to consider implementing additional conditions on HMO licenses similar to that of other local authorities.
- Environment & Sustainability/Community Services Committee to be asked to consider encouraging the Runnymede Group Forum to alter the way it operates to facilitate greater debate.

Subject to the agreement of final recommendations, the relevant Committee(s) would be asked to consider those recommendations in the new municipal year.

#### 24 **Work Programme - Grounds Maintenance**

The Committee noted the evidence heard at the previous meeting and felt satisfied that improvements in the service had been made. The Corporate Head of Environmental Services was asked to provide information relating to quarterly complaints to the next meeting to provide comfort that the volume of complaints had significantly reduced.

#### 25 **Work Programme - Building Maintenance**

The Committee noted that a recent Corporate Management Committee report was approved for a consultant to undertake a survey of the Civic Centre's fabric and components to establish what works would be required to ensure that the building was both fit for purpose and statutorily compliant.

No works to the Civic Centre would commence until a full report outlining estimated cost and details of works had been received by the appointed consultant. The report would also advise on the procurement route to market.

It was noted that no capital items had been spent on the Civic Centre since the building's completion, and it was further noted that planned and reactive budgets remain in place. The committee agreed to monitor the outcome of this project and would exercise their call-in powers should it be deemed necessary. This would conclude this particular workstream in the meantime.

(The meeting ended at 10.27 pm.)

Chair