

Runnymede Borough Council

Corporate Management Committee

Thursday, 14 December 2023 at 7.30 pm

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

Members of the Council absent: Councillors S Ringham and M Willingale.

In attendance: Councillors T Burton, S Lewis, T Gates and M Smith.

107 Notification of Changes to Committee Membership

Councillor A. King substituted for Cllr Ringham, and councillor Hulley substituted for councillor Willingale.

108 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

109 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

110 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

111 Social Media Work Plan 2024-26

The social media work plan was intended to bring structure to how the Council's Communications team propose to develop its social media platforms, which had become one of the most important ways to engage with residents and explain the work of the Council.

Each platform would be used in a nuanced way to play to the strengths of each one, and it was confirmed that during the trial of Instagram the Communications team would investigate the full functionality of the platform, which would include the alt text tool that benefits those with a visual impairment.

Resolved that:

- 1. Members adopted the Social Media Work Plan 2024-26**
- 2. Delegated authority was given to the Head of Public Relations and Marketing to pause the use of X/ Twitter for six months during 2024 to trial the use of Instagram.**

112 Social Media Policy

It was anticipated that a social media policy would bring framework to the way the Council uses social media, primarily for the Communications team, but also across the Council, setting out how the staff would operate on social media and how platforms would be

managed. Guidance was also provided on staff members' personal use of social media, the type of content deemed acceptable, as well as how the Council would respond to urgent and emerging situations.

There was debate on the appropriateness of publishing communication on behalf of other community representatives, with some members preferring to focus social media channels on the work done by Council. Whilst it was suggested to refer to other community representatives by title, other members felt that these groups helping each other to achieve maximum reach on a particular post was worthwhile and should be remain in the policy.

Whilst not explicit in the policy, it was confirmed that committee chairs would continue to be the spokesperson for matters relating to their committee, which was reflected in the constitution, and furthermore there was the need for the members' code of conduct to be updated to reflect member use on social media.

Resolved that:

- 1. The Social Media Policy was approved.**
- 2. The Head of Public Relations and Marketing and his delegates were authorised to implement the policy on a day to day basis.**

113 **Medium Term Financial Strategy**

In picking out the salient points in the report, the chief executive highlighted that inflation pressures that resulted in a higher pay increase to staff last year were still in existence but revised figures gave confidence that a tapered reduction could now be put in place. However, it was stressed that the figure was the total budgeted figure from which the pay award would be funded and did not predetermine what that award would be. It also included work to change the salary banding in line with the national living wage coming into force in April 2024, however it was noted that this would be part of a broader review to decompress some of the grades and posts affected.

It was felt that the modest number of growth items were considered essential and unavoidable, whilst it was stressed that the c£1m taken out of the staffing budget was a technical accounting piece designed to ensure reconciliation between the HR and finance systems and was not the removal of any existing job posts. This would ensure that the council's resources were appropriately allocated.

A cautious approach had been taken to the savings identified, with only savings included that had a defined savings plan and were not subject to outside factors such as a democratic vote or contractual agreement.

The Leader confirmed to a member that webstreaming council meetings remained an aspirational growth item, but would be brought forward at the appropriate time to ensure it synchronises with work to the council chamber and ensures the best value for money.

A member highlighted that the report should be viewed in the wider context of the risk appetite recently agreed by full council, whilst another member felt that they could not support the MTFs, partly based on previous decisions on the Council's asset base, along with the perceived lack of security central government provides local government around rate reviews and funding settlements making it impossible for the council to provide the full range of services that residents require.

It was recommended to full council that:

1. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy to be approved.

It was resolved that:

- 2. The growth items as set out in Appendix 4 for approval and inclusion in the budget for 2024/25 to be presented to the January Corporate Management Committee were agreed; and**
- 3. The Head of Paid Service (Chief Executive) was authorised to enter into pay negotiations with staff and Union representatives within the total provision set out in the report.**

114 Council Tax - determination of tax base and estimated collection funds surplus or deficit

The chief executive advised committee that as the borough council were the council tax collecting authority so understanding the base would allow partners to set their own budget, the precept for which the borough council collects on their behalf.

Resolved that:

- 1. The tax base (showing the estimated number of Band D equivalent dwellings within the Borough for the financial year 2024/25) was approved at 35,495.8.**
- 2. The estimated surplus on the Collection Fund for 2023/24 be declared at £415,403 to be split amongst precepting authorities as set out in the report, in accordance with the relevant statutory requirements**

115 Review of Local Council Tax Discounts

The report was welcomed by Committee, some of whom expressed regret that it had not been forthcoming earlier. It was stressed that the approach would entail a more compassionate and personalised approach to debt recovery, with more leeway for payment and additional support for care leavers, Ukrainian refugees and properties affected by flooding.

It was **recommended to full council** that:

- 1) That with effect from 1 April 2024:**
 - **To recommend the continuation of existing discounts for:**
 - **Care leavers**
 - **Ukrainian Refugees**
 - **Properties affected by flooding**
- 2) The Council Tax Discount for unoccupied and unfurnished dwellings would be reduced from 100% for up to 3 months to 100% for up to 28 days (Class C of the Council Tax (Prescribed Classes of Dwellings) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2012)**
- 3) That with effect from 1 April 2025:**
 - **In accordance with Section 11B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018, the additional amount payable for Council Tax be**

increased from 50% to 100% for dwellings that are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished for more than one year.

- **The additional amount of Council Tax to be increased from 50% to 200% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than five years.**
- **The additional amount of Council Tax be increased from 50% to 300% for properties that are unoccupied and unfurnished for more than ten years.**

116 **Financial Inclusion and Housing Benefit Overpayment Recovery**

The committee welcomed the robust but compassionate proposal, which had stemmed from an invest to save opportunity and was a corporate approach to debt recovery whilst having regard to an individual's ability to pay.

The 12 month pilot was supported, and the prospect of assessing an individual's ability to pay through Credit Save was welcomed to avoid going through the courts to chase a debt where an individual had no way of paying. Whilst no milestones were in place a report would be brought back to committee at the end of the trial period, along with an interim report after six months.

Resolved that:

- 1) **A supplementary estimate of approximately £50,000, to employ a dedicated resource to undertake a more corporate approach to debt recovery whilst having regard to a person's propensity to pay, to be funded from the Service Transformation reserve was agreed.**
- 2) **The business case for Welfare Support and Corporate Debt Software and the release of the £20,000 provision set aside in the capital programme to procure the specialist software systems to access third party financial information to maximise collection of monies owed to the Council, to be funded from the Service Transformation reserve was approved.**

117 **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

118 **Referral from Standards & Audit Committee - Internal Audit Provision**

With the Council's internal audit contract soon up for renewal officers had recommended membership of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership (SIAP), which was a combination of local authorities hosted by Hampshire County Council that would provide Runnymede a seat on the partnership board, with the ability to influence policy and learn lessons from peers.

During the debate members sought reassurance that SIAP had the capacity to deliver the services, as well as querying the depth of the advice they were able to offer given that the partnership was made up entirely of local authorities with no input or involvement from other sectors.

The officer from SIAP confirmed that they were currently slightly over-capacity, which reflected their desire to grow, and were subject to the same assessment and scrutiny as any other internal auditors. And whilst the requirement for assessment was every five

years SIAP's assessments were voluntarily undertaken every three years, with the next assessment due to take into account the changing standards of the industry.

Resolved that:

- 1. With effect from 1 April 2024, the Council would discharge its Internal Audit function under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972 to Hampshire County Council so that Southern Internal Audit Partnership (SIAP) could provide the Internal Audit Service for Runnymede Borough Council,**
- 2. The Council's Section 151 and Monitoring Officers were authorised to enter into the Joint Working Agreement by way of a deed of accession with Southern Internal Audit Partnership and undertake all necessary legal arrangements to do so, and**
- 3. The Council's Section 151 Officer or nominated officer represents the Council's interests by becoming a voting member of the Southern Internal Audit Partnership Key Stakeholder Board.**

119 **Microsoft Procurement**

The report sought to ensure continuity with the Council's Microsoft Licensing. The Crown Commercial Service (CCS) Framework had been utilised for an aggregation opportunity, with the sole supplier awarded the contract. As the value of the contract, despite being within agreed budgets, exceeded the Council's financial threshold for contract awards as set out in the Constitution, it was necessary to seek committee approval.

Resolved that:

The procurement of the Microsoft Enterprise Licensing Contract was agreed.

120 **Procurement exercises relating to Runnymede owned trees incorporating the procurement of a borough wide tree audit and procurement of a contractor or contractors to deliver tree maintenance and emergency works**

Approval was sought for the procurement of a tree works contractor or suite of contractors to work across all services on Runnymede owned trees, as well as the procurement of a supplier to undertake the audit of Council owned trees on communal land owned by the authority.

Resolved that:

- 1. The procurement of a tree works contractor or suite of contractors to the value set out in the report was approved. The contractor would work across all services on Runnymede owned trees and the work would be funded from existing revenue budgets.**
- 2. The procurement of a supplier to undertake the audit of Runnymede Borough Council owned trees on communal land owned by the authority was approved based on the estimated cost of the work as set out in the report.**

121 **Procurement of Grave Digging Contractor**

The grave digging contract had initially been up for renewal in 2020 but had been waived on an ongoing basis since then. Enquiries had been made about bringing the service inhouse but it was concluded that the workflow was too intermittent to sustain a member of staff in the post on a full-time basis.

Complaints about the spoil overspill in the existing contract was noted, and this would be tightened up in the new contract, whilst it was confirmed that the Council did not currently subsidise the service, although that position may change in future as graveyards fill up.

Resolved that:

The procurement of a company to dig graves as required in Runnymede Cemeteries via an open competitive tender was approved.

122 **Waste Management IT upgrades**

The proposal took a three-pronged approach to the IT around waste management, which would involve the upgrading of handheld devices and improve the digitalisation of how work was allocated and provide lives updates, as well as optimising the technology to ensure depot rounds were balanced. The third strand was the integration with the back office system and the ability to provide real-time updates to residents.

The project had come in below the budget set aside for it and it was confirmed that the local knowledge of drivers would be utilised to sense-check routes to ensure the appropriate optimisation. This would in turn have a knock on effect by reducing the number of miles the vehicles do, reduce fuel consumption and the Council's overall carbon footprint.

Resolved that –

1.The business case for improving waste and recycling operations and service delivery was agreed.

2. The release of the provision set aside in the capital programme already identified for the project was agreed.

3. The release of the provision set aside in the General Fund Revenue Budget and Business Plan for this purpose was agreed.

123 **Referral from Environment & Sustainability Committee: Environmental Services Restructure**

The report, which had been to Environment & Sustainability Committee, sought permission to open a consultation on a cost neutral restructure that would deliver a new management structure for Environmental Health, increased capacity in Green Spaces front line services, including arboriculture and the transfer of street naming and numbering from Engineering to the GIS team giving greater resilience to the GIS team.

Resolved that –

A consultation on the proposed restructure as outlined in the report and to delegate authority to take forward the agreed changes to the head of paid services subject to no significant issues being raised during the consultation exercise was agreed.

124 **Bid Acceptance**

Following the Committee's previous approval to dispose of one of the Council's assets, a marketing exercise had been carried out and multiple enquiries had been received and viewings undertaken.

Following the closure of the marketing window bids had been invited, and officers were recommending a preferred bidder for acceptance.

During the debate the fine balance between the offer and level of overage was discussed by committee.

The time constraints of completing the deal was acknowledged and in order to give officers flexibility in negotiations it was **resolved that –**

1. Committee agreed to the disposal of the property detailed in the report to the recommended bidder

2. Corporate Head of Assets and Regeneration to provide a written update to committee on how negotiations were proceeding with regard to the overage clauses as the deal approached final terms to allow committee the prospect of further deliberations should they be necessary.

125 **Potential Letting at Building 5, Pine Trees**

The proposed letting was for part of the ground floor, with the proposed tenant a relatively new company. Measures had been taken to minimise the risk involving a deposit and guarantor, however the company operated over Europe and had a solid reputation. Should the deal proceed to completion, in addition to the future rental income it would also mean that the Council would no longer have to pay services charges and business rates on the property.

On the basis most of the interest in the unit was based on part of the ground floor it was considered prudent to subdivide the floor regardless of whether the letting or not the letting proceeded to completion. There were limited configuration options open to the subdivision, and all fell within a few square feet. It was confirmed that subdividing the second floor would not be structurally possible due to the fire escape.

Resolved that –

1. Details of the letting on the terms set out in the report were agreed, including the Landlord's works to split the ground floor into two units; and

2. Delegation was agreed for the Assistant Chief Executive (Section 151) and Corporate Head of Assets and Regeneration, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairman of Corporate Management Committee, to be able to make necessary amendments to the proposed terms in order to ensure they progress to completion, provided the deal continues to fulfil the statutory obligation of best consideration reasonably obtainable;

3. In the event the proposed letting did not proceed to completion, the sub-division of the ground floor on a speculative basis was agreed, provided the cost of the works fell within existing budgets.

126 **Asset Disposal**

Following a previous report to Corporate Management Committee where it was resolved that Officers should implement a triple-tracking approach of re-letting, sale and development for the asset, a number of options had been considered and officers were now recommending the freehold disposal of the property on the open market.

During the debate the committee weighed up any offer against the cost of an alternative approach, with holding costs for the asset significant and at odds with the need to proactively manage the property portfolio in an efficient and pragmatic way. It was anticipated that disposing of the asset would allow officers to focus on less and achieve

more.

Whilst the committee was in general agreement with officers' recommendation, it was felt that the process and governance around decisions of this magnitude would require member approval of a total sale figure, therefore following receipt of any offers, officers were advised to present these to a future meeting of Corporate Management Committee.

Resolved that –

- 1) Committee approved the freehold disposal on the open market of the asset listed in the report; and**
- 2) Following receipt of offers the proposed terms be brought back to a subsequent meeting of Corporate Management Committee.**

(The meeting ended at 10.16 pm.)

Chair