

MINUTE

of

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE (FIRST TIER)

Minute of Meeting held at 2.00pm in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Giffnock on 13 February 2020.

Present:

Councillor Tony Buchanan
Councillor Caroline Bamforth

Councillor Stewart Miller

Union Representatives:

Ms Karen Catlow (UNISON)
Mr David James (UNISON)
Ms Lisa Kennedy (EIS)

Mr Steven Larkin (UNISON)
Mr Des Morris (EIS)

Mr Morris in the Chair

Attending:

Lorraine McMillan, Chief Executive; Caroline Innes, Deputy Chief Executive; Margaret McCrossan, Head of Accountancy (Chief Financial Officer); Andy Cahill, Director of Environment; Phil Daws, Head of Environment (Strategic Services); Sharon Dick, Head of HR and Corporate Services; Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager; and Linda Hutchison, Senior Committee Services Officer.

Apologies:

Councillor Paul O’Kane; and Mr Joe Lynch (UNISON).

MINUTE OF PREVIOUS MEETING

1. The committee considered and approved as a correct record the Minute of the meeting held on 14 February 2019.

REVENUE BUDGET 2020/21 AND RELATED ISSUES

2. The Head of Accountancy reported that, following a delay, the 2020/21 Scottish Budget draft grant settlement for local government had been announced on 6 February, confirming it had not covered multiple years as had been anticipated at one stage. Although a real terms increase of over 4% had been announced, she explained that a sum in excess of the increase received required to be allocated to new Scottish Government priorities, mainly associated with Education and the Integration Joint Board (IJB). With those exceptions, the underlying like for like grant support had reduced by 1%, which was very close to the level forecasted. The overall level of funding available for the Council was based on an assumption that councils would increase Council Tax by the maximum level permitted of 4.84%.

Whilst referring further to grant conditions associated with the grant settlement, the Head of Accountancy confirmed that the IJB base budget contributions had to be maintained at a flat cash level prior to any new priority funding being applied and that this restricted the level of savings that could be applied to IJB budgets for 2020/21. Consequently £200k savings the Council had previously agreed to apply to the IJB would have to be reallocated in addition to planned measures to close the authority's budget gap.

Having referred to ongoing negotiations by the Scottish Government on the finalisation of its budget, the Head of Accountancy highlighted that the settlement figures received by the authority could be subject to change, as the Scottish Budget would not be confirmed until 5 March. Furthermore it remained a possibility that the UK Government's budget, to be announced later in March, could impact on the final settlement the Council received.

Regarding capital expenditure, the Head of Accountancy confirmed that there had been an overall 17% reduction in grant for 2020/21, the Council's share of which was £900k. She commented that this was not considered ideal and that it was hoped that this reduction would apply for only one year, but that receiving multi-year settlements in future would be helpful as it would provide more certainty on future funding.

Thereafter, in monetary terms and more detail, she itemised various budget pressures facing the Council, such as in relation to inflation, service demand and contracts, Scottish Government Grant reduction and distribution changes as of February 2020, compared to the estimated position as of February 2019. The position on various savings related issues, such as previously agreed savings and the use of reserves, was also commented on. Related issues referred to included, Council Tax income anticipated in 2020/21 and related matters, such as the projected population growth in East Renfrewshire compared to other areas and the rate at which new houses were being built; and a small reduction in the contribution the Council would make to the Floors arrangement in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. Options open to the Council were also commented on which included increasing Council Tax by the maximum level allowed, the use of reserves, the application of further savings identified, and other savings rejected as a result of previous consultation.

It was clarified that overall, taking account of the latest assessment of spending pressures, an outstanding budget gap of £8.1m for 2020/21 remained to be addressed compared to the original forecast of £5.9m. Existing indicative 2020/21 budget plans had already assumed previously agreed savings of around £7m, the use of £1.5m of general reserves and the application of a 3% Council Tax increase. The related challenge of maintaining the level of Non-Earmarked General Fund reserve at its prudent target level of 4% of annual budgeted net revenue expenditure was commented on.

In conclusion, the Head of Accountancy referred to the need for the Council to set its budget and Council Tax. The possibility of the Scottish Budget being amended in future which could impact on the authority's final settlement and the Council's budget in due course, and challenging savings targets to be met in future when there would not be recourse to use reserves in the same way as in the past were also commented on.

Mr Morris referred to the unusual circumstances and particular challenges facing the authority arising from the General Election in December and related consequences for budgets at a UK, Scottish and local level. Having acknowledged the challenges Elected Members faced and welcomed the opportunity the Trade Unions (TUs) had been given to address the Budget Strategy Group earlier in the day, Mr Larkin confirmed that the TUs were continuing to petition the Scottish Government for a better local government settlement. He also referred to the importance of information being presented clearly, such as on inflation issues.

Councillor Buchanan referred to the need for the Council to make some difficult decisions to enable it to balance its budget, the significant pressures facing the Council in 2020/21 and beyond, and the lack of certainty the Scottish Government was facing on its own final settlement and related uncertainty facing councils on drawing up their final budgets. Having commented that the use of reserves by the Council could help address challenges faced by the authority, but only in the short term, he confirmed that like the TUs, Elected Members were continuing to lobby for additional resources for local authorities.

It was agreed to note the position and comments made.

CREATION OF HEADS OF SERVICE POSTS IN ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT AND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PARTNERSHIP (HSCP)

3. Mr Larkin stressed that UNISON supported job creation, but expressed concern regarding the Heads of Service posts recently created within the Environment Department and HSCP, especially given the restructuring of their services in the relatively recent past. Having expressed the view that this sent a confusing message about the Council's long-term plans, he added that the job remits of many UNISON members had been changed with staff in some cases being asked to take on additional duties, suggesting this could have been an alternative option to the creation of the new posts. Whilst commenting further on why the issue was being raised, Mr Larkin explained that there was a feeling amongst UNISON members that high-level posts were being created, but not others at the other end of the spectrum.

Councillor Buchanan reported that efforts were being made to take a long-term view, but that legislative changes outwith the Council's control and other factors had created a need to establish the posts. Regarding the HSCP, he commented on the need, for example, to address adult and health care service issues, to protect both those who used services and those who delivered them, and for leadership in the interests of delivering the best outcomes. In respect of the Environment Department, he referred to the impact of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, the Council's ambitious plans in terms of future development, and the importance of having the right people in place to manage issues such as these. Having highlighted that only some of these issues and changes had been predicted, Councillor Buchanan added that savings had been realised from past departmental restructures and that the costs associated with the new posts were being met from within existing budgets.

The Director of Environment itemised a wide range of issues that were impacting on his service, including the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, receipt of additional financial resources for roads and the Council's Capital Programme, including provision for the new Leisure Centre in Eastwood Park. Other issues he referred to included, the City Deal, the need to address climate change and sustainability issues, and the Council's house building programme. Whilst acknowledging how the creation of the posts might have been perceived, he clarified that other senior posts had also been created to address issues that needed to be progressed. However these other posts had not been the subject of formal reports as there was provision to deal with these under the Scheme of Delegated Functions. The Director of Environment referred to further departmental restructuring work to be taken forward, confirming that liaison with the TUs on this would take place.

Councillor Bamforth referred to the recruitment of a large number of HSCP staff to enable services to be delivered, emphasising that it was not just high level posts that were being filled.

Mr Larkin supported the need for more staff, but highlighted that some posts had been removed from the establishment previously. He reiterated that UNISON supported job creation and acknowledged the challenges facing the Environment Department and HSCP, commenting that he had been asked to raise the matter in view of perceptions the filling of the posts had created. The Director of Environment acknowledged why the creation of the new Head of Service in his department could have been perceived as it had been.

It was agreed to note the position and comments made.

ANNUAL HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

4. The committee considered a report by the Director of Environment providing an update on progress made on pursuing health and safety objectives during 2018/19, and on the proposed objectives and priorities for the year ahead. A copy of the Council's Corporate Annual Health and Safety Report 2018/19 was appended to the report.

Having clarified that it was considered good practice by the Health and Safety Executive for public bodies to summarise their health and safety performance and plans in their annual reports, it was confirmed that the 2018/19 Annual Report would be published on the intranet and submitted to the General Health and Safety Committee. The high level content within the document, related departmental health and safety reports prepared on a quarterly basis and key achievements of the Corporate Health and Safety Unit (CHSU) in 2018/19 were amongst issues commented on. It was clarified that of equal importance to progressing health and safety issues in 2018/19, was a redesign of the CHSU which had taken place in 2019/20 along with a reassessment of its key objective, further details of which were provided. Various issues to be progressed, such as to improve support for managers to enable them to address their responsibilities and convening a programme of related meetings, were commented on, in addition to which a range of issues, practices and priorities for moving forward were highlighted.

It was concluded that Health and Safety continued to be a fundamental priority and that of equal importance were the structural changes made to the CHSU and its new priorities for 2019/20 and beyond.

The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) explained that the submission of the report to the committee for the first time was in the interests of transparency and emphasised the importance the authority attached to health and safety. In response to Councillor Bamforth, he commented that the rise in accidents and the main reasons for this documented for 2018/19 compared to 2017/18 could reflect a rise in incidents or further awareness of reporting arrangements. He added that further analysis would be carried out and feedback provided, such as at future meetings of the Joint Consultative Committee.

Mr Larkin commented that the rise reported in physical violence incidents was a concern to everyone and required a concerted effort to be made to address and reduce these. The Head of Environment (Strategic Services) acknowledged the importance of doing so, and undertook to raise this at a future meeting of the Council's Health and Safety Committee.

Councillor Buchanan acknowledged the need to address the rise in incidents reported, and welcomed the submission of the report to the committee, noting that issues such as this were being considered and discussed at the Council's Health and Safety Committee.

It was agreed to note:-

- (a) that a health and safety report on Education would be submitted to the Joint Consultative Committee in September; and

- (b) otherwise, the report and related comments made.

HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

5. The committee considered the Minutes of the meetings of the Council's Health and Safety Committee held on 23 July and 22 October 2019.

Whilst referring to the Minute of 22 October 2019, Mr Morris reported that the Working Group established to look at best practice and address violence to staff in respect of which the EIS had reported a significant rise in 2018/19; had met in November 2019 and January 2020, and was scheduled to meet again later in February. He clarified that work was ongoing to reduce such incidents.

The committee noted the Minutes and related comments made.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

6. It was noted that the next meeting of the committee was scheduled to take place on Thursday, 7 May 2020.

BLANK PAGE