



To be submitted to the Council at its meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2023

## **BUDGET SCRUTINY**

**24th January 2023 at 6.00 p.m.**

### **Present:**

Councillors Abel, Aisthorpe, Astbury, Beasant, Cairns, Croft, Farren, Freeston, Hasthorpe, Holland, Patrick, Reynolds, Wheatley and Wilson.

### **Officers in Attendance:**

- Rob Walsh (Joint Chief Executive)
- Sharon Wroot (Executive Director for Place and Resources)
- Carolina Borgstrom (Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure)
- Katie Brown (Director of Adult Social Services)
- Helen Isaacs (Assistant Chief Executive)
- Simon Jones (Assistant Director Law and Governance)
- Janice Spencer (Director of Children's Services)
- Derek Ward (Director of Public Health)
- Paul Windley (Democratic and Scrutiny Team Manager)

### **Also in attendance:**

- Councillor Jackson - Leader of the Council
- Councillor S Swinburn - Portfolio Holder for Environment and Transport
- Councillor Cracknell - Portfolio Holder for Children and Education
- Councillor Furneaux - Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and the Visitor Economy
- Councillor Shepherd - Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities
- Councillor Harness - Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets

## **SPBS.5 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR**

RESOLVED – That Councillor Freeston be appointed as the Chair for this meeting.

## COUNCILLOR FREESTON IN THE CHAIR

### **SPBS.6 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence for this meeting were received from Councillors Brookes, Dawkins and Hudson.

### **SPBS.7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest for this meeting

### **SPBS.8 BUDGET, FINANCE AND COMMISSIONING PLAN 2023/24 – 2025/26**

Members received a report from the from the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Resources and Assets outlining how the Council plans to deliver its agreed financial strategy over the coming three-year period.

Councillor Jackson, Leader of the Council, introduced the report and members were then invited to ask any questions on the draft budget, medium-term financial plan, the draft business plans and the capital programme.

#### Medium Term Financial Plan

A concern was raised about the proposed level of Council Tax increase. Councillor Jackson shared that concern but felt that there were exceptional circumstances this year, including the rate of inflation and the increase in energy costs.

There was a discussion about the Council Tax Hardship Fund. It was noted that the fund was usually well utilised and would be kept under regular review.

In response to a query about whether this council had responded to the provision local government financial settlement, it was confirmed that it had and a copy of the response could be shared with Members.

Concerns were raised about the proposed annual organisation-wide uplift in fees and charges. It was clarified that this related to those services not subject to a separate charging regime and would be reviewed on an annual basis to take account of fluctuations in the Consumer Prices Index. Members were advised that the wording of the recommendation would be looked at so that the proposal was clearer within the report.

In response to a query about the proposed use of capital receipts for transformational purposes within children's services, it was noted that there would be a stand-alone transformation plan for children's services, which would be monitored on a regular basis. More detailed information

on the capital investment strategy would be provided within the final budget report.

On council tax collection rates, it was questioned whether these needed to be reviewed and whether enforcement budgets were sufficient in the current circumstances. It was noted that there had been little fluctuation in collection rates over recent years but they would be kept under continued review.

There was a query about the estimated growth in reserves as set out in the report. Ms Wroot explained that the report did not show the draw down of future reserves and this would be taken away to see if a better way of presenting the information could be found.

### Resources

There were no questions raised by members.

### Environment

There was a query about the proposed waste contract efficiencies. It was noted that the proposed level of savings were based on best estimates and officers' professional views. Enquiries would be made as to whether a more detailed breakdown of the proposal could be provided prior to presentation of the final budget proposals.

Members sought clarification over the disposal of assets and plans to bring empty properties such as heritage assets back into use. Recent examples were given of heritage assets that required too much investment to be disposed of on the open market and through investment had been brought back into use. Members were reminded that the process for disposal of assets was clearly set out in the Council's Constitution.

### Economy and Growth

Members enquired about the estate review and raised concerns regarding a potential budget gap if the land identified could not be sold. It was suggested that unless there had been an indication that land would be sold then it should not be included in the budget proposals.

Ms Wroot noted that there was a well rehearsed process for considering alternative proposals should proposed savings not be achievable. Councillor Jackson added that this was again down to professional judgement and reminded Members that such sales would be capital receipts so options to include in the revenue budget would be limited.

On the suggested review of car parking charges, it was noted that resident parking permits had been increased previously but had not delivered the expected additional income as residents chose to drop out of schemes. Councillor Jackson noted that the proposal was to merely

review charges and acknowledged that this would need to be done with care.

Note – at this point Councillors Aisthorpe and Beasant left the meeting.

There was opposition to the proposed removal of the Phone N Ride Bus Service, particularly given that there had been concerns over the booking process. Councillor S Swinburn clarified that there was an error in the report and the service was not being removed totally but it had been suggested that the number of buses be reduced from three to two, based on usage figures. This was currently the subject of a review, which would also look at the booking system.

### Children And Families

There was a comment about the vision set out in the report and whether it was appropriate in the current circumstances. Councillor Jackson noted that it expressed this administration's vision for children and family services.

There was a query about the level of savings to be achieved by the commissioning team and the future work of the team. It was noted that the figures within the report were recurrent savings. Ms Spencer felt that the team was critical for improvement work being undertaken in the coming months, such as reducing the number of out of area placements.

### Public Health

There were no questions raised by members.

### Adult Services

There were no questions raised by members.

### Capital Programme

There was a query about the viability of the Freshney Place West project given that the council had been unsuccessful with receiving Levelling Up Fund monies for this project. Councillor Jackson commented that there had been no assumption that levelling up funding would be received. He was confident that with the rents currently being realised from Freshney Place, the costs of borrowing and interest payments would be more than covered.

There was a question over the future of the Grant Street car park project. Councillor Jackson reported that this project was under review due to increased interest charges and the outcome would be reported to full Council. In response to a further query about value for money, it was noted that a value for money assessment had been undertaken and would be available to Members, but it was felt that the project should not

proceed as part of the current medium term financial plan.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted and the minutes of this meeting be included as part of the response to the consultation on the proposals.

There being no further business, the Chairman declared the meeting closed at 8.04 p.m.