

Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 14 February 2018

Attendance

Members of the Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Louise Miles (Chair)
Cllr Ian Brookfield
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Stephen Simkins
Cllr Andrew Wynne (Vice-Chair)

In Attendance

Cllr Andrew Johnson (Cabinet Member for Resources)

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Claire Nye (Director of Finance)
Mark Bassett (Director Future Space Programme)
Andy Moran (Service Director for Commercial Services)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha, Cllr Udey Singh and Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 **Minutes of previous meeting**
The minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed as a correct record subject to the following changes in item 6

- A) The rewording of the sentence, “In the past, there had been a different process which had meant calculating the deficit and dividing this by number of properties,” to the following :-

“Increases in Council Tax in the past had been calculated by dividing the Council Tax requirement by the tax base.”

- B) The word “increase” being inserted in the line, “Now there could only be up to 1.99% [Insert - **increase**] without having to hold a referendum.”

4 **Matters arising**

The Chair gave an update on the work of the Specific Reserves Working Group. They did have some concerns over the presentation of the material the working group had received and in the future, they had indicated they wanted to see the exact spend. As an example, she cited information the group had received on Education reserves, should have had more detail. She proposed in future there would be a more in-depth look at reserves more generally. There had also been some separate preliminary discussions about the possibility of forming a Budget Task and Finish Group.

5 **Budget 2018-2019 - Outcome of Consultation**

The Cabinet Member for Resources introduced a report on the Budget Consultation. A total of 669 people had taken part in the budget consultation survey. All of the budget reductions for the forthcoming budget were as a result of financial transaction changes, income generation or efficiency savings, which had not resulted in any proposed changes to overall service delivery. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained he believed this was one of the main reasons there was less interest in the budget consultation compared to last year, where waste and recycling changes featured more prominently. A number of valuable meetings had been held, including four different community meetings spread across Wolverhampton. A meeting had taken place with the Equality and Diversity forum, the in-house trade unions and the business community. The meeting with the business community had been particularly well attended. There had also been a meeting with the Youth Council, which had been a very valuable and worthwhile discussion as part of the consultation process. They had tried to keep the costs of the consultation down to a minimum and engage as many people as possible, which included the utilisation of social media.

The Director of Finance referred to a document which had been tabled by the Head of Corporate Communications which outlined the approach taken to the budget consultation. Many of the mechanisms utilised, allowed the budget consultation to reach a wider audience and at little to no cost, such as the social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter. The Council’s Facebook account had nearly 59,000 subscribers. Cllr Brookfield stated she was pleased to see the Equality and Diversity forum had been included. She stated she wanted to receive the attendance list from the meeting and who had been invited to attend.

A Panel Member asked why in paragraph 3.7 of the report it referred to 569 respondents, when earlier in the report it had said there had been 669. The Cabinet Member for Resources confirmed this was an error and the figure in paragraph 3.7

should have read 669. He asked what the Director of Finance views were on encouraging more people to take part in the consultation. In response, the Director of Finance stated each year they were trying to do different things to promote the consultation. They tried to spread the consultation events across the City and held the meetings in the evenings to allow people who worked during the day to attend. She did recognise that the weather during the Autumn could be inclement and it was also dark when the meetings were taking place. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated they had listened to feedback from the previous year and had staggered the events across different days rather than on the same weekday. This was because some people worked a specific evening on the same day each week. Since the venue had been changed at Bilston, due to previous feedback, the attendance figures had disappointingly reduced. The Chair stated promoting youth engagement to a greater level, in the budget consultation, was something which could be encouraged in the future.

A Panel Member asked at what point did the numbers attending public consultation events become so low that the Council ceased to hold them and did the Council try to learn from what other authorities were doing regarding budget consultation. In response the Cabinet Member for Resources stated the Council always tried to learn from other local authorities and information was shared between authorities. The budget consultation was however specific to the local area and was related to how the proposals would impact on a particular community. Public meetings were only one of the mechanisms for the consultation. The Chair referred to the legislation on budget consultation which in summary showed a requirement for the Council to be seen to be conducting a fair and equitable process.

A Panel Member stated it would have been helpful if the report had contained information on how the budget consultation response figures compared to neighbouring authorities, such as Sandwell or Dudley or even nationally. He added that benchmarking of data at a sub-regional, regional and national level would be helpful to the scrutiny process, as such data would help determine how much resource was put into the budget consultation process by other authorities. He asked for a future report to contain contextualised information on a sub-regional, regional and national level. The Panel Member stated that the breakdown of the people who had responded to the budget consultation survey by age, gender, ethnicity, religion and disability, whilst interesting information, would have been more useful if it had been shown comparatively to Wolverhampton's overall population. It would have enabled them to have seen contextually if it was a good representation of the overall population in Wolverhampton.

A Panel Member stated consultation response rates were directly correlated to how controversial the issues were being consulted on. Communication of change was very important for the Council. He cited adult community care as an example. He added the Council needed to utilise learning from other areas to develop understanding as to how best to communicate change. This would help to make changes in services as smooth a process as possible.

The Chair asked if there had been any changes to the forthcoming budget as a consequence of the budget consultation process. The Cabinet Member for Resources confirmed there had been no changes because of the budget consultation process. The information obtained had however gone into the general forecasting for

the future. A lot more consultation was needed for adult care in the future and some of this needed to take place with individuals and families.

A Panel Member stated that alongside the budget consultation process it needed to be explained how budgets were set. Many members of the general public were unaware of precepts for the Police, Fire Authority, and potentially the West Midlands Combined Authority. They saw the Council Tax as just being solely for the Council. There were other areas which required education such as business rates and how Local Government was funded.

A Panel Member stated there were many community groups and special interest groups which the Council could talk to about the budget setting process. This could work better than inviting people to general budget consultation events.

The Cabinet Member for Resources stated it had been a meaningful consultation, although there had not been many suggested specific changes to the forthcoming budget, from those that had responded.

6 **Future Use of the Civic Centre**

The Future Space Programme Director and Service Director for Commercial Services gave a presentation on the future use of the Civic Centre.

The Future Space Programme Director stated essential repairs had been carried out on the Civic Centre to extend its use to more than thirty years. There had been a significant risk to the building before the repairs, including building failure and in the mechanical and electrical systems. The Future Space Project, with the support of the Executive and the Full Council, had been conceived to rectify these problems. As part of the project there was an opportunity to introduce some new elements to the building, including a new Customer Service Centre. To make a solid business case, the Council would be reducing its use of buildings which were no longer fit for purpose. The intention was to reduce the use of twenty buildings down to four. The business case highlighted 2000 people would be working from the Civic Centre, which was an increase of approximately 600 people, but the total number of desks at the Civic Centre would be kept at a similar number. This was possible by enabling more modern working practice and recognising people were not always at a desk within the Civic Centre, whilst they were carrying out Council work. Employees could also use meeting rooms and breakout areas. The business case demonstrated there would be savings of at least £500,000 per annum once the buildings were rationalised down to four.

A Panel Member stated his experience of hot desking had been less than favourable. Unless it was very well managed he found it to be a counterproductive policy leading to less effective communication within teams. He felt it important to ensure there would be enough desks at any one time to keep up with the demand. It was therefore important to calculate the figures correctly. A Panel Member asked how

the Council was going to judge the productivity of new ways of working, adding he felt productivity was key as it equated to service delivery for the general public. He asked what a reasonable time would be to know if the new working practices were effective and expressed a desire for the item to come back to the Panel in the future to address the question.

The Future Space Director stated there wasn't hot desking taking place at the Civic Centre at the present time. It was rather, a sharing of desks within teams. Teams were allocated areas within the building. Managers had been consulted to understand how much space was needed for each of the teams. Due to each team having their own area within a zone, effective communication was still taking place. Some employees were out of the building on field work the majority of their time, meaning the number of desks did not need to equate to the total number of employees. The Chair stated the Leader of the Council had asked Scrutiny to consider if Community Groups could rent space within the Civic Centre. She felt this was potentially problematic, but reserved judgement.

A Panel Member asked what the current occupancy rate was of desks on a typical afternoon at the Civic Centre. In response, the Future Space Director estimated it was at 70-80% under the current circumstances, it was however a changing picture as some of the building was still being refurbished and teams were still moving in from other Council buildings. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated the public sector was still behind the private sector regarding how ICT changed how people worked. ICT enabled people to work remotely and input information into the central system, which was a more efficient way of working.

A Panel Member commented that the temporary accommodation which had been put in place for Councillors had worked efficiently, even though there was only a handful of work stations. In the past rooms allocated for specific Councillor roles had been empty 95% of the time. He had not heard any negative comments from the Licensing and Legal teams about the new desk arrangements. He was in favour of the clear desk policy. The Chair referred to the desk inspections which were undertaken to ensure there were no personal items on desks. It was confirmed that all staff had access to a personal locker.

A Panel Member asked about work station health and safety assessments and the importance of a work station being catered to meet the needs of individuals with specific requirements. The Future Space Programme Director stated the self-assessment online tool had been updated. After an individual had completed the form, the results were analysed and any reasonable adjustments and equipment were provided.

The Future Space Programme Director said each floor had zones. This was important for people to navigate their way around the building. Each floor had a different colour to make it more identifiable. Further physical signs and digital information were planned in the future. The signs in place had been checked for suitability for people with a visual impairment and had braille on them. There would be a new adult changing places facility on the ground floor allowing unassisted changing within the Civic Centre. There were split level reception counters and additional automatic sliding doors in the main concourse. He was pleased to report

there were additional hearing loops in the main meeting rooms, of which there had been an overall increase.

The Future Space Programme Director stated there would be a single fire alarm system and there was also additional fire compartmentation within the building. They had been working closely with colleagues in building control and fire risk assessors. This had resulted in putting in new staircase lobbies and refuges. There would also be better protection around the lift lobbies and risk assessments had been updated. The Future Space Programme had ensured the Civic Centre had received significant fire safety improvements. The Chair stated the issue of the fire alarm had been discussed as part of the Council's Fire Safety Review Group. There were two fire alarms systems in the Civic Centre due to historical reasons, she was pleased there would only be one system in the future.

The Future Space Programme Director stated all asbestos in the construction area had been removed. There was still some asbestos in the building but it was significantly less than before the refurbishment had commenced. The asbestos management plan had been updated in liaison with Corporate Landlord colleagues. Some asbestos had been discovered which had not been expected during the refurbishment works. The contractor had managed this within the programme, which included incidences when it had needed to be notified to the Health and Safety Executive. The contractor had been very responsible and their project plan had been realistic for the age of the Civic Centre. The contractor realised that initial surveys would not be able to show all the potential problems in the Civic Centre before the commencement of works. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated significant contingency had been included within the budget. It had been unforeseen that there had been some asbestos in Committee Room Three, which had required a specialist removal team. This had caused some delays to the plans for the third floor.

A Panel Member asked if there were any plans for childcare provision within the Civic Centre. The Future Space Programme Director stated it had not been part of their scope. The Chair stated the University of Wolverhampton had childcare provision. The Cabinet Member for Resources commented, when it had been discussed in the distant past there had been a question over who would have access to the childcare provision and the idea had thus never progressed further. He added the Council tried where possible to avoid meetings in school holidays, enabling staff to take holidays when children were not at school.

A Panel Member asked about the recent flood in the Civic Centre. The Future Space Programme Director in response said a water pipe had leaked and they were currently trying to understand why this had occurred. The flood had gone through several floors. They were looking to mitigate any delays because of the flood. The new nature of the building had meant teams had been relocated without any downtime in service provision. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated there would be a delay in handover for part of the first floor. The main damage had been in the Mezzanine area which was outside the scope of Future Space. The insurers were currently assessing the level of damage.

The Service Director for Commercial Services stated there were a number of different types of people who visited the Civic Centre. In the building previously there had been a lot of open public areas on different floors. The Future Space design meant general public access was restricted to the ground floor. There were two main

reasons for this which were security and fire safety. Another reason was concerning efficiency of operating the building and a consistency of user experience. There would be two entrances to the building, a Customer Services Reception at the front of the Civic Centre, whose main function was to meet and greet the public and a Business Reception at the back. Many employees who worked in the back office had transferred to Customer Services, as a result the majority of enquiries could be dealt with in the Customer Services area at the first point of contact.

The Service Director for Commercial Services said he would provide the monthly customer service statistics to the Panel about the type of reasons why people had visited the Civic Centre. In the next couple of months, the Business Reception would open at the back of the building, where the Keepers Desk used to be located. The appearance of the Business Reception would be very similar to the one at the front of the Civic Centre. The main function of the Business Reception would be to meet and greet visitors, who weren't visiting for a general customer services enquiry. Contractors would also be registered at the Business Reception. All Councillors and Employees would continue to have an ID badge which operated the access gate and had to be worn at all times. Visitors would only be allowed inside the gates under specific circumstances and had to be accompanied. The gates and doors had been installed in accordance with the Future Space Access and Security Strategy.

The Service Director for Commercial Services stated meetings with individual members of the public would continue to take place in the Customer Services area at the front of the building. It was proposed that Councillor meetings with the general public would take place in the Business Visitor Lounge area at the back of the building, where there would be three meeting rooms and a Changing Places facility. Business visitors would be issued with a temporary ID Badge but would not be able to get through the security gates on their own. The Business Reception would contact the person they were visiting, who would accompany them through the secure area. They were trying to encourage people to use public transport. Parking on the Ceremonial car park would be in accordance with the current Ceremonial Car Parking Protocol.

The Service Director for Commercial Services stated Contractors would be registered at the Business Reception. They would be issued with temporary time limited ID badges, which would operate the gates. They would only be issued with a pass if they had provided proof of identity and undertaken an induction by Corporate Landlord. With regard to public meetings, they were still working on a process to control access. As the meetings rooms were on the third and fourth floors, careful consideration had to be given to security and access requirements. This included people who required special assistance during an evacuation. They were also considering introducing bag checks for security reasons, which were quite common in other places, as the risk profile had changed. Appropriate training would have to be given to staff. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated bag checking would have been introduced even if the Future Space project had not occurred. The Chair stated, The Grand Theatre in Wolverhampton now checked bags. A Panel Member stated there needed to be an adequate number of staff trained in bag checking and a clear policy to avoid cases of discrimination. Careful thought needed to be given to the time it would take for people to go through the process.

The Service Director for Commercial Services stated they were giving careful consideration to the best location within the Civic Centre for evening and weekend

meetings. The Cabinet Member for Resources said the intention was to start using the public meeting rooms on the third and fourth floor in April. A Panel Member stated it was important for people who were coming to give evidence at Council meetings to easily access the building, especially as the meetings were often in the evenings.

The Services Director for Commercial Services stated the requirements for special events would be co-ordinated by the organiser supported by Customer Services, Facilities Management and Parking Services. For Mayoral visitors, in groups, the Group Leader would be issued with an ID badge. The Mayoral Team would accompany them throughout the Civic Centre. If it was not a group, the normal business visitor arrangements would be applicable. A Panel Member stated careful thought needed to be given to Mayoral events. He added groups could often be larger than anticipated, citing the standard bearers an example, which were over twenty people and could not really be classified as a group, rather a large number of individuals. He suggested Officers peruse the Mayoral Invitation book which would help give an idea as to what to expect. Other Members suggested invitations should allow for the extra time to clear security. It was important that meetings were not disrupted by people arriving late. The Services Director for Commercial Services stated there were no changes planned to car parking arrangements at the present time.

The Panel thanked Officers for the temporary Council accommodation provided, which had worked very efficiently. The Cabinet Member for Resources stated the temporary Councillor accommodation space would be assessed as to how it would be best used in the future. There were several options which included commercially renting the area, bringing more staff in from other Council buildings and use by community groups. The use of the Mezzanine level also needed to be assessed. A Panel Member stated demand and financial viability needed to be addressed before decisions could be made as to its use. The Chair stated integration in the building by outside groups was unlikely because of many reasons including confidentiality and security issues. There was potential, though, for the Councillor temporary accommodation area to be used by an outside group. A Panel Member requested the future use of the Mezzanine Level and the temporary Council accommodation area as a future agenda item for the Panel.

The Panel thanked the Cabinet Member of Resources, who was standing down in May, for his contribution over many years.

The meeting closed at 7:55pm