

**Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel- 25 November 2019
Draft Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy
2020-2021 to 2023-2024 Report
Minute Extract**

A report was considered seeking the Panel's feedback on the budget relevant to its remit and how it was aligned to the priorities of the Council.

In addition to this, the Panel's feedback was also sought on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2020-2021 to 2023-2024 that was presented to Cabinet on 16 October 2019 including budget proposals relevant to the remit of the Panel.

The Panel welcomed the Finance Business Partner to the meeting. It was noted that the format of the report was slightly different this year. The net revenue budget 2019-2020 for Stronger City Economy was £6.4 million and the approved General Fund capital programme 2019-2020 to 2023-2024 was £159.6 million.

The Panel queried the format of the reports and the fact that income was shown in parenthesis which was different to how some members were used to seeing it; there was concern that it could lead to confusion.

It was noted that businesses and local authorities had to abide by different accounting rules and officers agreed to circulate copies of the appropriate guidance from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

The Panel considered that many of the items under its consideration dealt with improving and changing the City to attract more people and increase footfall. Concerns were therefore raised about the table on page 15 of the agenda which appeared to show a weaker budget in this area when a stronger budget was required if the aims of the Council and the aspirations of the Panel were to be realised.

The Panel referred to the City Learning Quarter budget listed on pg. 16 of the report and were understanding as to why a large budget was required for this but queried what the Targeting Disposals Programme was. Officers confirmed that this dealt with properties the Council owned that they were looking to dispose of in order to make the Council's estate more efficient.

The Panel also considered the tremendous impact that Wolves at Work had had on the City and questioned the proposal to discontinue its funding. Officers explained that they were currently looking for ways to fund the initiative into the future and confirmed that money from the City Learning Quarter and Cultural Estates could not be used as one was capital and the other was revenue.

The Panel questioned whether there might be any funding available through the West Midlands Combined Authority to help fund Wolves at Work which had now

helped get just under 5000 residents into work and facilitated 600 business engagements (more than had been originally expected).

Officers stated that there had originally been £1.5 million input for the Council to Wolves at Work and £1.5 million from the Department for Work and Pensions and it was incumbent on the Council to evidence how it had used these devolved funds. There was another year of funding up to 2021 and it was important for the Council to make the initiative sustainable and prove this to the West Midlands Combined Authority and Central Government. Officers were also looking at what funding might be available from Europe.

The Panel considered that a potential source of funding might be businesses that had benefitted from the initiative and stated that it was vital that the Council found a way to sustain this very successful model.

The Panel queried whether there were any figures to show the real impact the initiative had led to and the knock-on effect of people now being in work and not at home and issues such as medical costs. Officers agreed that yes, this information needed to be included in a clear business case and the value that Wolves at Work added to the City as a whole needed to be highlighted. The Panel considered that it would cost more in the long term if the project were to stop.

It was confirmed that Work Box was the online platform for Wolves at Work where people were able to find out how to get skills and training to get work ready. Wolves at Work then took over when they were work ready and this included monitoring all work placements for the first 12 weeks.

The Panel considered whether more funding might be available if Wolves at Work became a voluntary service and it was confirmed that all options were being considered and that the project did already work very closely with partners in the voluntary sector.

Officers stated that the team had worked hard on building relationships and identified something quite unique in Wolves at Work which was now seen as a trusted and credible company with a knock-on effect that had helped to increase transport links for people placed in work; and salaries as the Council requested those businesses it work with pay the living wage.

It was confirmed that the i54 western extension was a jointly funded project with South Staffs.

Resolved: That the Panel:

1. Provide feedback to Scrutiny Board for consolidation and onward response to Cabinet on the budget relevant to the remit of this Panel and how it is aligned to the priorities of the Council.

2. Provide feedback to Scrutiny Board for consolidation and onward response to Cabinet on Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2020-2021 to 2023-2024 including budget proposals that are relevant to the remit of this Panel.
3. Approve that the Scrutiny Panel response be finalised by the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Panel and forwarded to Scrutiny Board for consideration.