

Report of Scrutiny Committee

1. This report summarises the business considered at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 8 February 2021.

Budget 2021/22 and Summary Position over the Medium Term

2. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Assets (Councillor Matthew Tomlinson) and the Section 151 Officer (James Thomson) presented the Council's proposed Revenue Budget for 2021/22 and forecasts for the two years thereafter.
3. We were assured that the council was in a healthy and robust financial position.
4. We were pleased to note that approximately 100 responses had been received to the online consultation so far. Other stakeholders, such as Lancashire County Council, would be consulted with once the budget was approved by Cabinet and we were encouraged to publicise the consultation to residents in their wards.
5. We queried why consultation was already underway as the report stated it would not begin until after receiving Cabinet's approval but were advised that the Cabinet Member and officers wanted to facilitate as much consultation with the public as possible.
6. We queried the projected deficit in business rates income and asked if these could be redistributed from other authorities. In response, it was advised that such practice was subject to government approval but that spreading the deficit over a number of years if income fell short would be permitted. However, the Section 151 Officer expressed confidence in the income levels of business rates and did not anticipate any major impact from the projected deficit.
7. The Cabinet Member responded to one of our queries regarding the temporary impacts of COVID-19 and Brexit on income through fees and charges and expressed confidence that these would not be permanent. An increase in subscriptions to the green waste scheme and in income through planning applications was highlighted as assurance.
8. We discussed funding for My Neighbourhood Community Hubs and were advised that each Hub would have financial autonomy as long as spending complied with the council's corporate priorities.
9. In reference to additional funding to invest in the council's priorities, we queried how value-for-money would be ensured and what return was anticipated. In response we were informed that a return on investment in all corporate priorities was expected and that value-for-money would be assessed in terms of both financial outcomes and social value.
10. We welcomed commitment to including members in the development of the Council's transformation programme and was pleased to note that a review of the council's reserves was ongoing and that the community hubs and credit union had been partially funded from reserves.

11. We were interested to hear what financial opportunities the in-house management of leisure services would bring and were informed that it would support the local economy by keeping money in South Ribble. We requested regular progress updates on leisure centre management.
12. We were also reassured that the capital programme was deliverable and realistic.
13. We asked the Cabinet Member if the Scrutiny Committee had been fair in its questioning and how it could be more robust in scrutinising future budgets. In response, the Cabinet Member welcomed our work and questions and expressed belief in the value of the committee's role in the decision-making process.
14. Hopes were expressed that the budget could be considered earlier in the year by the Scrutiny Committee going forwards and we were receptive to this.
15. We thanked the Cabinet Member and the Section 151 Officer for their attendance.

Worden Hall Progress Update

16. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Assets, Councillor Matthew Tomlinson, presented an update on the progress of the Worden Hall project.
17. We were informed that the planning application for the project was awaiting an ecology report and was anticipated to be considered by the Planning Committee in March 2021.
18. Procurement for the enabling works had begun and it was expected that first works would take place on the site by the end of March.
19. We queried whether the Council had officers with the expertise to manage a project of this scale and were advised in response that this was not an expertise area that the council had in-house. A contract for the project management of the project had been awarded to a South Ribble-based company.
20. We were pleased to note the Cabinet Member's assurances that the project was still on schedule to be completed by June 2022.
21. We requested that a site visit be undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.
22. We agreed that progress updates on the project would now be provided to alternating meetings.
23. We thanked the Cabinet Member for his attendance.

Recommendation(s)

That Council note the report.

COUNCILLOR DAVID HOWARTH
CHAIR OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
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