

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 10th February 2014

Present: Councillor J Oakes (Chair)
Councillors Bleakley, Creaser, Essex (sub), Hughes, Pilling,
Procter and Keith Pilkington (Co-opted member).

In Attendance: Phil Seddon, Head of Finance and Property Services
Andrew Buckle, Head of Customer Services and ICT
Alison Wilkins, Locality Manager
Tamzin Percival, Parks and Open Spaces Manager
Councillor Barnes, Leader, RBC
Councillor Serridge, Deputy Leader, RBC
Councillor Marriott, Portfolio Holder, RBC
Councillor Lamb, Portfolio Holder, RBC
Councillor Robertson, RBC
Carolyn Sharples, Committee and Member Services Manager

2 members of the public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Milling (Councillor Essex subbing).

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETINGS

Resolved:

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 18th November 2014 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Essex declared an interest in minute 8 and minute 11 that he was a member of the Free Lane Allotment Society and also that the trees behind his house were RBC's.

Councillor Oakes declared an interest in minute 8 that she was Acting Secretary of Stacksteads Allotment Society, and minute 12 that she rents a house and had completed a budget consultation form.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair agreed to deviate from the Procedure for Public Speaking and allow the members of the public to ask questions as the reports were discussed.

No questions were raised at this point.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The chair asked members if the agenda could be re-ordered to take item D1 last.

Resolved:

That members agree to item D1 being moved to the end of the agenda.

7. MEMBERS MOBILE PHONE POLICY

The Head of Customer Services and ICT presented the report. The policy had been to a previous meeting where further changes and clarification on costs had been requested. The policy now provided clarification for members and was more user friendly. A further change to the policy was required in relation to phone use in vehicles and the policy would be going back to JCC for this change. The Head of Customer Services and ICT informed that the policy would be brought back to Overview and Scrutiny following these changes.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- Yearly cost of member's mobile phones including calls.
- New phone contract in place and significant savings made.
- Clearer than before and more helpful for members.

In response to a question the Head of Customer Services and ICT agreed to provide the yearly cost of member's mobile phones including calls and include the details in the minutes. The costs for 2012/13 were £6,420.51 and for 2013/14 £4,580.67.

Resolved:

That Corporate Scrutiny Committee recommend that the Member's Mobile Phone Policy comes back once changes are made at the JCC meeting.

8. DEVELOPMENT OF ALLOTMENT SITES IN ROSSENDALE

The Locality Manager presented the report, and outlined the main recommendations including the self-management of sites. Advantages of self-management of sites and 25 year leases included better access to grant funding and more control over the sites.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- £5000 funding available.
- Unanimous support in Helmshore.
- Clarification on figures for path repairs and grass cutting costs.
- Skip provision for the last 2 years.
- Funding will help societies bring in more grant funding.
- Good to see allotments boosted and support for communities.

- Tree work and boundary wall cover.

In response to questions raised regarding the figures for path repairs and grass cutting costs, the Locality Manager clarified that path repair costs were for the main path and did not include Neighbourhood Forum funding for minor paths or side paths, and the costs for grass cutting were budgeted costs and not actual costs. The Locality Manager also confirmed that £250 would cover the tree work and boundary wall liabilities as detailed in 5.11 as there were no imminent medium term costs.

Resolved:

1. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet that Free Lane Allotments be self-managed by Free Lane Community Allotment Society on a 25 year lease as at Appendix 1, at an annual rent of £250, reviewed after 5 years, inflation linked.
2. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet the creation of two new allotment sites on Rossendale Borough Council land in Stacksteads and Loveclough and for these sites to be leased on a self-managed basis to the appropriate community association on a 25 year lease, initially at a peppercorn rent, to be reviewed after 5 years, inflation linked.
3. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet that £5000 from the 2013/14 Communities Team budget be allocated between Free Lane, Stacksteads and Limy Valley allotment societies as a one off grant to work with a suitable organisation to develop plans and submit grant funding applications.
4. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet that the new arrangements detailed in this report replace the current Allotments Policy approved by Cabinet in 2009.
5. That all future minor amendments to the Council's allotments policy be delegated to the Director of Business in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL ENFORCEMENT POLICY

The Locality Manager presented the report and policy, which outlined the Council's priorities and timescales for enforcement. Flytipping and dog fouling had been identified as priorities. Bin issues were being dealt with by Henrietta Street. A briefing had been done for switchboard to let them know who to refer enquiries to. An article had also been placed in the Members' Bulletin.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- Switchboard need to know where to direct enquiries.
- Service levels and cost of dog warden service.
- Section to explain who people need to contact, e.g. other agencies that they can contact directly.
- Booklet with Council Tax forms.

In response to questions from members, the Locality Manager confirmed that dog patrols incurred additional costs and that they were currently reviewing value for money. She also confirmed that information on the web would be made clear for members of the public.

Resolved:

1. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend Cabinet to approve Rossendale Borough Council's Environmental Enforcement Policy.
2. That all future minor amendments to the policy be delegated to Head of Health, Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

10. UPDATE ON CHANGES TO GROUNDS MAINTENANCE

The Parks and Open Spaces Manager presented the report, which was an update as a result of the June Cabinet decision. There had been strong community support and a lot of development had been happening. Gateways and cemeteries would remain high priority but here would be tough decisions to make on low priority sites. Grass cutting sites had been looked at individually, however if members had any comments about specific areas they could contact her directly. The document would be amended and updated as required and would be reviewed annually.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- Charging bowling clubs for winter use.
- Very interesting meeting with groups and engaging them.
- Good work, congratulations and setting examples to other groups.
- Ward councillor discussions about grass cutting.
- No grass in some of the places on the list.
- Was it good value for money?
- Grass strimming at Free Lane.
- Who was consulted in Helmshore?

In response to questions from members the Parks and Open Spaces Manager confirmed that a members' session had been run last year and information had been placed in the Members' Bulletin in relation to grass cutting. It was difficult to work out costs for small areas as the costs were based on the number of staff, equipment, salary rates and the number of metres of grass to be cut in the borough. The Locality Manager confirmed that the costs displayed were budgeted costs and possible saving and not necessarily the actual costs spent. The Parks and Open Spaces Manager informed that the Friends of Snighole had been consulted last year and members had been invited. The Citizens' Panel had also been consulted.

Councillor Barnes encouraged members to contact the Parks and Open Spaces Manager if there was anything on the grass cutting list that was an error.

Councillor Oakes proposed the recommendation detailed in the report and also recommended that an annual update be brought to Overview and Scrutiny.

Resolved:

That Corporate Scrutiny recommend to Cabinet the proposed changes to the grounds maintenance schedule and that an annual update be provided to Overview and Scrutiny.

11. TREE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Parks and Open Spaces Manager presented the report, and informed that the Council had no previous policy in relation to tree management. The policy would provide clear guidance for decision making and make the Council less open to legal challenge. The policy would assist with prioritising work, managing tree stocks and protecting and improving landscapes. The policy also listed the relevant acts and legislation which would be formally adopted along with the policy.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- Professionalism and skills of the team working on Schofield Woods.
- Number of enquiries as a result of high hedges.
- A market for work if there is capacity within the team.
- Work plan.
- Would fallen or damaged trees be a priority?
- Informing ward councillors if trees are to be removed and the reasons why.
- Memorial trees on Council land.
- Is height a priority?
- Charges for assistance under the High Hedges Act as detailed at 8.2 of the policy.

In response to questions from members the Parks and Open Spaces Manager confirmed that if there are signs that a tree needed priority attention it would be dealt with. High trees would not always be priority, it was more about safety. Suggestions for memorial trees on Council land would need to be made in writing and would need to take into account species and location. The Parks and Open Spaces Manager agreed to find out how much the charge was in relation to high hedges.

Resolved:

1. That Corporate Scrutiny recommend Cabinet to approve the Tree Management Policy.
2. That all future minor amendments to the policy be delegated to the Parks and Open Spaces Manager in consultation with the Portfolio Holder.

12. 2014/2015 REVENUE BUDGET, COUNCIL TAX SETTING AND THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

The Head of Finance and Property Services presented the report and took members through each of the recommendations.

The Head of Finance and Property Services informed members of:

- Settlement from government that had been confirmed on 8th February.
- Increase in the revenue budget by £100k for the capital budget.

- £100k Haslingden Town Centre fund.
- £50k drainage and flood prevention schemes.
- £27k to support the apprenticeship scheme.
- Savings and service efficiencies.
- Net resources and comparisons over the medium term.
- 2015/2016 was the last year of certainty in relation to government resources.
- Need to find savings of 1.5 million over the medium term.
- Key assumptions and forecast going forward.
- £500k-£600k deficit beyond 2015/2016, but balanced for 2014/2015.
- Level of Council Tax retained at current level.
- Lancashire Fire and Rescue and Whitworth Town Council had confirmed 0%. Police and Lancashire County Council were still to confirm.
- Consultation on discounts on empty properties and reduction to 50% discount, however there were some exemptions still in place.
- Business rate relief scheme and emphasis on supporting retail establishments.
- Business rate invoices will be sent without the discount, but any discount will be applied retrospectively owing to difficulties with software.
- Council Tax freeze and investment into 3 areas.
- 1.4 million savings in this year's budget.
- Over the last 4-5 years there has been approx. 5 million savings from the core budget.

In considering the report members discussed the following:

- Welcome investment in Haslingden and the apprentice scheme.
- Disturbing reading after 2016/2017.
- Is it possible to make cuts and maintain levels of service?
- Revenue for 2016/2017?
- There are sometimes genuine reasons why properties are empty.
- Comparison of empty property discounts with other authorities.
- £150k rental from one windfarm extension.
- Would a planning application for the windfarm go to RBC committee?
- Position in relation to Marl Pits and the extra income to pay off the loan.
- Page 10 third paragraph was repeated and needed deleting.

In response to questions from members the Head of Finance and Property Services informed that:

- Beyond 2015/2016 there was a gap of £½ million and there would be a need to do as much as possible prior to this to make the necessary savings.
- There was some evidence that there might be future gain in relation to business rates but information was only just coming through.
- New Hall Hey would be a positive shortly and there were initiative to reduce bad debts in NNDR.
- The authority was using the base line and not using the safety net position like some other local districts were using.
- In relation to wind turbines the proposed expansion of Scout Moor would mean that the authority would keep the total business rates and would generate rent from Council land.
- There would be a need to plan to find £½ million in 2015/2016.

- Comparisons of empty property discounts with other authorities had been provided in a previous Cabinet report.
- The repayment of the loan in relation to Marl Pits was a year behind the business plan. The Council had invested £250k last year and £300k to support the loan.

Councillor Barnes also confirmed that a planning application for windfarm expansion would not be determined locally as it was on Council land. It was likely that it would be determined by the Infrastructure Body, but given the strong national policy it would be unlikely that it would be refused.

Members of the public asked the following questions:

- Was it a subsidy?
- The continuation of PCSO support?
- Had there been an income stream created from the recent investment in leisure?
- What was happening with Haslingden Pool and was it up for sale?
- There was nothing in the report about the demolition of the old One Stop Shop building.

In response to questions from members of the public the Head of Finance and Property Services confirmed that there was an assumption of £35k for PCSO's. An October Cabinet report had explained the strategy for the pool site. A potential tenant had been lined up for the old Town Hall annex.

Resolved:

That Overview and Scrutiny note the report and make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That Cabinet reconfirms and recommends to Council the following Corporate Priorities:
 - Regenerating Rossendale: This priority focuses on regeneration in its broadest sense, so it means supporting communities that get on well together, attracting investment, promoting Rossendale, as well as working as an enabler to promote the physical regeneration of Rossendale.
 - Responsive Value for Money Services: This priority is about the Council working collaboratively, being a provider, procurer and a commissioner of services that are efficient and that meet the needs of local people.
 - Clean Green Rossendale: This priority focuses on clean streets and town centres and well managed open spaces, whilst recognising that the Council has to work with communities and as a partner to deliver this ambition.
2. That the Cabinet recommends to Council the additional costs for 2014/15 as noted in para' 5.3
3. That the Cabinet notes the savings for 2014/15 as noted in para' 5.4 and detailed further in para' 5.6.
4. That Cabinet recommends to Council the use during 2014/15 of:
 - £29,000 from the Transitional Reserve to support the 2014/15 annual budget.

- £177,000 from the Directors Reserves to support the Investment initiatives noted in paragraph 5.3.
 - £20,000 from the Directors reserve to support the Area Forums as noted in para 5.3.
5. As a consequence of the above, the Cabinet recommends to Council a net revenue budget for 2014/15 of £8,904,000
 6. That the Cabinet recommend to Council to freeze Council Tax and that the Band D equivalent for 2014/15 remains at £253.40.
 7. That Cabinet recommends to Council the changes to Fees and Charges as noted in Appendix 2
 8. That Cabinet recommends to Council the annual inflation increase in relation to Member Allowances is not applied.
 9. That Cabinet recommend to Council the changes to Council Tax discounts and premiums as noted in para 5.12
 10. That Cabinet approves a local discretionary scheme for NNDR in relation to Retail Relief as per para 5.13 for 2014/15 and 2015/16. Any other changes to be delegated to the Head of Finance in consultation with the portfolio holder for Finance and Resources.
 11. That the Head of Finance and Property Services be instructed to prepare the technical resolutions necessary to give effect to these proposals.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 8.15pm

Signed
(Chair)

Date