

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD
SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.30pm on 22 NOVEMBER 2016**

Present: Councillor A Dean (Chairman)
Councillors H Asker, G Barker, P Davies, M Felton, B Light, E
Oliver and G Sell.

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Assistant Director Corporate Services), M Cox
(Democratic Services Officer), A Knight (Assistant Director –
Finance), B Tice (Principal Website Officer), V Taylor (Business
Improvement and Performance Officer) and A Webb (Director of
Finance and Corporate Services).

Also present: Councillor S Howell (Portfolio Holder for Finance and
Administration).

SC29 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Chambers and S
Harris.

Councillor Asker declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda items 9 and 10,
budget overview and LCTS as a member of Saffron Walden Town Council.

SC30 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2016 and of the extraordinary
meetings held on 26 September and 4 October 2016 were received and signed
by the Chairman as a correct record.

SC31 MATTERS ARISING

The committee received a list of the outstanding actions from the previous
meetings. It was agreed that this status report would be presented to future
meetings.

It was explained that following the call-in of the Saffron Walden AQAP decision,
the Cabinet had agreed to defer the decision and would consider the revised
version of the policy at a future Cabinet meeting.

Councillor Light queried the suggestion that the Youth Engagement Working
Group might be asked to look at Member/public engagement once it had
concluded its current work. She said the youth group would be taking an initial
report to Council on 8 December but its work was still ongoing. Officers noted
this point and said that discussions were continuing on how best to progress
this matter.

SC32

CABINET FORWARD PLAN

Members received the latest version of the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Members asked about progress with the Aspire initiative and were informed that there would be a discussion around possible investment opportunities at the Member workshop on 29 November. This item might be referred to the Council meeting on 8 December 2016.

Councillor Light questioned the Aspire governance arrangements and reiterated her view that the Board should include external members in order to provide speciality independent advice and commercial acumen.

Councillor Howell said this type of appointment would be premature, no investments had yet been made and he would not wish to overburden Aspire with expensive and excessive governance arrangements. He considered the existing arrangements to be appropriate but said it might be necessary to seek specialist external support in the future.

In relation to the devolution update for Council on 8 December, Councillor Sell asked if members could receive a written report. He was particularly interested in the Leader's discussions around this issue and whether the council should be giving a steer on relevant matters, for example the requirement for an elected mayor.

It was noted that the constitutional amendments and recommendations from the youth engagement group would be considered at the council meeting on 8 December 2016.

SC33

SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The committee received its work programme to the end of the council year.

It was noted that the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) report on the preparation of the Local Plan was expected to be considered at the meeting on 17 January 2017, although the date was still to be confirmed by PAS. The meeting in April would include an introductory item about the Tenant Regulatory Panel. This was a scrutiny body within housing and it would be useful to look at possible links with the work of this committee.

Councillor Davies said he would be reporting back to a future meeting regarding public/Member reporting of maintenance issues with ECC Highways.

Councillor Barker suggested that the committee could benefit from follow up scrutiny training.

BUDGET OVERVIEW

The Assistant Director Finance presented a report which gave an overview of the process for preparing the budget for 2017/18. The report explained the issues for each of the budget areas (HRA, Treasury Management, Capital Programme, MTFs, Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserves General Fund Budget and Council Tax) and suggested questions for the scrutiny committee to consider to ensure it was satisfied with the proposals. The committee would have the opportunity to comment on the detailed budget papers at its meeting on 7 February 2017, prior to the consideration of the budget by Cabinet and Full Council.

The report also included the results of the recent budget consultation. There had been 672 responses. The overall opinion was for council tax to remain the same, although there was a rise in support for an increase. The top 3 priority services were collecting bins, council and sheltered housing, planning how the district would develop in the coming decades, new housing and business locations.

A key concern was a lack of clarity around the council's funding streams for 2017/18. A lot of detail was still awaited, for example the outcome following the consultation on the NHB and business rate retention and the Autumn Statement was not expected to fully answer these questions. This left a period of uncertainty for future financial planning.

Members commented on the report.

In answer to a Member's question about inspections at Stansted Airport, it was confirmed that the council was now receiving income for the inspection of peas rather than green beans but there was no guarantee of the continuation of this type of income.

Members discussed the residents' budget consultation exercise and questioned the reliability of the statistics, particularly as the responses were 20% down on the previous year. There was no indication of the reasons behind the stated preferences, and as the questions did not seek public opinion of the service the Chairman said the information should be treated with care.

The Principal Website Officer explained the consultation process. The telephone survey had been undertaken by a professional marketing company. It had interviewed a representative sample of 500 people, considered to be an appropriate number for an authority the size of Uttlesford. The same questions were available on-line and as paper copies and the questions had been asked of the Citizens' Panel. The residents had been asked to rank the services that were most important to them, not to give an opinion of the service. More information could be obtained but it was important to strike a balance and keep the consultation short and easy to complete.

Members were disappointed with the 40% response from the Citizen's Panel. They also questioned the purpose of the consultation. It was explained that although the consultation was not a statutory requirement, it was accepted good

practise. It also gave context to the budget decisions, and because the same questions were asked each year, it gave an indication of the direction of travel.

The Assistant Director Corporate Services explained that under the Council's Constitution, consultation was a function delegated to officers; however officers would take on board the views of members when designing future schemes.

Members said they would like to review the budget consultation process and

RESOLVED to bring an item to a future meeting, to consider the purpose and management of the budget consultation, and give a steer on how it should be handled in the future.

The committee said the suggested questions for each of the budget reports were very helpful. However, it was difficult to address these issues at the present time when the funding situation was so uncertain.

RESOLVED to carry forward the questions to the budget pre-scrutiny meeting in February.

Councillor Howell replied to the points made during the discussion. He said there were many known unknowns, but in any case the numbers would be challenging and there would difficult choices and decisions to be made. He said the purpose of the survey was to guide the council by understanding the public's priorities and how they changed over time.

SC35

LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2017/18

Councillor Howell reported that following the committee's consideration of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS), the cabinet had set out its draft proposals for the 2017/18 scheme, and recommended it for consultation. The scheme included the retention of the contribution rate of 12.5%, and amendments to reduce the town and parish council subsidy by 50% and to align the LCTS with the housing benefit and universal credit reforms. The committee received the results of the consultation and were asked to comment on the detailed proposals before they were considered by cabinet and approved by full council.

The consultation had supported the retention of the collection rate at 12.5%. Those supporting a 100% grant to parish council's had reduced to 63% from 93% the previous year. The responses were largely in favour of alignment of housing benefit reforms with the scheme, with exception of the removal of the severe disability premium.

Councillor Dean said the consultation had included a number of useful comments, which should be considered for future discussion.

Councillor Asker mentioned the reduction in the grant to parish councils and the consequent effect on the larger councils. It was explained that the contribution

had been subsidised by the Government Revenue Support grant but this had now gone and as a result the contribution was being reduced accordingly.

The committee supported the continuation of the 12.5% collection rate. The council still maintained a high collection rate and Members were proud of the council's more generous scheme.

RESOLVED that the committee notes the consultation response and confirms that it does not wish to change its previous recommendations.

SC36 NORTH ESSEX PARKING PARTNERSHIP

Further to the meeting on 26 September 2016, the committee received the comments from Councillors Dean and Asker on the suggested improvements to the quality of service provided by the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP).

RESOLVED to agree the comments and forward them to Cllr Susan Barker as the council's representative on NEPP and the Assistant Director of Planning as the council's nominated officer.

SC37 PLANNING ADVISORY SERVICE - REVIEW

The committee noted the terms of reference for the PAS review of the Local Plan preparation process.

The meeting ended at 9.35pm