

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

**FINANCE, REGENERATION AND PROPERTY SCRUTINY SELECT
COMMITTEE**

MINUTES

Tuesday, 11th October, 2022

Present: Cllr R I B Cannon (Chair), Cllr F G Tombolis (Vice-Chair), Cllr P Boxall, Cllr T Bishop, Cllr M O Davis, Cllr Mrs T Dean, Cllr D Harman, Cllr N J Heslop, Cllr D Lettington, Cllr B J Luker, Cllr H S Rogers and Cllr C J Williams

Councillor M A Coffin was also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Virtual: Councillors Betts, Branson, Keers, Oakley, Palmer, Rhodes and Tanners participated via MS Teams and joined the discussion when invited to do so by the Chair in accordance with Council Procedure Rule No 15.21

An apology for absence was received from Councillor M A J Hood

PART 1 - PUBLIC

FRP 22/9 NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitute Members required for this meeting.

FRP 22/10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

However, for reasons of transparency Councillor Dean advised that she also served as a County Councillor and West Malling Parish Councillor in case either of these organisations were referenced in any matters debated. As this did not represent either a Disclosable Pecuniary or Other Significant Interest there was no requirement to leave the meeting.

FRP 22/11 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the notes of the meeting of the Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee held on 26 July 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

MATTERS FOR RECOMMENDATION TO THE CABINET

FRP 22/12 FINANCIAL PLANNING AND CONTROL

The report of the Director of Finance and Transformation brought together information on salaries, major operational income streams and investment income. The performance of these key budget areas, together with approved variations to the revenue budget and areas identified through revenue budget monitoring were summarised to provide an indicative overall budget position for the year. Members were also updated on capital expenditure and variations that had been agreed in relation to the capital plan.

Members noted, amongst other things, that the salary budget was under pressure with spend above profile and overall income from the Borough Council's operational income stream below profile. However, this was negated, amongst other things, by increased investment income. When taking all of the issues identified as at the end of August into consideration it suggested that the year-end position would be on or around budget or better, albeit only five months into the financial year and a lot could happen between now and the end of the year.

Reference was made to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the growing funding gap as a result of the impact of the current global economic conditions. It was noted that if Government did not recognise the pressures faced by local authorities in future financial settlements and council tax referendum principles a number of councils finances would be under severe pressure, including Tonbridge and Malling.

There was in-depth discussion on the progress being made to address the savings target for 2022/23; the escalating levels of inflation and its negative impact on the funding gap and the MTFS; the value in reviewing fees and charges for the current year due to the increasing costs of providing services and the reduced income given the current economic climate; and the uncertainty around Government funding and potential reductions of 10% across all Government departments.

Members requested more detail in relation to the MTFS and the Savings and Transformation Strategy and were advised that this would be reported to the Cabinet and the Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee in November 2022.

With the current high levels of inflation, the Committee felt it appropriate for an in-year review of the level of fees and charges to be undertaken. It was also felt that car parking charges and usage across the Borough should be reviewed as part of this exercise to see if there was any potential to generate income from lower charges by increasing daily use.

RECOMMENDED: That, due to the escalating levels of inflation, an in-year review of fees and charges, including a review of car parking charges across the Borough, be undertaken.

***Referred to Cabinet**

MATTERS SUBMITTED FOR INFORMATION

FRP 22/13 REVENUES AND BENEFITS PERFORMANCE

Members reviewed and noted the performance information in respect of council tax, business rates, council tax reduction and housing benefits as detailed in the report.

Collection rates for council tax and business rates were currently above target. However, with the increased energy price cap coming into effect in October 2022 it was not expected that this trend would continue. As a result of residents having other financial priorities, it was anticipated that collection rates would fall.

Members were also advised that as a direct consequence of a cyber attack on Clarion, there had been a decline in performance in respect of housing benefit and council tax reduction applications. Delays in processing benefit claims could place claimants in difficult financial circumstances. However, the computer systems at Clarion had been reset and there were signs that the situation was improving.

Failure to collect council tax or business rates in a timely and efficient manner could put the Borough Council's finances under pressure. Members were reminded that as the Billing Authority, the borough Council had to pay preceptors (County Council, Parish Council etc) in accordance with an agreed schedule regardless of whether collection was on target. It was also reported that a reduction in collection rate for council tax which became sustained would have an impact on the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Anyone facing difficulties with payment were encouraged to contact Finance Services for advice and assistance as soon as possible.

The Committee agreed that the performance information provided was a useful monitoring tool and felt that this should be presented at every meeting of the Scrutiny Select Committee.

FRP 22/14 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

The Work Programme setting out matters to be scrutinised during 2022/23 was attached for information. Members were invited to suggest future matters by liaising with the Chair of the Committee. It was

requested that the following matters be considered for inclusion in the Work Programme, subject to liaison with relevant Services:

- Future occupation of retail units on Station Approach, Tonbridge
- Future of Temporary Accommodation units, Pembury Road, Tonbridge

However, Members asked that these items be included as longer term potential items which would be reviewed to see if matters remained appropriate.

The Principal Democratic Services Officer advised that representatives of the Post Office were unable to attend the meeting of the Finance, Regeneration and Property Scrutiny Select Committee to be held on 14 March 2023. However, they had offered to attend the meeting of the Communities and Environment Scrutiny Select Committee on 8 February 2023 if that was acceptable. Members were satisfied with this approach if the Communities and Environment Scrutiny Select Committee were in agreement.

Finally, it was indicated that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would review the operation of Scrutiny Select Committees and how to prioritise matters for scrutiny early in 2023.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION IN PRIVATE

FRP 22/15 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no items considered in private.

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm