

**SCRUTINY COMMISSION
13TH NOVEMBER 2023**

PRESENT: The Chair (Councillor Seaton)
The Vice Chair (Councillor Needham)
Councillors B. Gray, Harper-Davies, Lennie,
Rattray and N. Taylor

Councillor Hamilton (Deputy Leader of the
Council, Public and Private Sector Housing)

Director Housing and Wellbeing
Democratic Services Manager
Democratic Services Officer (SW)

APOLOGIES: Councillor

The Chair stated that the meeting would be recorded and the sound recording subsequently made available via the Council's website. She also advised that, under the Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014, other people may film, record, tweet or blog from this meeting, and the use of any such images or sound recordings was not under the Council's control.

56. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting of the Commission held 9th October 2023 were approved.

57. DISCLOSURES OF PECUNIARY INTERESTS, AND OTHER REGISTRABLE AND NON-REGISTRABLE INTERESTS

No disclosures were made.

58. DECLARATIONS OF THE PARTY WHIP

No declarations were made.

59. QUESTIONS UNDER SCRUTINY COMMITTEE PROCEDURES 11.16

No questions were submitted.

60. PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY OF ANY SPECIFIC FINANCIAL MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET

There were no items of this nature on the Cabinet agenda for the Commission to consider.

61. CABINET ITEMS FOR PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY

62. HRA BUSINESS PLAN AND CAPACITY UPDATE

Councillor N Taylor arrived at the meeting at 6:09pm.

A Cabinet report of the Director of Housing and Wellbeing to seek Cabinet approval for the updated Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2023-2053 and Capacity Review, was submitted (item 7a on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Lead Member for Housing and Wellbeing (and the Deputy Leader of the Council) and the Director of Housing and Wellbeing assisted with the consideration of this item. The following summarises the discussion:

- i. The Director of Housing and Wellbeing explained some of the information contained within the graphs included in the report.
- ii. The HRA Business Plan and Capacity Update programme would vary in expenditure over the course of the 30 year period. This was related to the Asset Management Strategy which required updates to properties at a specific time. Updates to properties were required sooner than the report suggested due to the desire to maintain the 'Charnwood Standard'. There was an action in the Asset Management Strategy to review the position in respect of the Charnwood Standard as it may be components were being replaced before the end of their life cycle. Decent homes guidance was being updated and that may have an impact on this approach.
- iii. The Director of Housing and Wellbeing agreed to provide information on the intended pattern of borrowing and review processes associated with this, follow the meeting.

Post meeting note: Whilst loans could be taken out with banks etc, the primary source of lending for Councils was the PWLB – the public loans work board. This was part of the government's Treasury. The current debt portfolio of £79m was all with the PWLB. Interest was paid twice a year, and the loans range from £1m to £5m and the repayment duration was spread over a long period so not all loan principal was repayable in one go. The decision making on debts was part of the treasury management service which was run within the Finance department at Charnwood. The decision to borrow money was dependent on the levels of existing and forecasted reserves, together with interest rate considerations. The current rates were all fixed interest amounts, although variable rates may be possible too. PWLB issue daily updates to their interest rates. The current policy was to repay the loans when they are due – the first of these was £1m in the next financial year. Providing the council could prove it could afford the loan, there was no longer a cap on the amount of debt the HRA can borrow.

- iv. The borrowing forecast outlined in the report was relatively up to date, although it was difficult to predict future interest rates, which would affect borrowing capacity. It was anticipated that an annual review of the HRA Business Plan and Capacity Update would be undertaken to account for inflationary changes and because there were several current budget pressures. The existing level of borrowing of the Council was usual across many other Local Authorities.

- v. The Director of Housing and Wellbeing agreed to provide information on the reduction in bad debt value after 2022/23, following the meeting.
- vi. The sudden decrease in the Major Repairs Reserve was due to the funds being used for a capital programme.
- vii. It was highlighted that there were budgets within the HRA Business Plan to support work undertaken by the Council's anti-social behaviour team and communal door entry systems. This would have a continued positive affect on crime and disorder in the Borough. Reasonable action associated with crime and disorder was decided by the Council and there was a Corporate Anti-Social Behaviour Policy which outlined this.
- viii. There was a Sheltered Housing Review in progress which was considering updates to existing schemes. It was anticipated that the outcome of the review would reduce the voids rate of sheltered housing properties.
- ix. It was likely that a capital sum would be made available for new Council properties. Some of the funds generated through the Right to Buy scheme could be used towards purchasing homes.
- x. It was suggested that an executive summary would have been useful to draw attention to the key details within the report and the graphs. However it was acknowledged that the explanation provided by the Director of Housing and Wellbeing had been useful.

RESOLVED

1. That the Cabinet be informed that the Commission supports the recommendations as set out in the report of the Director of Housing and Wellbeing.
2. That the Director of Housing and Wellbeing provides information on the reduction in bad debt value after 2022/23, following the meeting.

Reasons

1. The Commission, having carefully considered the report, felt the Cabinet should approve the recommendations set out.
2. To ensure the Scrutiny Commission understands the reduction in bad debt value after 2022/23.

63. CABINET RESPONSE TO PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY

A report of the Cabinet was considered setting out its responses to the recommendations of the Commission on pre-decision scrutiny items, was submitted (item 8 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager assisted with the consideration of this item.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet's responses to the Commission's recommendations be noted.

Reason

The Commission was satisfied that it added value where appropriate and welcomed the Cabinet's consideration of the Commission's views and recommendations as part of its decision making process

64. SCRUTINY PANELS

A report of the Head of Governance and Human Resources to consider updates on the work of scrutiny panels, was submitted (item 9 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Director of Housing and Wellbeing, the Democratic Services Manager and the Democratic Services Officer assisted with the consideration of this item. The following summarises the discussion:

- i. The Democratic Services Manager was due to meet with the appointed Chair of the Housing Needs Scrutiny Panel to produce a scoping document for the panel. It was anticipated that the panel would commence in February 2024.
- ii. The Director of Housing and Wellbeing informed the Scrutiny Commission that a Garage Strategy was in development and this could be scrutinised at the appropriate time through the pre-decision scrutiny process. Following this information, the Scrutiny Commission agreed not to progress with a scrutiny panel on Council assets.
- iii. The Director of Housing and Wellbeing suggested that a briefing note be provided for the Scrutiny Commission detailing the current work being undertaken in relation to dementia friendliness and loneliness. This was considered to be a more appropriate approach than a member development session.

RESOLVED

1. That the Scrutiny Commission reviewed the progression of scrutiny Panels.
2. That the Council Assets and Garages Scrutiny Panel suggestion be removed from the list of Scrutiny Panels.

3. That a briefing paper be prepared covering the work undertaken by the Council in relation to community care, dementia friendliness and loneliness, as opposed to a member development session.

Reasons

- 1-3. To ensure timely and effective scrutiny of the matter/subject.
2. To avoid duplication of work.
3. To ensure information is provided in the most appropriate way.

65. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

A report of the Head of Governance and Human Resources enabling the Commission to review and agree the scrutiny work programme, was submitted (item 10 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager assisted with the consideration of this item.

RESOLVED

1. That the Scrutiny Commission review the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Work Programme and make any amendments the Commission feel necessary.
2. That the Scrutiny Commission agree that the Finance and Performance Scrutiny Work Programme be updated in accordance with the decisions taken during consideration of this item and any further decisions taken during this meeting.

Reasons

- 1-2 To ensure timely and effective scrutiny of the matter/subject.
- 2 To ensure that the information contained within the Work Programme is up to date.

66. SCRUTINY COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME

A report of the Head of Governance and Human Resources to review its own work programme, including considering the list of forthcoming Executive Key Decisions in order to schedule items for pre-decision scrutiny, was submitted (item 11 on the agenda filed with these minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager assisted with the consideration of this item. The following summarises the discussion:

The Scrutiny Commission added the following items to their work programme;

- Pre-decision scrutiny - Corporate Strategy 2024-2028 (January 2024)

- Pre-decision scrutiny – Declassification of Properties Designed for Allocation to People Aged Over 45 Years (January 2024)
- Pre-decision scrutiny – Housing Strategy (February 2024)
- Pre-decision scrutiny – Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Reduction Strategy (March 2024)

RESOLVED

1. That forthcoming Executive Key Decisions or decisions to be taken in private by the Executive, set out in Appendix 2 to the report, and scheduled scrutiny of those matters, be noted.
2. That the Commission’s current work programme be noted.
3. That the following items be added to the Scrutiny Commission’s work programme for pre-decision scrutiny:
 - Pre-decision scrutiny - Corporate Strategy 2024-2028 (January 2024)
 - Pre-decision scrutiny – Declassification of Properties Designed for Allocation to People Aged Over 45 Years (January 2024)
 - Pre-decision scrutiny – Housing Strategy (February 2024)
 - Pre-decision scrutiny – Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Reduction Strategy (March 2024)

Reasons

- 1&3 To ensure effective and timely scrutiny, either to provide Cabinet with advice prior to it taking a decision or to ensure that the Council and external public service providers and partners were operating effectively for the benefit of the Borough.
- 2 To ensure effective and timely scrutiny.

NOTES:

1. No reference may be made to these minutes at the Council meeting on 15th January 2024 unless notice to that effect is given to the Democratic Services Manager by five members of the Council by noon on the fifth working day following publication of these minutes.
2. These minutes are subject to confirmation as a correct record at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Commission.
3. The following meeting participants attended the meeting virtually via Microsoft Teams: The Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Public and Private Sector Housing. All other participants attended the meeting in person.