

SCRUTINY PANEL 20 AUGUST 2013

Present :- Councillor Beverly Davies (Chairman)
Councillors Kevin Bentley, Nick Cope, Marcus Harrington, Jo Hayes, Peter Higgins, Mike Hogg and Gerard Oxford

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Pauline Hazell
Councillor Will Quince
Councillor Paul Smith
Councillor Anne Turrell

18. Apologies

Councillor Harris gave his apology for not attending the meeting.

19. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2013 was confirmed as a correct record.

20. Work Programme

Councillor Hayes requested a review of parking in Colchester, to include consideration of whether Colchester's Parking Policy helps Colchester's Businesses and residents, and the benefits of the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) to Colchester. Councillor Hayes added that in the context of Mary Portas's high street review it would be important to consider whether Colchester's parking policy was helping to transform their local high street into a social place, bustling with people, services and jobs.

Councillor Kevin Bentley concurred with Councillor Hayes, adding that it would also be useful when considering the benefits of the NEPP to Colchester, to also understand and examine the decision making process and the Partnership finances.

In response to Mrs. Ann Hedges, Chief Operating Officer, Councillor Hayes said she would welcome a Scoping Report at the next briefing setting out the objectives of a review of parking services in Colchester.

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council addressed the Panel to explain that the Scrutiny Panel was the appropriate panel to scrutinise NEPP, but any consideration to the change in parking policy was the remit of the Policy Review and Development Panel.

Councillor Davies said she would like added to the Work Programme a review of Colchester General Hospital in light of the recent Keogh report.

Councillor Bentley supported the request saying it would be an opportune time to receive an update on the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) one year on from its inception.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Considered and noted the current Work Programme.
- ii) Agreed to a review of Parking Services in Colchester at the December meeting, with a Scoping Report to be presented to the Chairman and Group Spokespersons at the next briefing.
- iii) Agreed to a review in early 2014 of Colchester Hospital in light of the recent publication of the Keogh report, and to include an update on the progress of the CCG since the review of the progress on the implementation in August 2012.

21. 2013/14 Capital Monitor, period April to June

Councillor Hogg (in respect of being a Trustee of the Friends of the Moot Hall Organ Trust) and Councillor Bentley (in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council) both declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5):

2013/14 Capital Monitor, period April to June

The Panel was asked to consider the Capital Expenditure Monitor – Quarter 1 and note the level of capital spending during 2013-14, and forecasts for future years.

Mr. Steve Heath, Finance Manager, introduced the report. Mr. Heath said the Capital Programme had increased by £10.5m.

Further to the request by the Panel at the June meeting, Mr. Heath explained that the information on the CBC Enhancements element of the Bus Station capital scheme were provided in paragraphs 4.7 – 4.8 of the report.

Mr. Heath said there is currently a forecast net over-spend on the capital programme of £26.4k and details of the over-spend is highlighted in paragraph 4.10 – 4.11 of the report.

Councillor Bentley said it was a very good report but would be improved if it provided a common RAG status definition to communicate progress against each project.

Mr. Heath confirmed to Councillor Harrington that the £130,800 to be spent in 2013-14 on the Osborne Street Bus Station was an element of the S106 contribution from Essex County Council (ECC).

Councillor Paul Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources addressed the Panel to respond to Councillor Oxford, saying the £40,000 Lion Walk Activity Centre

Lift project remained in the Capital Programme. Councillor Smith said despite the concerns about the building's full DDA compliance, the lift project sum did remain in the programme

Mr. Heath confirmed to Councillor Bentley that the Capital Programme is fully funded, and where a capital scheme is not implemented, the money remains in the capital programme but is re-allocated to another project.

Councillor Smith responded to Councillor Cope by explaining that of the £170,000 balance of the Colchester Borough Council enhancements element of the Bus Station capital scheme, the bulk of this would be for updating the town's signage to reflect the new location and that a small part was for remediating the former site back to a grassed area. Councillor Smith said a breakdown of the £170,000 figure could be provided to the Panel.

Mr. Heath confirmed to Councillor Davies that the work concerning larger bus shelters as reported in the press was part of the work to be funded from the element of the S106 contribution from ECC.

Councillor Harrington enquired about whether the capital money earmarked for IT Works towards the implementation of the Sport and Leisure Fundamental Service Review was to contribute to an improvement in the telephone system currently in operation. Councillor Harrington said when ringing Leisure World you invariably went to a recorded message that explained someone will ring you back, or alternatively you could log-on to the website to make a booking. He added that given most people do not have the time to wait for someone to return their call and inevitably you are not present to receive the ring-back, it felt as if the system was trying to channel people down the on-line route.

Mrs Hedges explained that the IT capital money had been used to improve the self serve facilities, for example booking of activities on line and that the service was encouraging those able to use this facility. She was concerned about the delay on responses to the call back option and would investigate with the service.

In response to Councillor Hayes, Mr. Heath said he will provide a detailed breakdown of the anticipated expenditure for 2013-14 regarding the St Botolphs Regeneration Scheme.

In response to Councillor P. Higgins, Councillor Smith said progress on the Town Centre Square scheme will be reported to the Panel at the November meeting.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Noted the level of capital spending during 2013/14, and forecasts for future years.
- ii) Requested a RAG status definition within future reports to communicate progress against each project.
- iii) Requested a breakdown of the anticipated 2013-14 expenditure on the St

Botolphs Regeneration Scheme.

22. 2013/14 Financial Monitor, period April to June

Councillor Bentley (in respect of being a Director of a local company paying Business Rates) declared a non-pecuniary interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5):

2013/14 Financial Monitor, period April to June

The Panel was asked to consider and note the financial performance of the General Fund Services and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the first three months of 2013/14.

Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager, introduced the report. Mr. Plummer said this, the first review of the year, showed a net overspend of £181k on the current forecast outturn. He added this initial forecast is very early in the financial year and forecasts will be regularly monitored and revised as the year progressed.

Mr. Plummer said the forecast outturn for all services was a net overspend of £331,000 as shown in paragraph 5.2 of the report. The forecast also contained risks, both positive and negative. These risks will be monitored closely and the outturn forecast will be revised if necessary. Mr. Plummer also mentioned that the budget includes a number of technical and corporate budget areas such as net interest earnings, the provision to repay debt and pension costs, and the current forecast for these was an under-spend of £150,000.

Mr. Plummer concluded by saying the current projected outturn for the Housing Revenue Account was an under-spend of £75,000.

In response to Councillor Davies and the £50,000 under-spend on Bed and Breakfast and Homelessness Initiatives, Mr. Plummer said this was not a statement about the lack of services but about the assumptions made regarding the demand for these services. He added that this could change as the year progressed.

In response to Councillor P. Higgins regarding the 'red' forecast against premises related expenditure, Mr. Plummer said further detail was shown in the 'Position to date', paragraph 6.2 of the report.

Mr. Plummer agreed with Councillor Harrington that the first two column headings on appendix A, 'Budget to period 3' and 'Actual to period 3' referred to month 3 not quarter 3 and were misleading. Mr. Plummer agreed to provide new headings in future reports.

In response to Councillor Harrington, Mr. Plummer said the £100,000 adverse variance on transport related costs was a year end projection, and that at the end of quarter one the variance was a £92,000 under-spend. He added that these costs predominantly related to the Recycling and Fleet Service Area within Operational Services as commented on in appendix C of the report.

Councillor Smith agreed with Councillor Hogg that more detail was required on the net under-spend of £45,000 on Repairs and Maintenance for quarter 1. He added that he would have expected the expenditure to be higher given more of this work can be done during the summer months. He said the requested Capital Monitor RAG status definition reports would provide the kind of detail needed. Councillor Smith said the quicker turnaround of void properties (as mentioned in paragraph 6.2 of the report) was a positive sign of effective repairs and maintenance. Mr. Plummer said he would provide a detailed breakdown of the half yearly position on repairs and maintenance to the November meeting.

Responding to Councillor Bentley, Mr. Plummer said the authority is now keeping a proportion of Business Rates collected. He added that any money collected above the baseline figure is retained by the Council subject to payments required to the Government and preceptors. Mr. Plummer said whilst the report (paragraph 5.6) was not forecasting any variance, this was a complex area of work and things can change. He said a more detailed review will be carried out and reported at the half yearly stage.

Mr. Plummer added that whilst it is possible to estimate an overall collection figure based on the expected payments by direct debit plus an estimate of other payments, this was the first year of this new initiative and there are potential risks, for example, the main issue was not just around the amount collected, but the significant level of appeals lodged with the Valuation Office and not knowing the outcomes from the appeals.

Councillor Smith responded to Councillor Bentley regarding the Council's Car Park pricing policy and whether this was driving potential visitors away from Colchester to neighbouring Braintree and Tendring. He said a lot of work goes into providing marketing deals for parking and the Council's website provides the information in respect of parking offers.

Mr. Plummer responded to Councillor Oxford, saying the Council's Joint Museum Committee does have the ability to carry forward from one year to the next, under-spends and over-spends up to a value of £100,000.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Noted the financial performance of the General Fund Services and the Housing Revenue Account for the first three months of 2013-14.
- ii) Requested a detailed breakdown of the half yearly position on repairs and maintenance to the November meeting.