

Council – 30th January 2019

ITEMS DEFERRED FROM THE DECEMBER COUNCIL MEETING

AGENDA ITEM 9 – QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF COUNCIL

1. Question from Councillor Roger Mace to Councillor Eileen Blamire

Does the Council operate a time recording system for senior officers, such that the time they spend on different projects or activities within their roles can be separately analysed and costs allocated accordingly?

ANSWER

No formal time recording system is in place, although certain services (for example, the Legal service) record time spent on chargeable work.

2. Question from Councillor Roger Mace to Councillor Anne Whitehead

With regard to the council's ongoing research into creating a local authority trading company into which certain council services might be transferred, it has become clear that the business case for such a development will depend substantially upon "financial engineering" within an unchanged financial environment.

Given the risk that future government action might arbitrarily change this financial environment, such that "financial engineering" by a Local Authority Trading Company can no longer generate a more viable outcome for the council than the present direct operation of the service, does the council intend to provide within its business case, a mechanism for reversing at the council's option, the process by which the service was transferred to the Local Authority Trading Company and away from direct operation by the city council?

ANSWER

Any Council business case which considers alternative service provision vehicles, such as LATCs, will assess the risks associated with changing methods of service delivery. As part of this process, exit strategies will be considered for all such projects.

Most Local Authority Trading Companies are wholly owned by the authority and the authority as owners of the company will be able to decide the future of any company.

3. Question from Councillor Tim Hamilton-Cox to Councillor Janice Hanson

In view of:

i) the Local Examination planning inspector's highly critical recent correspondence to the city council which described his deep unhappiness at the extent of modifications to the Local Plan already proposed, and those yet to be proposed;

ii) and the substantial reduction in the population projections for the district published by the Office for National Statistics in the summer;

Can we agree that council should take up the option presented by the inspector to withdraw the Local Plan and resubmit it when a full and necessary set of modifications to make it sound and sensible have been properly incorporated?

ANSWER

In respect of (i) above, the Inspector did not specifically reference the extent of suggested modifications, rather he advised the Council that once submitted for Examination, the substance of a submitted plan can only be changed through the process of main modifications. It is for him to consider how modifications to the submitted Plan should be addressed and therefore, whether they are necessary for the soundness of the Plan and acceptable.

The Inspector must examine the soundness of the Plan as submitted. The Inspector reminded the Council that if it wished to revise a plan that had already been submitted to the Secretary of State then it would have to first withdraw the submitted one. However it remains the Council's position that the Local Plan was sound at submission and the Council was not and is not now proposing to submit a revised plan.

The Council, and the Inspector, were advised that the Council intended an informal consultation on draft suggested modifications as this could assist in exploring how account might be taken of inevitably changing circumstances and new information received since the Plan was formally published. The Plan has not and cannot be modified by the Council by such a process at this stage. It is entirely for the Inspector to decide if and how he wishes to explore modifications during the Examination. He may or may not wish to explore modifications and he may or may not wish to explore the draft suggestion modifications that were the subject of the informal consultation.

In respect of (ii), the release of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) population projections have been overtaken by the latest national consultation from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

The consultation included the following statement from the Minister:

- That that ONS has confirmed that “...*lower household projections do not mean fewer homes need to be built. If more homes are planned for and delivered, more people will be able to own or rent their own home. This consultation (which ended on 7 December) therefore proposes changes to the standard method (of calculating local housing need) to ensure consistency with the objective of building more homes...*”

In other words Government are aiming to make changes to the methodology. The most short-term change being that they will specify that the 2014-based ONS data will provide the baseline for assessment of local housing need (not 2016). They also stated that the lower numbers expressed in the 2016 ONS projections would “*not qualify as an exceptional circumstance*” to warrant departing from the standard

methodology. Longer-term, Government aims to review the formula in time for the next ONS projections.

Therefore, in terms of the ongoing preparation for the Local Plan Hearing Sessions, whilst it had been anticipated that Hearing Sessions might start early in the New Year, dates had **not** been formally set. The Inspector's Programme Officer will give six weeks' notice of the commencement of the hearing sessions only once dates are established.

The Council is completing additional evidence work and arranging for a period of consultation on the additional evidence for the soundness of the plan. The Council is in communication with the Inspector about prospective hearing dates.

4. Question from Councillor Tim Hamilton-Cox to Councillor Anne Whitehead

Given that the budgetary pressures on the city council have only intensified in recent weeks, will you now call on cabinet to respond to the overspending on employees and halt the employment of agency-sourced interim senior officers?

ANSWER

As you know, the recent senior team restructure signified the start of the process to review structures across the whole of the Council. Over the coming months, our new Directors will be considering how they structure their teams, removing duplication and bringing together teams where there are synergies. This should, in the longer term, lead to a more streamlined workforce, which will in turn help reduce the funding gap the council is facing. Similarly, work is underway to identify and implement initiatives to bring income to the council in the longer term.

The interim managers currently engaged by the Council have been retained whilst the Council considers future plans relating to structure, finances, major projects and challenges, and to provide professional advice and guidance to support decision making. These interim managers are playing vital roles in support of the Council. It is expected that once longer term operational plans are developed and agreed, the position relating to retaining interim managers will be decided.