

FINANCE AND POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES AND DECISION RECORD

16 September 2024

The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool.

Present:

Councillor Brenda Harrison (In the Chair)

Councillors: Gary Allen, Rachel Creevy, Tom Feeney, Pamela Hargreaves, Jim Lindridge, Sue Little, John Nelson, Karen Oliver and Mike Young

Also Present: Edwin Jeffries, Hartlepool Joint Trades Union Committee

Officers: Denise McGuckin, Managing Director
Sally Robinson, Executive Director of Children's and Joint Commissioning Services
Jill Harrison, Executive Director of Adult and Community Based Services
James Magog, Director of Finance, IT and Digital
Craig Blundred, Director of Public Health
Tony Hanson, Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services
Paul Dixon, Assistant Director, Corporate and Financial Services
Karen Kelly, Principal Housing Strategy Officer
Joan Stevens, Statutory Scrutiny Manager

16. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Scott Reeve and Hayley Martin (Director of Legal, Governance and Human Resources).

17. Declarations of Interest

Minute 21 - Strategic Financial Management Report - As at 30th June 2024.
Councillor Hargreaves declared a non-prejudicial interest as Chair of Families First North East.

18. Minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2024

Received.

19. Minutes of the Safer Hartlepool Partnership meeting held on 26 February 2024

Received.

20. Minutes of the Health and Wellbeing Board meeting held on 11 March 2024

Received.

21. Strategic Financial Management Report - As at 30th June 2024 (*Director of Finance, IT and Digital*)

Type of decision

Budget and Policy Framework.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report was to inform Members of:

- i) Forecast General Fund outturn for 2024/25;
- ii) Reserves forecasts;
- iii) Forecast Housing Revenue Account outturn for 2024/25;
- iii) Corporate Income Collection Performance; and
- iv) Capital Programme Monitoring 2024/25.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Finance, IT and Digital reported that the previous report to Finance and Policy Committee in February, highlighted the significant financial pressures being experienced by the Council. These pressures had continued in to quarter 1 of 2024/25 with significant increases in demand and costs for Children's Social Care external placements. In terms of inflationary pressures, whilst general inflation had eased to around 2% there remained a profound impact from permanent inflation increases over the last 12 to 18 months.

These pressures, alongside the inadequate funding settlement for 2024/25, had resulted in a number of Councils issuing warnings about the sustainability of their financial position. Hartlepool's officers continue to engage with MHCLG finance officials and Ministers to outline the growing sustainability issues for the Council's finances and there were indications from the new government that a review of local government funding was to be sought. The extent and timeframe of this was unclear at this time.

The report detailed the latest 2024/25 budget forecast position for the Council. The Director of Finance, IT and Digital highlighted that the:

- Overall position remained challenging, with a forecast overspend of £2.900m. It was emphasised that the continued use of underspends and increases in Children's Social Care costs would be unsustainable and in order to avoid overspends, and protect reserves, all-staff had been instructed to restrict spending to only where it is absolutely necessary. The financial position over the next couple of years continued to be challenging and the potential need to issue a 114 notice could not be precluded; and
- The Dedicated Schools Grant continued to forecast a significant overspend which the statutory override allowed to be separated from the wider local authority accounts. Concern was, however, expressed that should this override be removed, the over spend would need to be funded by the Council and that this would be challenging without government assistance.

Details of the current forecast outturn for each of the Council departments were outlined in the report and clarification provided in relation to a number of issues:

- The provision of Warm Hubs would continue in 2024/25 (details available via the HartlepoolNow web site);
- Increases in the number of children in our care requiring external residential and independent fostering agency placements, recruitment of foster carers continued to be a national challenge as complexity of children's needs increase. Options to mitigate the increase in costs were being explored, including increasing the availability of foster care placements via 'Foster with North East' and exploration of the provision of additional Council owned children's homes;
- The need to balance enforcement action against those who were able to pay their council tax and those who were legitimately unable to pay was recognised. Nationally, the Hartlepool council tax support scheme had the highest take up for working age people and was in the top cohort for pensioner take up. It was suggested that work should be undertaken with the Poverty Truth Commission to explore how engagement could be improved to increase the collection rate and take up of the support available (including responses to literacy issues and the improvement of letter and the website); and
- The empty home premium had been increased as a means of discouraging owners from leaving homes vacant and increasing council tax income. The effectiveness of this was not yet known.

Decision

1) The Committee noted:

- The 2024/25 forecast outturn position of £2.900m overspend and the accompanying financial performance for the year;
- The forecast use of reserves;

- The 2024/25 forecast outturn in relation to the Housing Revenue Account detailed within Section 5 of the report; and
 - The capital programme position and approve variations detailed within Section 7 of the report; and
- 2) The Committee approved the HRA Capital Budget Amendments (as outlined in paragraph 5.4 of the report).
- 3) The Committee approved, and referred to Council, the reallocation of £0.700m from the Borough Hall approved capital scheme to support capital maintenance and improvement works at Town Hall Theatre (as detailed in 7.5 of the report).

22. Draft Community Safety Plan 2024 - 2027 *(Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services)*

Type of decision

Budget and Policy Framework.

Purpose of report

To seek consideration and comments on the Draft Community Safety Plan 2024-27.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services reported that, under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and the Crime and Disorder Regulations 2007, the Safer Hartlepool Partnership (SHP) is required to develop and implement a Community Safety Strategy. The strategy to set out how the SHP intends to address crime and disorder, substance misuse, and re-offending issues in Hartlepool.

The draft Community Safety Plan 2024-27 provided an overview of recent activities to improve community safety in Hartlepool, along with key findings from the Partnership's Strategic Assessment and consultation with the public. The proposed strategic objective identified in the draft 2024-27 Plan was 'to make Hartlepool a safe, prosperous and enjoyable place to live, work and visit', under which the SHP's priorities are:

- Anti-social Behaviour;
- Drugs and Alcohol;
- Domestic Violence and Abuse; and
- Serious Violence.

As part of the six week consultation period for development of the Plan, the Finance and Policy Committee was asked for its views and comments, to feed in to the finalised plan. The Committee commended officers on the draft plan and discussed:

- Concerns regarding violence against women, as highlighted by the recent Police and Crime Commissioner survey. Officers were requested to look at how this issue could be included in the finalised Community Safety Plan;
- Input from the MP for Hartlepool was relayed to the Committee in relation to the inclusion of a town centre focus as part of the anti-social behaviour priority, with reference to the potential availability of UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF). In addition, a request was made for the inclusion of priorities around off-road bikes and shoplifting.
- The need for the Plan to reference victims of crime and the required conversation with young men about how their behaviour can make women feel.

The Executive Director of Development, Neighbourhoods and Regulatory Services advised the Committee that the issue of retail crime was being considered as a potential topic for investigation by the Audit and Governance Committee and in terms of off-road bikes, emphasis was placed upon the importance of residents providing information on where they are parked, rather than where they were being ridden.

Members took the opportunity to express their thanks to the Police and other partner agencies for their response to the recent incidents of civil disobedience. Emphasis was placed on the importance of identifying the reasons that those involved feel disenfranchised and the potential need to identify resources to allow this piece of work to be carried out. The Chair highlighted that as an example of joined up partnership working, this could potentially include co-ordination with the work being undertaken as part of the Long Term Plan for Towns.

Decision

That the Finance and Policy Committee's comments on the draft Community Safety Plan 2024-27 be fed in to the development of the finalised Plan.

23. Hartlepool Housing Allocation Policy (*Executive Director of Children's and Joint Commissioning Services*)

Type of decision

Key Decision (CJCS150/24)

Purpose of report

To seek approval for amendments to the Hartlepool Housing Allocation Policy.

Issue(s) for consideration

In accordance with the requirement for the Council to have in place an allocation system for determining priorities between applicants for housing, a policy was adopted in November 2022 to meet the needs of people in Hartlepool and make the best use of the available social housing stock.

Changes in supply and demand resulted in a full review of the policy, as part of which Elected Members, registered providers, staff, residents, stakeholders and partners were consulted. Details of the consultation and its outcomes were presented to the Committee and consideration sought of the amendments to the policy outlined in the report.

Members discussed a number of issues:

- The statistical relevance of the consultation findings, and the mandate it provided, given the level of response. Concerns were recognised, however, it was noted that the rate of response to this consultation had been larger than the previous consultation.
- In response to concerns about the exclusion of individuals with rent arrears, it was confirmed that those with up to 8 weeks rent arrears could be added to the housing register. Some landlords refuse to accommodate anyone with over 8 weeks of arrears and as such adding those individuals to the register could raise unrealistic expectations for tenants. Assurances were given that the Council endeavours to help vulnerable individuals wherever possible.
- Members were interested in how many landlords restrict access to their properties, and the basis for it. The potential being that this information could be used as a starting point to addressing long term historic issues. It was also suggested that the potential of re-establishing the Hartlepool Housing Partnership should be explored to share best practice.
- In relation to the allocation of housing on the basis of bidding or priority need, it was confirmed that priorities were being look at to ensure that allocations are fair and on the basis of priority.
- The housing allocations application process must be accessible to those with all levels of literacy and this was to be looked in to, to build on the face to face support already offered.

Decision

That the updated Hartlepool Housing Allocation Policy be approved.

24. Permission to Direct Award for the Delivery of Drug and Alcohol Services *(Director of Public Health)*

Type of decision

Key decision (CJCS 152/24)

Purpose of report

To seek approval under the new Health Care Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023 (“PSR”) to direct award the delivery of clinical drug and alcohol services to Foundations the current provider.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Director of Public Health reported that an evidence based approach had been used to develop the START model, for delivery of drug and alcohol services, referencing NICE guidelines, Drug Strategy 2017, Medications in Recovery and Routes to Recovery publications. Provided by an integrated team, between Hartlepool Borough Council and Foundations, the service had been delivered for three years, with the option for 1+1 including standard contract break clauses. The recommissioning of the service was now required and approval sought of the commissioning of the services in accordance with the Provider Selection Regime Regulations 2023 (“PSR”).

The PSR removed the commissioning of health care services (under the PSR) from the scope of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and the expectation that competitive tendering would be required to award contracts for health care services. Directly awarding contracts using the PSR allowed a flexible and proportionate process for selecting providers of health care services (so that all decisions can be made with a view to securing the needs of the people who use the services, improving the quality of the services, and improving the efficiency in the provision of the services). Avoiding the costs and risks associated with a competitive tendering exercise.

Members were advised that the START service had delivered significant improvements in clinical services, between 2020 and 2024, and Members praised them on the excellent work done during National Recovery Month. In light of the excellent service provided by Foundations, it was proposed that the PSR Regulations be used to recommission Foundations as a direct award, for 5 years from Aug 2025. The basis of the direct award being that:

- It meets the criteria for PSR;
- The contract value will be unchanged (exemption; inflationary uplift in line with the Public Health grant uplift arrangements);
- The provider is satisfying the contract currently and will continue to deliver services to a high standard;
- The risk of a formal procurement exercise following a failed procurement exercise in Middlesbrough; and
- Continuity of care for patients.

Decision

That the use of the PSR Regulations to direct award the delivery of clinical drug and alcohol services to the current provider (Foundations) be approved.

25. Annual Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Update

(Director of Legal, Governance and Human Resources)

Type of decision

For Information

Purpose of report

To provide an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) update, including the Annual Equality Report for 2023/24, and seek approval for the Council's approach to setting new Equality Objectives.

Issue(s) for consideration

The Managing Director reported that the Equality Act 2010 required that the local authority comply with the Equality Duty (as outlined in the report).

There is a requirement to publish Equality Objectives once every 4 years and since publication of the original, in April 2012, the Council had based its objectives on the strategic objectives set out in the Council Plan. Following agreement of the new 5 year Council Plan priorities, it had been agreed that it would be beneficial to make the Council Equality Objectives more specific and that they sit within the Council Plan (underpinning the agreed priorities).

New equality objectives had therefore being developed, based on a review of available evidence and consultations with local communities. On this basis, the 2023/24 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion report:

- Highlighted the range of activities delivered by the Council in relation to the EDI Policy;
- Demonstrated compliance with the specific duties (Public Sector Equality Duty);
- Included a Hartlepool Population Equality Fact File setting out the data available in relation to the 9 protected characteristics; and
- Set out data in relation to the locally adopted areas of consideration which are care leavers, the Armed Forces Community (as established in our Armed Forces Covenant) and inequality related to poverty and disadvantage.

Decision

That the Finance and Policy Committee noted:

- The 2023/24 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Report (as set out in appendix 1 of the report); and

- Intention to develop new Equality Objectives over the coming months, based on a review of the available evidence and consultation with our local communities.

26. Corporate Complaints Monitoring Report for 2023/24

(Director of Legal, Governance and Human Resources and Monitoring Officer)

Type of decision

For information.

Purpose of report

To inform the Finance and Policy Committee of the 2023/24 outturn position in relation to corporate complaints and those considered by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO).

Issue(s) for consideration

The Managing Director reported that there had been an increase in the number of corporate complaints received with 15 received in 2023/24, up from 9 in the previous year. Of these, only 5 (33%) had been upheld.

Appendices to the report set out brief details of both the corporate complaints and those investigated by the LGSCO. The LGSCO Annual Review 2024 Letter, received on the 17th July 2024, set out annual statistics on complaints made to the LGSCO about Hartlepool Borough Council (HBC) for the year ending 31st March 2024. The data showing both the complaints and the enquiries that the LGSCO had recorded, along with any decisions they have made.

In summary, in 2023/24 the LGSCO received 21 complaints or enquiries about HBC, which was an increase of 3 on the previous year. Of the 19, only two had been investigated and upheld, representing a 100% 'upheld' rate. In addition to this, it was reported that at the present time there were no residents on restricted contact with the Council through the Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy.

Decision

That the update on complaints received during 2023/24 be noted.

27. Any Other Items which the Chairman Considers are Urgent

None.

The meeting concluded at 6.20 pm.

H MARTIN

DIRECTOR OF LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCES

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