

Pre-Scrutiny questions and answers on reports being considered by Cabinet on 10 February 2022

(This forms part of the considerations at Group meetings before a decision is made on which Cabinet reports will be called-in for scrutiny by the Overview & Scrutiny and the Finance & Audit Scrutiny Committees)

3. Minutes

Questions asked by Councillor R Dickson

In the Minutes of the Cabinet meeting of 9th December 2021 (page 30) and also in the Finance & Audit Scrutiny Committee Minutes of 8th December 2021 (Minute 60) there is reference to the Committee's request for 'an analysis of the income received from EA to date for each year of the current contract including compensation from the government during the pandemic for lost concession fees'.
Has this analysis been provided to Councillors?

6. General Fund 2022/23 Budgets and Council Tax

Questions asked by Councillor R Dickson

In paragraph 5.5 of the report there's reference to the Council Tax Support Scheme. Given the cost of living crisis, rising inflation and massive increases in fuel poverty, it seems prudent to plan for an increased claimant rate. If claims increase 5%, what impact would this have on income.

In Appendix 9 Capital Expenditure there appears to be no planned capital spend on equipment at Glendale Avenue park which has now been delayed by nearly three years? Please explain if I am missing something.

Questions asked by Councillor Syson

1.3.2 Is allowing just "5 for core inflation sufficient this year given the increase in fuel prices with its knock on effects?

1.5 Business rate income - I note The Council's Business Rate Retention projections are based on figures provided by Local Government Futures, a specialist consultancy that many local authorities subscribe to. Do these take into account the substantial reduction of income we would face if the Baseline were reset ? A balance of the reserve of £7.6m at 31 March 2027 looks optimistic.

1.15 Green Bin Charges - On 7 May 2021 the Government announced not only weekly food waste collections from 2023, but also that Ministers were considering "free garden waste collections for every home, which could save householders over £100 million a year in green waste charges." The press release went on to say " Additional funding and support will be provided to councils for their recycling collections."

I think I am right in saying the additional funding will only be provided if you are already charging for green waste collections. Can you bring me up to date on this please? If we start charging, may we then be able to stop or indeed have to stop?

1.15.7 Are we really only expecting a 5% take up in the service initially, given that Stratford had a 75% take up in the first year?

Item 6 Appendix 2 page 1 - Please would you briefly explain to me why the variance in the Finance budget for 2021/22 was so large and for 2021/22 is substantial.

Item 6 Appendix 5a page 2 - Covent Garden Multi Storey reserve with the purpose of "To provide finance to cover lost income and first year's debt charges when the car park is redeveloped." We have been told for some years that Covent Garden Car Park has to be inspected regularly to be sure it is still safe for use.

Item 6 Appendix 5b page 1 - now states that the balance of this reserve is being repurposed towards the 'Future High Street Fund'. Is this because redevelopment is not foreseen?

Finally I think it might be helpful if Councillors appreciated the approximate % that Council tax actually contributes to the Council's General Fund expenditure; and if the Green Waste charges were to be paid by Council tax, which it isn't, what % of the Council tax income that would swallow. I have done the calculations and gulped but would be grateful if you would do them too. Thanks.

9. Net Zero Carbon Development Plan Document

Questions asked by Councillor J Dearing

I welcome the reports on the net zero DPD and decarbonisation of assets - it's really good to see the progress. However, these are large and complex documents which I do believe would have been served better by coming to the Climate Emergency PAB prior to the current round of Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings. It's a tall order to make constructive comments on these documents in just two working days since they were published. As a result I have only been able to look through Item 9 for which I have the following general questions:

- The new standard is defined as a percentage of a percentage (i.e. 63% improvement on carbon emissions set down in 2021 regulations - which I believe are a percentage improvement on 2013 regulations) but what how does this translate into minimum carbon emissions or energy usage in operation? I would prefer to see a quantified standard for maximum carbon emissions or energy demand, such as the one mentioned in the report by the CCC for desirable space heating demands of 15-20 kwh/m2/yr. This would be an easily understood metric for planners, architects, builders and householders - and there must be other metrics that could be used. (I attach copies of the Net Zero plans for Cambridge's new Local Plan - also produced

in conjunction with Bioregional - to me, they show a clear presentation of metrics - see for example Local Plan Zero Carbon Evidence Base Policy A.1.0 p.12).

- It's good to see that carbon offsetting is clearly defined as a last resort. I have two questions about this:
 - a. Can you give a fuller range of carbon offsetting mechanisms that would be supported by or included within the WDC Carbon Offsetting fund (for example as listed by the Milton Keynes carbon offset fund)?
 - b. The words 'feasibility' and 'viability' are used throughout the document. Feasibility is not dealt with separately, and section 11 'Viability' does not define 'viability'. It leaves the decision-making procedure for deciding upon what is 'viable' or 'non-viable' open to subjective assessments based on different accounting mechanisms and assumptions. Can the definition of these terms be strengthened or reference given to published guidance on these terms, if it exists?

Questions asked by Councillor Milton

In terms of the viability question I note the reference to affordable housing as one of the things that could be flexed in order to make a scheme more viable (if I've understood correctly.) Would you be able to outline what the potential parameters of this are? E.g could there be a situation where the affordable housing allocation was reduced to zero in order to accommodate the need for 'viability'?

Are you still confident that we can finalise a policy which is a) agreeable through the consultation process b) strong enough to have a meaningful impact on the carbon emissions of the district?

10. Rural and Urban Initiative Scheme (RUCIS)

Questions asked by Councillor R Dickson

The streamlining of the decision-making process is welcome.

It's appreciated that the annual budget is very modest at £100k. However, did the review consider - in an attempt to free up more staff time for other priorities - outsourcing the delivery of this grant scheme e.g. to WCAVA or Heart of England Community Foundation? Also what did the review identify as the community impact of the 76 grants total value £1.07 million over the past eight years to justify continuing with the scheme?

[Response from Jon Dawson](#)

Potential outsourcing has never been mentioned before and therefore was not in the scope of the review. In terms of staff time, there is only myself that deals with the RUCIS scheme, within my job description it is listed as a main responsibility and is considered to only be 20% of my time.

From time to time, reviews of the scheme are completed to ensure that it remains robust and is helping as many organisations as possible, community impact was also not mentioned and therefore wasn't in scope of this review.

The RUCIS scheme has actually been running since 1998/99, it was initially a scheme for rural areas and then in approx. 2010/2011 it was expanded to cover urban areas too; over this period of time it has helped many not-for-profit organisations deliver a multitude of projects for community benefit. There is no 'measurement' of community impact/benefit such as form filling post-project as the money has been spent and the projects can't be undone; the RUCIS application makes the case for the project including how it helps to support objectives within the Council's business strategy, for example; reducing anti-social behaviour or obesity, Members then make an informed decision on the basis of this. Pre-Covid I would visit the organisation both pre and post project and take photos of the before and after which evidences that the organisation delivered what they said they would deliver within their application. Currently visits are suspended but applicants still provide before and after photos for me. Also, to draw-down on an award the applicant has to provide copies of contractor(s) invoices for works completed which I check against the project works noted within the application to ensure that what is completed matches the application that Members considered when making the decision to award the grant.

The criteria has been designed to help support a sufficient 'value' return on the Council's contribution, for example;

Grants cannot be awarded if....

- The organisation and / or project are not deemed sustainable for a minimum 5 year period, for example;
 - Income streams with a set time period of less than 5 years that are relied upon to meet annual expenditure costs without which there is potential risk of the organisation or the project being unable to continue to operate
 - Annual expenditure is higher than income resulting in operational losses
 - Leasehold premises with less than 5 years lease remaining

- Risks of leasehold premises / land being sold
- Lack of demand; low usage of facilities with no evidence that usage will increase
- Non-payment or continual late payment of Warwick District Council invoices / debts

Also appropriate insurance cover must be in place in case of theft/fire/vandalism etc so that facilities can be repaired or replaced in events such as this.

The RUCIS scheme has had audits completed within which it is noted that there is no post-project form completion or such like, however, the before and after photos and the fact that all applications presented are accompanied by a detailed précis of the organisation, the project, how it meets the scheme's criteria and the Council's objectives enable Members to make a well informed decision. There has been no recommended actions as a result of these audits.

12. Housing Decant Policy

Questions asked by Councillor Quinney

The overall aims of the policy seem clear and correct but would appreciate some clarification/adjustment on the following please:

Question:

4.5 and 4.14 Rent - As I read it, the rent on the original, not temporary, property will be payable during the decant - would that also apply if the temporary property agreed to for whatever reason (eg proximity to schooling) was smaller/cheaper than the original?

Response from Lisa Barker, Head of Housing

This is intended for temporary accommodation for short periods or emergencies. In such circumstances the applicant is still liable for the rent on their tenanted accommodation.

The Tenancy agreement for their property is still valid and therefore the tenant is still legally responsible for the payment of rent at that property. We would not move someone to a property that is too small for their needs. If we had to move someone to a property that involved, for example, more travel for them we would reimburse them for their travel expenses. If we have to move someone urgently for health & safety reasons, we would move them to

what we have available and review this until a more suitable property became available, if necessary. The Council will pay for the temporary accommodation whether it is cheaper or more expensive than the rent payable.

Question:

4.9/4.10 - There seems to be no appeal against a single decant offer made by officers. Is that reasonable ?

[Response from Lisa Barker](#)

This is for short term or emergency situations. The Council may not have the flexibility in such situations to offer alternatives, and therefore an appeals process would seem inappropriate under such circumstances. Discussions and consultations will be had with the tenants and housing officer in finding alternative temporary accommodation to ensure that we meet the needs that are acceptable to the customer, there is also the complaints policy available.

Question:

4.13 Pets - Would it not be fairer to rephrase the offer as 'if that is not possible, we will usually look to cover the cost of rehoming the pets...'

[Response from Lisa Barker](#)

I am not sure that the rephrasing suggested adds anything new. We cannot commit to covering the costs without knowing the situation, or the pet involved. "We will usually look to cover" and "we may look to cover" both have a certain ambiguity about them and, in my opinion, one does not add any more weight than the other.

Question:

4.14 Utilities - Not entirely clear to me what this means. Seems to imply continued responsibility for utility bills at the original property but with compensation to them for any usage during decant. this seems to strongly imply that households will be responsible for bills when at the temporary address and if not or if so this should be stated.

[Response from Lisa Barker](#)

To clarify, which I believe the statement does explain the position perfectly, the tenant is still responsible for paying all their utility bills as if they were still living in their tenanted property. However, the Council will reimburse tenants for any difference in meter reading between when they left and when they returned. The Council will also pay for any utilities used at the temp decant address for the short term period they are in the property.

Question:

Contents Insurance - Presumably this will usually only be required for either original or temporary housing at any one time. But there may be circumstances where both may need to be covered. If so can the wording here be adjusted to allow for discretionary compensation in such a case ?

Response from Lisa Barker

Contents insurance can only be taken out by the person who the contents belongs too, we as an authority cannot take out contents insurance on a tenants behalf as we do not have the insurable interest in the property (as we don't own it or responsible for it.) There are occasions where some belongings may remain in the tenancy whilst the tenant and other belongings move to a temporary address.

Question:

5.3 - Unless I misunderstand this clause, it seems to exclude all home loss and disturbance compensation payments whenever a property is being sold and redeveloped. But that seems to contradict the overall thrust of the policy and notably as spelled out for leaseholders in section 6.0. Could that be clarified to avoid confusion ?

Response from Lisa Barker

5.3 only refers to the property being sold. The tenant will not be asked to decant and therefore there is no disturbance to the tenant other than payment to a new landlord.

Response from Councillor Matecki, Portfolio Holder – Homes, Health & Wellbeing

For the last question, 5.3, the tenant would not be evicted or asked to leave if a property is sold. If they were asked to leave then they would be dealt with under other parts of the policy and not 5.3. The only change that the tenant would see would be a new landlord.

13. Decarbonisation of Council Assets

Questions asked by Councillor Quinney

Following the sharp increase in gas prices and the working party review, are there any plans to decarbonise the two new Kenilworth Leisure buildings before construction starts, by removing or greatly reducing the use of gas as an energy source ?

Questions asked by Councillor Milton

The one question I had was the absence of a time plan (as far as I could see) for when things would start to be implemented. Could you confirm when this will be available please.

Response from Dave Barber, Director for Climate Change

We will be commencing work on both phases immediately – indeed the ball is already rolling on the strand relating to LED lighting.

For phase 1 we intend to appoint a Design and Build contractor to undertake assessments and works to buildings covering elements such as lighting, control systems, doors and windows, insulation. This will be undertaken in line with our guidance and based on the Cabinet paper. This approach enables delivery to get underway quickly. We will not be preparing a timetable for this as the approach has been designed to be flexible to respond to specific opportunities that assessments identify.

For phase 2 we will be starting a procurement process immediately following Thursday's Cabinet meeting to appoint specialists to undertake assessments around deeper building retrofits and replacement of heating systems. Subject to availability, we would like to have the specialists in place by the spring this year. We are currently commencing work on the specification for this work. Until the specialists have been appointed it is difficult to be specific about how long their assessment will take but we if we possibly can we will be pushing to have information ready for priority buildings for

- a) Public Sector Decarbonisation Grants (at present we don't know how soon these will come on stream)
- b) Budget planning and spending for 2023/24 – and sooner if we possibly can.

Questions asked by Councillor Davison

- What confidence do you have that this strategy will ensure the council is net zero by 2025?

Response from Dave Barber, Director for Climate Change

There is no doubt that the net zero ambition for 2025 is a big challenge. Phase 2 of this report will give us the more detailed data regarding the range of interventions required to achieve that ambition as well as detailed costs. The delivery will then depend predominantly on funding. Clearly the Council is committing to substantial funding, but this on its own will not be sufficient. We will therefore need to draw on government grant funding. At

present, that is a big unknown factor, but we believe the work proposed here will put us in the best position we can be to access future government funding.

- 1.6: strand 2 requires longer-term planning. Does this mean that very little if any will be completed by 2025?

Response from Dave Barber

We would expect the study proposed in Phase 2 to be undertaken during 2022. Subject to funding, we will then be in a position to deliver progress on the proposals during the latter part of 2022/23 and during the whole of 2023/24 and 2024/25. We would therefore expect substantial progress during that time if sufficient funding can be found.

- 1.9: Why is WDC putting in twice as much money as SDC?

Response from Dave Barber

This is because WDC has (approximately) twice as many assets requiring attention

- 1.10: surely ballpark figures have been estimated! Presumably, whilst important, phase 1 will not be able to address the majority of the carbon emissions from these buildings. What is your best guess for carbon savings achievable by phase 1? And phase 2?

Response from Dave Barber

This is an initial high level report and, whilst some indicative savings have been included, each project will have a detailed cost benefit section showing assessed savings in terms of Carbon Usage and the impact on running costs, mainly due to the cost of fuel used. Carbon savings from Phase 2 will depend entirely on the level of costs reported and the level of funding available. Ideally we would like this to enable all assets to be carbon zero ready (e.g. utilising electrical heating), but at this stage it is not known how realistic that is.

- Appendix:
 - a. what cost per kWh assumed for gas and electricity?

Response from Dave Barber

The tariff prices used in the report are from 2019-2020. These are:- gas average £0.0203 per kWh and electricity average £0.1374 per kWh. Averages are used as there is a difference in cost depending on the regularity of readings, time of day and time of year. However it is acknowledged that volatility in the energy

supply market is such that prices are likely to increase substantially in the medium term at least. Latest readings for Warwick District Council are gas at an average of £0.0144. Currently, electricity tariff varies from £0.185 to £0.44 per kWh

- b. 6.4 With crematorium showing as cost saving of moving to electric, what plans to fast track this? What other projects will be fast tracked so available to apply for funding? When are they likely to be bid-ready? What will these major upgrades look like? (I hope not simply changing gas heat to heat pumps without major improvement to the buildings)

Response from Dave Barber

There is no plan to bring forward ahead of schedule the replacement of existing LPG Crematory burners as the capital cost of doing this would be a very significant sum. However, options to replace LPG burners with electric will be an option at the next scheduled renewal. We are not expecting to replace heating systems at any site unless they are either programmed for replacement due to the age/condition of units or it can be shown that the cost and/or carbon savings make this value for money. However, as part of Phase 2 in the report, we will be looking to develop schemes across many corporate buildings which might then be suitable for bids for government funding as and when these arise. Other options around changes to lighting and other systems, building fabric and upgrades to heating and lighting controls will be considered as part of the phase one review. This will include the Crematorium as well as other corporate buildings and assets.

- c. Table page 20 to 26: why do we need hot water in these public buildings?

Response from Dave Barber

The need for hot water is generally for washing facilities in kitchens and washrooms. However on some sites, for example Temperate House, hot water is used in greater quantities both as a result of the number of people catered for and the fact that there is a commercial catering unit on the site.