

**WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL  
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**HELD REMOTELY**

**THURSDAY, 11TH JUNE 2020 (6PM)**

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**Present:**

Councillors: M J Hart (Chairman), S J Chambers (Vice-Chairman), N J Desmond, C Edginton-White, S Griffiths, S Miah, T L Onslow, M Rayner, S E N Rook and D R Sheppard.

**Observers**

Councillors: G W Ballinger, A Coleman, R H Coleman, H E Dyke, P Dyke, I Hardiman, F M Oborski MBE, C Rogers, J W R Thomas and L Whitehouse.

**OS.01 Apologies for Absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

**OS.02 Appointment of Substitutes**

No substitutes were appointed.

**OS.03 Declarations of Interests by Members**

No declarations of interest were made.

**OS.04 Minutes**

**Decision: The minutes of the meeting held 5<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.**

**OS.05 How Are We Doing? Performance Update**

The Committee considered a report from the Business Improvement Officer which updated Members on the performance of the Council for quarter 4, from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.

The Business Improvement Officer presented the report and appendices which included detailed reports of performance against the Council's purposes of 'Planning' and 'Housing'. Members were advised that the Capital Projects and exception reports were from the 2020/21 Programme of Projects.

The Committee considered each page of the report and appendices in turn.

**Agreed: The progress in performance for quarter 4 be noted.**

Councillor T Onslow joined the meeting at this point, (6.09pm).

**OS.06 Consideration of the flooding motion from Council**

The Committee considered a briefing paper from the Chief Executive on how to approach the task that it had been set following the resolutions of Council at its February and May 2020 meetings.

The Chief Executive presented the paper which detailed the background to the storm and weather events in February that caused flooding and disruption across the country. He gave a summary of the main points of the impact of the storms on the District and outlined the response by Wyre Forest District Council and other agencies.

In addition to those listed in section 6 of the paper, the Chief Executive explained that Wyre Forest Rural Ward had also been affected as there had been a flood event in Wolverley.

The Chairman acknowledged that the Environment Agency was the principal witness and, in order to have ample opportunity to hear evidence from them, he suggested that a special meeting of the Committee be convened for that purpose.

The Committee discussed the scoping of the scrutiny exercise. Councillor Edginton-White thanked the Chief Executive for providing a very comprehensive report in such a short timescale and was delighted that an additional meeting had been proposed. She added that in addition to the potential witnesses listed in the report, the Committee should seek evidence from Severn Trent, as they have a lot of responsibility with the drainage systems which were compromised during the flood events. She said the management of the pumping and drainage during the flood events was a key consideration. She also suggested that feedback be sought from Wribbenhall Flood Group and Bewdley Community Flood Group.

Having discussed the proposed timeline, the Chairman said that if necessary, consideration would be given to holding an additional Committee meeting in September prior to finalising a report for Council on 23<sup>rd</sup> September.

**Decision: The Committee agreed the following timeline:**

- 1. A special meeting of the Committee be held on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2020 to receive input from the Environment Agency.**
- 2. The following agencies be invited to attend the meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020:**
  - Worcestershire County Council**
  - West Mercia Police**
  - Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service**
  - Severn Trent**
- 3. The Committee to hear evidence at its meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> September from members of the public and business; including a representative from both the Wribbenhall Flood Group and Bewdley Community Flood Group.**

Councillor J Thomas lost IT connection at 6.38pm and returned to the meeting at 6.45pm.

**OS.07 Car Parking Changes as of 1st June 2020**

At the request of the Chairman, the Committee were invited to consider the changes made to the way payment can be taken due to the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The Chief Executive presented a briefing paper which set out the background to what happened, what was announced and detailed a number of the other relevant issues.

The Committee considered the paper and a discussion ensued. Councillor Desmond said that he was certainly not questioning the integrity of Officers and Members of the Cabinet; he believed that the original decision to cease cash payments had been taken in the spirit of public health and was done for the right reasons. He added that it could be argued that the decision was discriminatory against a certain section of the community that did not have access to be able to pay via the JustPark methods. He asked whether there had been a full and frank discussion with the relevant Cabinet Member and the Cabinet on this with Officers or was it that the Cabinet were simply notified of the decision by Officers. Councillor Chambers spoke about the timing of the decision to re-introduce the car parking charges as she felt it was not supporting the town centres. Councillor Onslow asked if representations had been made from Members of the Progressive Alliance who were not happy with the decision to not accept cash and, with reference to paragraph 9 of the briefing paper, said she was not aware of how the health advice had changed.

The Cabinet Member for Operational Services addressed the Committee. In response to the points raised he advised Members that the original decision to suspend the payments by cash payment was taken in consultation with himself and the rest of the Cabinet. He added that they had a thorough discussion about it and had acted on advice from Officers and with full regard to the Government guidelines for keeping people safe in relation to the coronavirus. He said the virus is spread by droplets which are transmitted when you cough or sneeze and can be transmitted by touching surfaces. He said the Cabinet had looked to follow the guidelines to try to keep people safe, including the Council's own staff that have to deal with the situation on a daily basis. He said at that time this was the correct thing to do and that was the way it was decided to proceed. The current situation is an ever-changing picture and councillors can only go on advice that is given to them.

He acknowledged that, when the original decision to cease accepting cash had been made, representations had been received from members of the public as well as from elected Members from all parties; and indeed many comments had been received which welcomed the decision. He said that the Cabinet had taken heed of all the feedback received.

He further explained that as the Government advice changed and more shops were able to open and people were able to move around more freely, it was realised the authority needed to bring back in the facility to use cash. He said that at that time the authority also brought in plenty of signage to ensure that all people using the machines were informed about the social distancing rules and cleansing guidelines.

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He added that all Council employees had been provided with PPE to make sure that the whole of the situation was well contained.

The Cabinet Member for Operational Services said there was never going to be a good time to re-introduce the car parking charges. In fact, some neighbouring local authorities had taken the decision not to suspend charges in March. He said that the Cabinet had discussed many dates and, as the Government announced the easing of lockdown measure around the beginning of June, it was felt that would be a suitable time.

He further explained that the authority had lost a considerable amount of revenue from this initiative. The Cabinet realise that the authority is not going to recover that revenue and are not going to pull back from that for a long time. Therefore it was agreed to re-introduce the charges from 1st June.

The Chief Executive explained that car parking income was only one of many income streams that had being severely impacted or disappeared altogether for a period. He said that in the case of car parking it was a choice that was made partly in order to deliver the free parking for on duty NHS and social care staff which was announced in the latter part of March but also as a reflection of the reality that, when the lock down came into effect on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, there were very few people who were using any of the Council's car parks from that point onwards until such time as the lock down started to shift. He added that the government had given Councils significant sums of money to cover their costs and lost income: however it was not enough.

The Chief Executive explained that the evidence that had been produced from the most recent returns showed that District Councils have collectively been underfunded by the government to the tune of £200m up to the end of May. This was in respect of both extra costs they have occurred and income that they have lost. He added that it remains to be seen to precisely where Wyre Forest falls on that spectrum. Whilst in the short term authorities are coping, if the government doesn't come up with some further funding to address the needs of not just District but all Councils, it is very likely that some are going to face significant difficulties

In response to a Member question regarding the allocation of a proportion of the government funding to the Council's lost revenue, the Chief Executive confirmed that the Council would use the government grant to plug the budget; not only car parking lost revenue, but also things like trade waste and other income streams that had either disappeared altogether or been severely impacted. He explained that the budget assumes a certain level of income from various activities and clearly, if the authority has not achieved it, it was appropriate to charge it to the grant we have received.

**Agreed: The Committee noted the report and endorsed the decision that was announced in the 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020 press release.**

#### **OS.08**

#### **Work Programme**

The Committee reviewed the work programme for the current municipal year.

**Agreed: The work programme be noted.**

**OS.09 Press Involvement**

The Chairman requested that the Consideration of the flooding motion from Council item be flagged up with the Media Team as a future item requiring publicity.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 7.15pm.