



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
OVERVIEW SELECT COMMITTEE

Held: THURSDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2024 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Cassidy (Chair)

Councillor Adatia
Councillor Batool
Councillor Dawood
Councillor Kitterick

Councillor March
Councillor Osman
Councillor Pickering
Councillor Porter

Councillor Rae Bhatia
Councillor Waddington

Also present:

Sir Peter Soulsby
Councillor Vi Dempster

Councillor Geoff Whittle

Mario Duda
Zara Jamal

City Mayor
Assistant City Mayor for Culture,
Libraries and Community Centres
Assistant City Mayor for Environment
and Transport (Online)
Youth Representative
Youth Representative

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58. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr O'Neill.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to disclose any pecuniary or other interests they may have in the business on the agenda.

There were no declarations of interest.

60. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Members had been updated on actions from the previous meeting via email.

It was noted that the Executive Members (The City Mayor and Councillor Malik)

and Youth Representatives had been omitted from the attendance on the previous minutes.

Councillor Porter clarified that his question regarding the Lothbury Fund was more specifically about how much of the £3.2m had been lost.

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 July 2024 be confirmed as a correct record subject to corrections as detailed above.

61. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair reported on the site visits to the site of Jewry Wall Museum and to Leicester Museum and Art Gallery (LMAG) that had been undertaken by members to observe the developments taking place. He noted that:

- At the Jewry Wall site, Councillors were shown where the new walkway will be, as well as the new reception, shop, café and meeting & learning facilities will be. Members were also briefed on the Digital and Physical interactives.
- At LMAG, members were shown where the new café will be and were also briefed on the revamp of the reception and shop, the relocation of the Victorian Art Gallery Stage and the closing down of Wildspace which was no longer fit for purpose.

The Officers involved in arranging the visits were thanked.

The Chair further announced that the next meeting of the Workforce Representation informal Scrutiny would be 3 December. He encouraged those present to take part.

The Chair welcomed the new members of the Committee.

62. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS AND STATEMENTS OF CASE

The Monitoring Officer reported that no questions, representations and statements of case had been submitted in accordance with the Council's procedures.

63. PETITIONS

The Monitoring Officer reported that no petitions had been received.

64. TRACKING OF PETITIONS - MONITORING REPORT

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report which provided an update on the

status of outstanding petitions against the Council's target of providing a formal response within three months of being referred to the Divisional Director.

It was noted that none were marked as 'red'.

AGREED:

That the status of the outstanding petitions be noted, and to remove those petitions marked 'Petition Complete' Ref: from the report.

65. QUESTIONS FOR THE CITY MAYOR

The Chair reminded members that he would prefer for all questions to be provided in advance, which can help in providing more detailed responses at meetings.

The Chair accepted the following questions to be asked to the City Mayor:

1. The Chair noted that it was disappointing that Marks and Spencer (M&S) had moved out of their premises in Leicester and asked the City Mayor what plans there were for the site.

The City Mayor responded that City Centres were changing, and M&S were also changing in that they were increasingly moving out of city centres, moving online and to out of town shopping. They were also focussing more on their food stores rather than the clothing stores. It had been explored as to whether the clothing and household section of M&S could move out, but the food store could remain, however, this had not been amenable to them at this time.

It was further noted that other chains had previously moved out of Leicester, such as C&A, Littlewoods and Fenwicks, which were replaced by Primark, TK Maxx and the Gresham respectively.

The City Mayor explained that the ownership of the areas traded from was in two different hands and the section on Humberstone Gate was leased separately to the section on Gallowtree Gate. Therefore, it was possible that separate interests could be expressed in the separate sections.

The premises were good places to trade from and the city centre had been invested in. Footfall in the city centre was still good despite the loss of Marks and Spencer.

The City Mayor remarked that it was sad that Marks and Spencer had

left, but it was noted that the departure of large traders gave good opportunities for other businesses.

2. Councillor Porter drew attention to the leasing of the Travelodge above the Haymarket centre, and asked what the return on this was.

The figures would be shared following the meeting.

3. Councillor Kitterick raised flooding and drainage issues and noted that whilst the Highways team had a list of high risk locations where procedures such as gully cleaning took place, the Street Cleansing team did not prioritise the cleaning of leaves in the same way that Highways prioritised the cleaning of gullies. If drains were at risk of causing flooding, it would be good for them to have leaves cleaned from them on a weekly basis. It was asked whether Highways and Street Cleaning could be better aligned in their priorities.

The City Mayor acknowledged that it was important for priorities to be lined up and coordinated, and that flooding was an important issue, particularly due to climate change. It was important to make sure that communications with the public, before, during and after heavy rainfall, were right. The City Mayor agreed to consider the issue and raise it with the relevant officers.

4. Councillor Rae Bhatia also raised the issue of flooding and noted that officers had previously advised that flood prevention and management was the responsibility of the Environment Agency. He suggested that the Council should be the first point of contact for residents so that they knew where to go.

The City Mayor acknowledged that the issue of flooding involved many agencies and explained that the Council was working to communicate with residents before, during and after flooding to help disseminate advice to residents and help them understand what kind of response they could expect.

5. Councillor Rae Bhatia raised issues concerning the Leys Building in Beaumont Leys and the play area around it. He asked how quickly the work on them could be completed.

The City Mayor clarified that this was a Housing Association building and agreed to follow up on the issue.

6. Councillor Rae Bhatia raised the issue of long waiting times when Council telephone lines were contacted and long response times.

The City Mayor explained that a problem with the phone system had been difficulty in recruiting people to operate it. This was a difficult issue

for call centres in general. The Council had been doing its best to recruit staff for this. He further suggested that scrutiny may wish to consider the issue further, perhaps through an informal scrutiny group of the Culture and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission.

7. Councillor Porter suggested that maybe a callback service or outsourcing of call centres could help with pressure on the telephone service and providing advice and help to residents.

The City Mayor responded that these approaches had been discussed with officers and the issue was not amenable to a simple solution. As such, it could be an area where scrutiny could add value by looking at evidence available, including what had been done at other Councils, and taking a view on whether such solutions could be suitable.

8. Councillor Waddington raised concern about the low level of book stock in libraries reported that she had been told that the Library Service was saving money by not purchasing so many new books. She asked whether the budget for new books had been reduced in year and whether libraries were still spending as much as they had previously on new books.

The City Mayor responded that new books were still being purchased, but also note that conventional stock was not the only way that people accessed the written word.

The Assistant City Mayor for Culture, Libraries and Community Centres responded that she was not aware of in-year reductions in funding but would look into the issue.

The Chair noted that it would be useful to receive questions in advance to allow information to be more readily shared.

The Chair welcomed questions from Youth Representatives at future meetings.

66. REVENUE MONITORING PERIOD 3

The Director of Finance submitted the first report in the monitoring cycle, providing early indications of the significant financial pressures the Council was facing this year and also providing an update on progress to control costs in demand-led social care budgets.

The Committee was recommended to consider the overall position presented within this report and make any observations it saw fit.

Key points included:

- This was the first report of the financial year, based on the budget set by Council in February.
- Some pressures continued from the previous year, such as around temporary accommodation with £8.4m overspent, including the use of the contingency budget. SEND home-to-school transport and disabled payments were also pressures.
- Positives included:
 - Work with Adult Social Care (ASC), where it had been proposed to reduce the budget.
 - The costs of Children Looked After was coming down, which was offsetting transport costs.
 - A VAT refund had been received following a court case this is proposed to be transferred to the managed reserve to support the budget.

In response to comments and questions from members, the following were stated:

- It was clarified that the variance under Housing was so high as it was the forecast figure to the end of the year. There had been a £45m decision in affordable homes aimed at moving families out of temporary accommodation, however, it was recognised that it took time to acquire properties. Without mitigation, the forecast overspend would be higher (£13m). It was hoped that the forecast overspend would come down as more properties were purchased and more families were moved out of temporary accommodation.
- It was clarified that the original budget was the budget as set in February, the current budget was the budget as things currently stood, the forecast was where it was thought the outturn would be at the end of the year, and the variance was the difference between what the forecast and current budget.
- Housing would be a pressure area next year. The Housing department had done a report on this area.
- In response to a query about the costs involved with buying houses to reduce pressures around homelessness, it was clarified that there had been a mistake in the capital report on how much had been planned to spend. It was further clarified that there was a plan to spend £10m this year of the £45m decision and this would progress as soon as possible. It was a difficult housing market, but the team were working hard to identify properties. The Director of Housing would clarify costs and the Committee could consider the issue.
- It was clarified that all people coming to the city for housing, must have a local connection based on family or work for over a year.
- With regard to pressures from Section 21s, increased numbers of asylum seekers and prisoners released early going into temporary accommodation, it was acknowledged that this would be an issue, but

early indicators suggested that these were relatively small number. The Director of Housing could also update on this.

- It was clarified that what was not spent of the £45m would earn interest in the Council's bank account. The managed reserves would be used to manage the overspend.
- A property was mentioned that could be considered for purchase and was being considered by the department.
- In response to a query surrounding SEND transport and respite care, it was clarified that with regard to respite care the spend on this was a shortfall of £0.6m with a forecast spend of £2.6m and with regard to SEND transport the forecast expenditure was £17m, £2m more than the budget. Staff were continually trying to review cases on SEND transport and taxi procurement was a part of this. Staff looked to ensure there was appropriate transport, and as such personal budgets were also considered for families. This was a difficult situation and was a pressure nationally.
- In response to a suggestion that SEND transport be brought back in-house, it was clarified that whilst much of it was managed in-house, there were complications in doing this as many children were out-of-area and also off bus routes. Suggestions from members on how to manage the issue were welcomed.
- It was suggested that if personal budgets were increased, it might make the option more attractive and thus enable children and young people to be more independent. The Director of Finance agreed to consult the relevant department to see which recommendations were being considered and the progress made on them.
- There was an ongoing conversation with the Department for Education around the recovery plan. Once more information was available it would go to the relevant Scrutiny Commission for consideration.
- It was clarified that savings had been made in ASC by making use of technology and preventative care.
- In response to concern raised about the difference between the forecast and spend on ASC, the Director of Finance noted that £8.4m had come through quicker than expected and work was going on between departments to improve that position. Late announcements regarding issues such as government grants could not be accounted for. The budget had been set with the best information available at the time that the budget was set.
- The City Mayor added that there had been good planning and management, but risk was still present. It would be necessary when looking at next year's budget to assess how precarious the situation was.
- The Director of Finance further clarified that the reserve position had improved, however, the additional one-off transfer would not offset the budget gap and it was not expected to cover the budget gap in the next financial year.
- With regard to the sale of assets, the City Mayor clarified that the ability

to use income from the sale of assets to prop up the revenue budget was dependent on government permission, and permission would only be forthcoming if sustainable cuts were made in the revenue budget.

- In response to concern raised about proposed changes in council tax support and issues surrounding briefing for Councillors on the issue, it was acknowledged that there had been technical issues at the briefing, however, the current scheme was well understood by officers, and it was necessary to help people understand why the system was proposed to change. Further briefing sessions were offered to Councillors.
- In response to a request that the process for changes in council tax support to be delayed to help Councillors understand the issue before it became a document for public consultation, it was explained that whilst it was acknowledged that it was a complex issue and members had a right to understand it, the consultation process needed to take place when scheduled. However, it was confirmed that a decision did not need to be made January 2025 and this was a Council decision. It was recognised that there was a need to ensure that members had opportunities to ask questions and express concerns, but there was no need to delay the consultation.
- It was clarified that the proposed changes to the council tax support scheme could save £2.4m through changes to the council tax support scheme. The scheme was also about making the system simpler so that people could understand it, and when they had income changes, they could re-assess their council tax bill. This was particularly useful as people could have multiple changes in a year. It was also aimed to add more discretionary support to help people to transition to the new scheme.
- It was clarified that a proposal had been put to Councillors and the public on a suggested way of running the scheme. Feedback would then be considered which would inform the decision that would be put before Full Council.
- In response to further suggestions that a delay would be useful to allow people to understand the changes and for the people who wanted to respond to the consultation to understand what they were being asked. It was confirmed a further Councillor briefing would be offered to answer questions.
- The Chair further clarified that the consultation was about a proposal, not about a decision.
- The Director of Finance reassured the Commission that the scheme was well understood by officers and members would be worked with to help them understand the scheme.

AGREED

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That comments made by members of this commission to be taken into account by the lead officers.

67. CAPITAL MONITORING PERIOD 3

The Director of Finance submitted a report on Capital Budget Monitoring for period April – June 2024/25. The Director noted a mistake as the report does not show the forecast spend on temporary accommodation which should detail a planned expenditure of £10,000,000.

It was recommended that the Committee consider the overall position of this report and make any observations it saw fit. Questions were welcomed and addressed as follows.

- A point was clarified on the Jewry Wall improvements, the figures discussed were for the remaining 2024/25 budget, rather than the earlier outturn position.
- It was acknowledged that there was a difficulty with reporting on the environmental impact on housing. Considerations were made within the overall budget, but there were not separate reports on decarbonisation and climate emergency impact work within the capital programme.
- The Director of Finance explained that figures queried for housing allocation were for Housing Revenue Account housing, which was not part of the general fund.
- In response to a query regarding the shops capital programme, The Director of Finance advised that an update would be provided.
- Regarding the railway station works, the City Mayor advised that the levelling up was expected to remain within budget and commented on the positive relationships with the respective rail agencies.
- The Leicester Market scheme was ongoing and the City Mayor would engage further with traders over the following weeks.
- Councillor Dempster would share an upcoming report on multi-use games areas with members once it was complete, she noted there were significant investments across the city in this area.
- In response to concern raised about the way that information was disseminated regarding the contractor for the Jewry Wall Project going into administration, A statement was made about the Jewry Wall contract. Notable dates for the contractor's liquidation were clarified and it was explained that the Council were limited in what information they could disclose whilst they were in contract. In response to further discussion, the Chair suggested writing to the Monitoring Officer for further information.

AGREED

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That comments made by members of this commission to be taken into account by the lead officers.

68. OVERVIEW SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee was asked to consider the current work programme and to make comments and/or amendments as it considered necessary.

It was requested that the Customer Services report come to the Committee.

It was requested that the Committee look into housing allocation and property purchase, perhaps as part of the Annual Corporate Estate Report 2024/25.

It was noted that the next meeting would be 12 December 2024.

AGREED:

That the current work programme be noted.

69. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There being no other items of urgent business, the meeting closed at 19:38