

Cabinet – 24 February 2021

Recommendation from the Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee of 9 February 2021

The Draft Capital Strategy

1. At its extraordinary meeting held on 9 February, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to note the working draft of the Capital Strategy 2021 and to provide recommendations on how the Strategy could be improved and amended to Cabinet for them to consider prior to the report going to Cabinet on 24 February and Council on 25 February 2021.
2. The Committee scrutinised the strategy in detail as reflected in the minutes of the meeting.
3. Members expressed the view that although it was a live document the strategy was too long, some of the information was irrelevant, there were references to historical and unpublished documents, that there were instances of duplication and that it needed to be stripped back and re-written.
4. The Committee noted that there was a statutory requirement for the Strategy to be approved at the same time as the Capital Programme which did not leave time for a complete rewrite or any significant changes to be made. However the historical appendices could be removed and referenced by a link, and some tweaks made.
5. The Committee acknowledged that there was balance that needed to be struck between brevity and providing a sufficient level of detail and transparency.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: The Committee recognises the live nature of this Strategy and accepts that due to time constraints it is not possible to re-write the Strategy this year but the Committee requests that in future the Strategy is more forward focused, and a tracked changes version is available for members to review to see how the Strategy has evolved.

Recommendation 2: That officers update the Strategy to make it more concise, replacing appendices with links where possible, prior to being presented to Cabinet on 24 February 2021.

Recommendation 3: That the information provided in paragraph 6.9 is updated to make it clear that the figures quoted are from the Strategic Land Availability Assessment and not any future planning application or any previous development scenarios members may have seen.

Detailed Revenue Budget

1. The Committee scrutinised the Budget in detail as reflected in the minutes of the meeting.
2. Members expressed the view that it was not clear what would be covered by the £1 million contingency for issues relating to COVID-19 and expressed concern at the increase in domestic violence and financial hardship under COVID-19 conditions and sought assurance that there would be provision for supporting these areas, although noting that as a borough council Spelthorne do not have primarily responsibility for tackling domestic abuse.
3. The Committee noted the Grants Panel had considered the range of issues generated by COVID-19 and that these issues would be addressed in a report to Cabinet this evening and taken into account in the Panel's grant allocation recommendations.
4. The Committee also noted that residents may be eligible to apply for Council Tax Support in certain circumstances and that the Council was receiving a grant from the Government in anticipation of this, which was reflected in the Budget..
5. Members queried the provision made for external audit costs and noted that it was a prudent precaution to ensure funds were available if the issue could not be resolved but that the Deputy Chief Executive was working hard to resolve the matter.
6. A member of the committee expressed concern that by freezing the Council Tax base for one year future increases would always be from a lower base and under the capping regulations it would not be possible for the Council to catch up. Members of the Committee expressed the view that the freeze resulted in a minimal saving for most households.
7. Members discussed the Council's provision for Green projects and climate change and agreed that there was inadequate provision and that the Council's aspirations in this area were not sufficiently ambitious.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: The Committee was concerned over the adequacy of the monies set aside for green issues and climate change, which undermines the pledge in the draft Capital Strategy that climate change is a priority and asks Cabinet to review this.

Recommendation 2: That next year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (or Service Committees if the Council agrees to adopt the Committee System governance model at the Annual Council meeting in May) will have sight of the budget earlier in the process to enable them to be fully involved in the shaping of the final budget before it is presented to Council for approval.

Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 24 February 2021