

Recommendations and updates from other committees to Cabinet 16 February 2024



Scrutiny Committee

The committee met on 5 February to discuss the following. Each of these matters relates to an item on Cabinet's agenda for 16 February:

(1) Revenue Budget 2024/25 and Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2028/29

The committee asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- include gross amounts in the reporting, to help with understanding the base budget; a fuller explanation of the base budget was requested;
- in Appendix D1 on the capital programme, welcome the links between expenditure and corporate plan themes. This should be continued and matched to new themes when the new corporate plan is approved;
- add sensitivity analysis for the Medium Term Financial Plan, where possible, to model the impact of variables;
- ask that the Cabinet members for finance and communications review how to make budget information more accessible to residents and contextually link the budget more clearly to corporate plan priorities.

In order to be transparent and open, here is a summary of the officer advice and actions in relation to the above, to aid consideration by Cabinet.

- The head of finance, in discussion with the Cabinet member for finance, will reflect these points as far as they are able in future budget setting reports.

(2) Corporate Plan Approach 2024 to 2028

The committee asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- in Corporate Plan quarterly reporting, members would like to see measures and milestones presented, suggesting that headline graphics had more impact and might be more useful for the public;
- transparency, openness and fiscal responsibility are embedded but need to be explicit in the document. Even if no longer a main theme, these should be explained in the document in relevant places;
- renaming the Corporate Plan. Internally, keep the name "corporate plan" due the potential work involved in changing this, but public-facing communications and headings could change to better engage the public;
- active risk management should be taken on by the project board proactively in their meetings.

In order to be transparent and open, here is a summary of the officer advice and actions in relation to the above, to aid consideration by Cabinet.

- On the suggestion regarding the Corporate Plan quarterly reporting, this is noted and is planned to be a considered alongside other requirements when the development of the draft plan progresses at a later stage, after the engagement phase. Officer advice has consistently been that the new Corporate Plan

should have simplified reporting based on timelines, milestones and realistic expectations.

- Transparency, openness and fiscal responsibility can be made more explicit in the document, such as in the preface and theme descriptions, as underpinning principles and values of how a well-run council should operate. Fiscal responsibility is a requirement placed on all local authorities by the Best Value regime.
- Comments on the naming of the corporate plan are noted. There are plans to incorporate this already with the proposed title 'At the heart of the Vale – Our Plan for the Vale 2024-2028' that has been brought forward by Cabinet members. Officers support the Scrutiny Committee's view that when communicating internally, officers should refer to the plan as the Corporate Plan, reflecting existing job descriptions across the council, and also supporting engagement with outside bodies, such as CIPFA, who expect 'the Corporate Plan' to drive budget planning process.
- Regarding the suggestion made about risks, it should be noted that risk management is actively applied to all projects across the council and risk reporting is over seen by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee.

(3) The Beacon

The committee asked Cabinet to consider the following:

- accelerate work on the action plan, particularly focussing on fundraising efforts, future commercial options, revisiting decarbonisation timescales and discussions with Wantage Town Council, with clear time parameters for the whole action plan;
- revisit engagement with local ward members to meet, share ideas and contacts, and will any community action groups want to be involved in the Beacon's future?;
- providing an update to Scrutiny Committee in quarter three.

In order to be transparent and open, here is a summary of the officer advice and actions in relation to the above, to aid consideration by Cabinet.

- On the action plan's acceleration, the action plan element have not yet been awarded priority ranking, however, those actions currently identified for the earliest delivery (within quarter 1, 2024/25) include obtaining the specialist arts, marketing and fundraising resources, implementation of a fundraising strategy, implementation of a new pricing strategy/structure, producing a stakeholder map, extending the officer working group, closely followed by re-establishing a community board, implementing new marketing strategies and similar.
- On fundraising efforts, subject to approval of the budget for the post, officers will recruit/procure a fundraising officer to undertake fundraising activity and will write and implement the fundraising strategy. This is not possible without Council approval of the budget. In the interim, officers have engaged with the council's corporate external Funding Officer, who has offered additional support to the current in-house team.
- On future commercial options, in order to ensure best value is achieved, officer's recommendation is that before external options are considered for progression, the in-house operation should be operating at its best potential, to ensure comparisons are accurate and fair. This does not mean officers will not be gathering more information and potentially undertaking some informal market testing to gauge interest and viability for different operating models. It is

unlikely that a compliant assessment of Value for Money across various options can be completed earlier than the action plan indicates.

- On revisiting decarbonisation timescales, the team will revisit the timescales and the financial modelling for decarbonisation works, but these are budget dependant.
- On discussions with Wantage Town Council, officers will endeavour to progress discussions as quickly as possible, but this will be dependent on the Town Council's availability to work to the timescales we set. The current target in the action plan is to have completed discussion by quarter 3, 2024/25. Officers aim to suggest initial discussions and informal indication of their interest as soon as possible. It should be noted that Wantage Town Council is under no obligation to respond within a set timescale and may wish to fully engage its own democratic and budget processes before any agreement is reached and indeed may not wish to reach any revised agreement.
- On providing clear timescales in the action plan, the action plan provided top line actions with target completion dates, as outlined in the report. Officers will produce detailed operational work plans, listing out all the individual tasks that will contribute to delivering the overall action. These tasks will each have their own timescales, in order that the overarching target is met. However, much of the delivery work for the action plan will be delivered by existing staff, who will have to incorporate it into their existing capacity. Officers are therefore looking to set realistic timescales that can be achieved.
- On Scrutiny Committee's suggestion of revisiting engagement with local ward members to meet, share ideas and contacts, and on the question whether any community action groups want to be involved in the Beacon's future, officers consider that The Beacon is a district wide resource; as worded this recommendation does not seem to fully recognise that. Officers are currently taking advice on the degree to which district councillors, who are also town councillors, are conflicted, pending the completion of discussions with Wantage Town Council. The importance of Wantage Town Council in the action plan and in discussions was acknowledged by the committee.
- On Scrutiny Committee seeking an update in quarter three, within section 78 of the report officers have already committed to provide regular progress updates on delivery of the action plan and its impact to the officer working group, Cabinet members, and any other key stakeholders, which can include Scrutiny Committee. Officers will also be providing more statistical information with the monthly members' updates from March 2024 onwards, showing sales and expenditure income, analysis of what has sold well for the period, and marketing and engagement statistics.

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