

## Customer Panel Meeting

15 November 2017

### **Present**

Mrs E Robson	Mr K Bell
Mr J Hannah	Mr J Snowball
Mr D Sutton-Lloyd	Ms S Chiang
Mr W J Curtis	Mr S Howarth
Mr T Liddle	Mr P Clark
Mr M Carter	Cllr K Robson
Cllr M Ashcroft	Cllr P Symons

Cllr R S Fleming – Leader of the Council  
Mr D Austin – Finance Manager  
Miss A Donald – Town Clerk's PA

### **Apologies**

E French, S Barnett

### **Meeting Notes**

1. Councillor Fleming updated those present on the number of financial uncertainties and constraints facing the council. The Neighbourhood Plan was now in place and had already been used in a case to protect the town's green spaces. The potential for taking over the maintenance of some green open space from Durham County Council was currently being discussed.
2. Dan Austin, Finance Manager, gave a presentation updating panel members on the Council's financial situation and the progress of the budget setting process. Panel members were requested to complete a questionnaire indicating their views, which would be taken into consideration by the Council when setting the budget.

A full audit had been carried out and confirmation received that the Council provided good value for money and its finances and governance were in good order.

3. Questions and comments were invited from panel members. These included the following:

*How does the Town Council deal with Council Tax arrears?*

It was explained that the Town Council receives Council Tax monies from the County Council in full. It is the responsibility of the County Council to recover Council Tax arrears.

*Green open spaces – why will no financial contribution be received by the Town Council from the County Council if the green spaces are taken over?*

Negotiations were in a very early stage and it would take some time for terms to be agreed.

*With reference to building and machinery improvements, a leaf collecting machine would be very useful.*

It was explained that provision had already been made in next year's budget for one of these.

*Oakleaf Sports Field – issues with dog excrement on the sports pitches. A Public Space Protection Order could be used under new legislation.*

This would be looked into. Durham County Council's neighbourhood wardens would be asked to check the area from time to time as they have the power to issue fines whereas Town Council staff do not.

*Would a public referendum be required if the Council wished to raise the Council Tax by more than 2%*

It was explained that this only affects Principal Councils at the moment. Some town and parish councils have increased their precept by considerably more than 2% and this practice was therefore under government scrutiny.

*Will the interest rate changes have a beneficial help?*

Yes, and this had already been included in the budget figures. However, the Town Council's loans were on a fixed rate.

*How will the Council's reserves be affected by the end of the five year plan?*

These could be as low as a quarter of a million but much would depend on savings on the revenue budget and other factors such as the increase in house building in the parish. Business rates from the parish all go to Durham County Council, the Town Council received nothing from this.

*Is the Medium Term Financial Plan reviewed regularly?*

It is reviewed constantly. A service review of the Oakleaf Sports Complex and Golf Complex was currently underway. The Complex currently runs at a net cost of £250,000 to the Council. There was a good deal of competition from other sporting and food outlets on the town. It was commented that something new and different should be put into the Complex to compete with other facilities on the town and it was confirmed that this would also be looked at as part of the review.

*What is the contingency sum in the Revenue budget.*

This was to deal with any unforeseen expenditure and also as a buffer for future budget reductions.

It was commented that a Council Tax freeze at this point in time would be unwise.

*Who deals with waste disposal?*

It was explained that this is dealt with by the cheapest agency, currently a private contractor.

*What are the costs for councillors and civic events?*

All Councillors receive just over £1,050 per year allowance. This had not changed for a number of years and no councillors had made additional mileage claims. It was acknowledged some councillors attended more meetings than others.

*Pre-School expansion running costs?*

The Council has two buildings, one of which is already an established Pre-School. The second building would be able to offer up 12 places for 2 year-olds and on this basis running costs would break even. If full, the Pre-School should operate at a small surplus.

*Have you considered making a small charge for the Firework Display?*

This could be considered.

*Where is CCTV located and could it be extended to cover parks and play areas?*

CCTV currently operated at the Council Depot and Complex, with a monitoring fee paid to Durham County Council. It would be very expensive and logistically difficult to extend it to other properties.

4. Councillor Fleming and Dan Austin thanked panel members for attending and completing their questionnaires. Further copies of the questionnaire were available on the Council's website and on the Council's Facebook page.