

SCRUTINY BOARD (STRATEGY AND RESOURCES)

MONDAY, 16TH OCTOBER, 2023

PRESENT: Councillor A Khan in the Chair

Councillors H Bithell, S Burke, D Chapman,
S Firth, T Hinchcliffe, W Kidger, A Parnham
and E Thomson

39 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

40 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There was no exempt information considered by the Board.

41 Late Items

There were no late items.

42 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

43 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

The Board received the following apologies:

Cllr Matthew Robinson
Cllr Gohar Almass

44 Minutes - 18 September 2023

Under minute 33 – Matters Arising of the meeting held on 18 September, the Scrutiny Advisor agreed to follow up on the July meeting of the Board and the provision of information to Rothwell Ward members related to Leeds 2023.

RESOLVED:

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th September 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

45 Matters Arising

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser highlighted the following areas as matters arising from the 18 September meeting of the Board:

Min 34 – On the staff survey item the Board were informed that more detailed analysis of EDI survey results linked to protected characteristics is to be shared with the member champions as requested. In addition, more information linked to member questions on digital improvements being planned to support staff in their roles has been requested and will be circulated to the Board once available.

Min 35 – The Electoral Commission report summarising issues arising from the 2023 Local Elections has been circulated to members as requested, and it has been noted that a further elections item could come forward later in the municipal year to set out plans for the Election in 2024 following questions from the Board.

Min 36 – The OFLOG training request has been passed on to colleagues and plans to develop that will be pulled together. In addition, queries have been raised with colleagues in Adult Social Care linked to some queries from the Board on the metrics that covered those services, responses are awaited and will be provided to the Board when available.

In addition, the Board also highlighted a useful follow up meeting in relation to Minute 35, the Elections Update. This was focussed on ensuring that support is available for trans people to be able to vote without triggering gender dysphoria. It was further noted that additional information will be available through a forthcoming communications plan to support this approach.

46 Employee Mental Health Update

The Board considered a report from the Director of Strategy and Resources setting out the Council's approach to staff mental health and well-being support.

The report highlighted a number of targeted interventions being undertaken by the Council, as follows:

- Setting a clear policy, framework, and management system.
- Continue talking, learning, and leading
- Corporate Support
- Data Capture and Reporting
- Building Manager Capability
- Managing absence and performance

To accompany this item a presentation was delivered covering the key points in the council's approach to mental health and well-being support. In attendance for this item were:

- Mariana Pexton, Director of Strategy and Resources
- Andy Dodman, Chief Officer HR
- Lisa Colver, Head of Health, Safety and Well-Being

By way of introduction the importance of health and well-being was highlighted, and it was noted that it is a key element of the Council's People Strategy and work to support staff working for Leeds City Council.

The Board heard that the approach to mental health and well-being is continuously developing and that the role of managers in ensuring the success of the approach will be vital within the context of the Be Your Best management programme.

In response to comments and questions from the Board, discussion included the following:

- Members were interested to know more about management approaches such as responses to feedback where colleagues say "I am fine", whether trauma informed management techniques are used and encouraging the disclosure of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to inform how managers respond to staff in a more nuanced manner. The Board were informed of plans to expand the Be Your Best management programme which has to date focussed on EDI (for the mandatory element of the programme). This will move to focus on other areas of management such as performance management (as discussed with the board previously) and mental health, safety and well-being.
- Members asked about correspondence to staff who are suffering from sickness absence and potentially adapting it to be more individually focussed. The Board were informed that work is ongoing with the Business Support Centre on developing the correspondence used in these cases to ensure it is better tailored and appropriately compassionate.
- Responding to a query about how mental health first aiders are supported the board were informed that more work is required in this area. There is provision of counselling for the first aiders, but more could be done and this will commence through an upcoming conference for mental health first aiders to enhance support. Members expressed an interest in attending the Mental Health First Aiders Conference and this was welcomed.
- Discussion moved on to pre-crisis techniques and what the Council is doing to support staff and deliver interventions. The Board heard that initial steps have been taken and more is planned through the Mental Health First Aiders Conference that is due to take place in November where this will be one of the areas of discussion.

- The Board asked about any consideration that the authority had given to use of a four-day week to relieve stress and work related anxiety given that other organisations have used that approach to help staff manage work pressures. The Board were informed that it had been briefly considered but it is not in the Council's plans particularly given the hybrid approaches that the Council has developed in recent years which can assist with staff workloads and providing work life balance flexibility.
- Members noted that mental health and well-being are two different subjects and warned about conflating the two as they are distinct issues. In addition, members also emphasised that mental health encapsulates a range of conditions beyond perhaps the most commonly reported of stress and depression and wanted to see more of a focus on wider conditions as well as tackling stress and depression. In response it was acknowledged that there is a danger of compressing everything into 'well-being,' work is underway to address this within the Council through the appointment of a Mental Health Advisor who will be focused solely on mental health issues.
- The Board also referenced cultural awareness which they wanted more of an emphasis on in the Council's approach to take account of the different perceptions of mental health amongst the active groups in this area – it was acknowledged that this should feature in the approach and is a factor in the work being carried out.
- Members received assurances on support available for the menopause. It is a key area of focus for the Council and the possibility of supporting initiatives such as Menopause Cafes was also covered. The Board requested access to any briefings available on this subject and suggested that consideration should be given to establish a menopause staff network that could focus on this issue in detail covering issues such as trans colleagues who often experience early menopause due to the hormone treatment. It was agreed that a discussion with the Women's Voice and other staff networks could be taken forward to see if there is a specific group that could work with the Council on this issue. It was also noted that WYCA has been doing some valuable work in this area and that will be shared with attending officers.
- Members asked about the breakdown by directorate in terms of access to the Vivup support that is offered by the Council. The Board were informed that social work services in Children and Families are a main area of focus followed by social work staff in Adults and Health services. There was a further commitment to look at the data in more detail to provide that breakdown by services or directorate.
- In respect of home working the Board were keen to ensure that support is available to new staff and that they do not become isolated through home working approaches. It was acknowledged that hybrid working can carry some risks in terms of health, safety and well-being issues but also brings benefits through work life balance flexibility.
- The Board also discussed staff survey results and those that are anxious or unhappy in their lives. Approximately 15% of staff have stated that they are not happy and more work is planned through data analysis to focus resources on those that are expressing these views.

- The Chair asked about the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on staff absence. The Board were informed that some of the free text responses in the recent staff survey covered this but that is still subject to ongoing analysis and it is difficult to accurately provide numbers on how many staff have had absences due to financial difficulties however, it was clear that this has had an impact on absence rates.

Resolved:

The Board noted the contents of the report and the ongoing work and progress to promote positive mental health and manage work-related stress and:

- a) Agreed to consider this item again later in the municipal year but as two distinct items, one to cover mental health and one on staff well-being.
- b) Requested a 'you said, we did' summary of ongoing work linked to well-being and mental health and covering issues raised by the Board.

47 Financial Reporting 2023/24 - Month 4 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 - 2028/29

The board agreed to consider Item 8 and Item 9 as one item given the clear links between the two and that the financial issues faced in 2023/24 will have an impact on the medium-term strategy and projections.

In attendance for this item were:

- Victoria Bradshaw, Chief Finance Officer
- Mariana Pexton, Director of Strategy and Resources (left to attend another meeting for part of this item).

The Board received a presentation on the following issues:

- The latest position on the financial challenge in 2023/24 and work underway to balance the budget.
- Detail on the budget gaps faced over the course of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2023/24-2028/29 (MTFS), the key risks and assumptions, work underway to address the budget position and next steps.
- Details on other key areas of the MTFS such as the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and the Capital Programme.
- In respect of Children Looked After (CLA) budgets the board were informed of the ongoing challenges faced by the authority in terms of increased demand and higher costs of placements in recent years, this is reflected nationally and is not a position unique to Leeds. The budget pressure in 2023/24 for CLA external placements is £15.49m.

- To manage in year spending in 2023/24 only essential spend is permitted. This has been combined with other measures such as a recruitment freeze, maximising income, focussing support on services with the highest areas of spend, an asset review and bringing forward future years savings proposals to deliver benefits in year.
- Key messages being communicated internally to manage budgets are: stay within budget, absorb in year pressures, highlight budgetary issues early and continue with robust monitoring.
- The projected budget gaps for the next three years were presented as: 2024/25 - £59.2m; 2025/26 - £56.6m, 2026/27 - £47m. In terms of key risks these were identified as: impacts of global events on the UK economy, the overall funding envelope available for Local Government from the Government, fuel and energy inflation, increased interest rates, pay awards, demand and demography, possible changes to the political landscape and capital assumptions.

In response to comments and questions from the Board, discussion included the following:

- Members were interested to know more about plans for CLA budgets in future years given that costs for external placements have recently doubled. In response the Board were informed that the increased costs in this area have been built into the MTFS which is reflected in the budget gaps that formed part of the presentation. The overall approach to CLA placements has been to develop a mixed economy and to look to deliver more in-house placements through smaller living accommodation in Leeds. These plans are well underway along with detailed work to see if any external placements can be brought back into Leeds where it is suitable, and any move would not be disruptive for the children and young people concerned.
- It was noted that there needs to be a balanced approach to delivery of new in-house placements to not have accommodation that is either not used or staffed and not having enough of that type of placement and having to pay additional costs for external placements. The cost of placements as opposed to volume was stressed as the key concern in this area.
- In response to a query around the Little Owls nursery provision the Board were informed that the service is subject to a review which will be reported to Executive Board in the coming months.
- Members also noted the reduction in Government funding and whether that has been taken account of in the projections. The Board were informed that this is part of the projections, and it was also noted that there has been a shift from Government funding to more of a reliance on local taxation to increase the funding available to local government.
- Members were concerned about the projected overspend in the current financial year, 2023/24, and how the Council will be able to deliver the savings required to balance the budget as is legally required. The Board were informed that it is likely that the Council will have to use its reserves in 2023/24 to deliver a balanced budget. The impact of this will be a reduced level of resources in future years of the MTFS.

- The budget sustainability of the Council and the services provided were discussed. It was acknowledged that there is a need to re-base the council's budget and carry out a thorough analysis of statutory services and those that are valued by Leeds residents to ensure that services are provided to those that need it the most.
- Given the scale of the challenge faced the Board emphasised the need for engagement with elected members to ensure that they can carry out engagement with residents and explore alternative solutions that could be delivered and for ward members to be part of the solutions that are developed.
- Members made enquiries around the speed of decision making and that sometimes it can take too long to make decision that can deliver savings. In response the importance of ensuring the right decisions are taken was emphasised. However, it was acknowledged that in some cases colleagues have other responsibilities and delivering transformative change can be difficult whilst also having a 'day job.' As a result, additional staffing has been invested in to deliver service transformation which should assist in terms of realising change and delivering savings.
- The Board were informed of the need to do more on budget accountability and the new financial systems being delivered through the Core Business Transformation approach will assist with this to ensure that real time information is available to budget holders.
- Responding to queries around possible staffing reductions the Board noted that to address the budget position the Council will need to stop or reduce services which will inevitably lead to reduced staffing. Reducing staff levels without changing services will ultimately lead to additional workload pressure and remaining staff being placed under more pressure.
- The staffing reductions that do take place will be delivered in a managed way through a voluntary leavers scheme and decisions will be based on the services that staff are working in and will be different to other schemes such as the Early Leavers Initiative that operated in previous years.
- The Board highlighted the section 114 notice that Birmingham has served in recent months. A key difference between Leeds and Birmingham is that the Council does not face equal pay claims like Birmingham does and has been proactive in addressing equal pay issues in the past. It was also believed that the open and honest approach taken in Leeds allied to close consultation with elected members has enabled decisions to be made and measures taken to balance the budget each year.
- The board put on record their thanks and appreciation for the work being done by the Council's finance team to ensure balanced budgets and budget sustainability.

Resolved:

The Board:

- a) Noted the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2024/25 to 2028/29
- b) Noted that savings proposals will be considered at future meetings of Executive Board and the budget proposals for 2024/25 will be the focus of a Scrutiny Working Group in December 2023, following practice established in previous years.
- c) Noted the Month 4 Financial Reporting Position for 2023/24.

48 Best City Ambition Update

The Board considered the report of the Director of Strategy and Resources setting out the scope of the Best City Ambition update which precedes more detailed work on the initial update proposals and offers an opportunity to the Board to provide feedback on this ongoing work stream.

As part of ongoing consultation with the Strategy and Resources Board this item will return for further consideration in the Board's January cycle.

In attendance for this item were:

- Mariana Pexton, Director of Strategy and Resources
- Mike Eakins, Head of Policy

Given the previous items on the financial challenge the Best City Ambition emphasises the need to maximise available financial resources to have the biggest impact against the key priority of tackling poverty and inequality and the work on net zero, health and well-being and inclusive growth.

Through the Team Leeds approach the Council aims to deliver the Best City Ambition setting out the way the city wants to work and how the ambition will be delivered. Team Leeds has six key strands:

- Building mutual respect and understanding through co-production and co-design
- Shifting power to citizens through vibrant and sustainable community social infrastructure, and tackling systemic inequalities
- Being evidence-led, ambitious and optimistic for the future of Leeds – fostering innovation, creativity and a learning culture in a digital world
- Investing in prevention and using asset-based approaches to build community capacity, focusing on what people can do not what they cannot
- Recognising the impact of society and the economy on the health of people in Leeds at different stages of their lives
- Everyone playing their part – businesses and public institutions recognising their responsibilities and investing in social entrepreneurship.

In response to comments and questions from the Board, discussion included the following:

Minutes approved at the meeting
held on Monday, 11th December, 2023

- On KPIs members were keen to understand how the Council is delivering on the ground, and whether feedback on KPIs would feature at the report brought to full Council annually. The Board were informed that the KPIs are part of a separate reporting process through the annual performance report that is considered by Executive Board, reporting the same KPIs through the BCA route runs the risk of duplicating.
- Members also wanted to know more about implementation of the priorities particularly in relation to giving more power to communities and listening and responding to resident concerns and feedback. The council buildings in Rothwell were suggested as a case study that might inform how the Council responds to communities. In response the Board were informed that the BCA is an over-arching strategy setting out and guiding how the Council and its partners wants to achieve their ambitions and does not answer all aspects of the work done by the Council in granular detail. It was also noted that the BCA plays an important role in galvanising partners in the city and guiding how the city works.

Resolved:

The Board:

- a) Noted the scope of the update of the Best City Ambition set out in the presented report.

49 Work Programme

The Board considered the Scrutiny Board’s work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year.

In attendance for this item was:

- Rob Clayton, Principal Scrutiny Adviser

The Board were informed of some changes to the work programme that have taken place since the publication of the papers for this meeting. The staff networks item scheduled for December has now been moved to the February meeting.

In addition, the Chair updated board members on the cross-scrutiny Community Committee Review Working Group. Follow further discussion the nominees from this Board will now also include Cllr Chapman.

50 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Board will take place on 11 December 2023 at 10.00am. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at 9.30am.

Minutes approved at the meeting
held on Monday, 11th December, 2023