

SCRUTINY BOARD (STRATEGY AND RESOURCES)

MONDAY, 16TH NOVEMBER, 2020

PRESENT: Councillor M Harland in the Chair

Councillors G Almass, P Carlill,
D Chapman, S Firth, H Hayden, D Jenkins,
J McKenna, M Midgley, M Robinson and
S Seary

CHAIRS OPENING COMMENTS

The Chair welcomed all to the meeting, and thanked Cllr Hayden for Chairing the last meeting in her absence.

53 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection of documents.

54 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

55 Late Items

There were no late items.

56 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests.

57 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

There were no apologies for absence.

58 Minutes - 12 October 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th October 2020, were approved as a correct record.

59 Matters arising

In relation to Minute 47, Board Members were advised that no response had been received from the Secretary of State to the joint letter sent by the Chairs of Strategy and Resources and Adults, Health and Active Lifestyles Scrutiny Boards, in relation to Social Care Funding.

The Board was disappointed that no response had been received from Government.

With the agreement of both Chairs, the Principal Scrutiny Adviser said that he would send a follow up letter.

60 Leeds City Council contribution to Welcome to Yorkshire

The report of the Chief Officer Financial Services advised the Scrutiny Board Strategy and Resources on Leeds City Council's contribution to Welcome to Yorkshire.

In attendance for this item were:

- Cllr James Lewis – Deputy Leader of Council and Executive Member for Resources
- Victoria Bradshaw – Chief Officer Financial Services
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing
- James Mason – Welcome to Yorkshire

Chief Officer Financial Services presented the report advising Board Members of the following:

- A brief history of pooling in the region and the current pooling position;
- The 2019/20 North and West Yorkshire Business Rates Pool;
- Allocations of funding to Welcome to Yorkshire;
- Decision making requirements in Leeds.

James Mason informed the Board of the following points:

- He had joined Welcome to Yorkshire in January 2020, after the financial affairs of the organisation had been scrutinised in the public domain. Although Welcome to Yorkshire had successfully hosted a number of events such as Tour de Yorkshire and The Grand Depart as well as a number of festivals the organisation needed to re-engage with the public to show transparency in its accounting and build on previous successes;
- A new strategy for Welcome to Yorkshire is more inclusive for regions and communities with a focus on making the region a place to live, work and study. The strategy encourages students to not only study in Yorkshire but to consider it as a place for them to gain a career and ultimately set up home here;
- As part of the new strategy and given the current circumstances under covid restrictions it would promote Yorkshire as a tourist destination. Part of the strategy looks to encourage people to walk around and enjoy the hospitality of the county with a focus for next year on 'Walkshire';
- The strategy also looks to put residents, and local businesses into the limelight.

Member's discussions included:

- Reasons why Wakefield had chosen not to subscribe to Welcome to Yorkshire;
- Support of tourism for the county including walking, arts, heritage, large events, and hospitality. The Board also discussed current restrictions and the use of digital engagement including webinars to promote Yorkshire;
- The importance of encouraging people to use local businesses including online services;
- The need for a Service Level Agreement;
- Joint Committee membership and its decision making powers;
- West Yorkshire Charitable Trust and its work within local communities;
- The need for a robust business plan to include resources, better governance and sustainability.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report.

61 Collection rates for Council Tax and Business Rates - 2020/21

The report of the Head of Democratic Services provided Board members with an up to date position on collection of business rates and council tax in financial year 2020/21. This report follows interest shown by Board members at the Scrutiny Board meetings in July and September as to how collection rates for both Council Tax and Business rates had been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In attendance for this item were:

- Cllr James Lewis – Deputy Leader of Council, and Executive Member for Resources
- Victoria Bradshaw – Chief Officer Financial Services
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing

The Chief Officer Financial Services introduced the report informing the Board of the following points:

- Business rates collections were slightly worse than council tax collections due to the climate we are currently operating in, with it showing 5.19% behind last year's collection rate, this equated to £16.7m. It was noted that this is after all the relief that Central Government had provided to local businesses;
- Members attention was drawn to Appendix 1 of the submitted report which showed the collection rates and comparisons with previous years;
- The deficit on the Collection Fund for this year was forecast to be £43.9m. Government had announced this could be spread over the next three years. As part of the Government spending review it is expecting that there may be some support, although it was noted that not all local authorities were experiencing the same issues in collection rates.

In responding to questions from Members the Board were informed:

- The figures provided were assuming a Council Tax increase of 2.99% based on previous years. For next year the figures have been looked at and will be provided to Executive Board in December.
- £8.9m provided for the hardship fund had been distributed to those who are on the local council tax support scheme with £150 to each claimant with new claimants also provided with an element of the hardship fund.

Members were mindful that an increase in Council Tax bills would be difficult at this current time for some families.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report.

62 Covid-19: Agile working approach and Estate Realisation

The report of the Director of Resources and Housing and the Director of City Development set out the changes that we have seen over the last 6 months in the way that staff are working, the support which has been provided and the approach to home and agile working moving forwards. It also set out the implications and opportunities this has for the estate and the work underway to right size and remodel it to ensure it meets the expectations of staff and supports agile and flexible working and changing service delivery requirements.

In attendance for this item were:

- Cllr James Lewis – Deputy Leader of Council, and Executive Member for Resources
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing
- Graham Sephton – Head of HR in Resources and Housing
- Mark Mills – Head of Asset Management

The Board was informed of the following points:

- 8,000 staff have been supported to work from home this included looking at the wellbeing of staff working from home and in the workplace;
- Covid safe workplaces to enable staff to work in the office. It was noted that future working in the workplace will change with a greater flexibility on work space to allow more collaboration and team work;
- Surveys undertaken to assess the wellbeing of staff and their experiences of working from home and in the workplace. It was noted that more than half the staff are happy to work from home for more than half the week.

Responding to questions from Members the Board were provided with the following information:

- Staff have had a variety of experiences most enjoying the experience of work from home, although some staff are struggling with mental

health issues including the social aspect of working. Work spaces going forward would hopefully address this. The organisation is currently moving in a different direction from the previous 7 months. The latest Pulse Survey taken recently needs to be looked at in a bit more detail;

- To date 15,000 pieces of equipment have been provided to staff which include office furniture and I.T. equipment. Where possible this has been through recycling furniture from offices which are closed and will remain closed. All I.T. equipment has been recorded and is monitored;
- Over the first period of lockdown it was noted that staff worked hard to keep services going and support the community. Often working long hours as they were able to work more flexibly. However, staff wellbeing was being addressed through the wellbeing offer providing support on physical and mental health and also financial support. It was recognised that more conversations were required for the maintenance of staff wellbeing. December and January will see the reintroduction of mid-year appraisals that are more focussed on staff well-being, with managers also offering individual one to one meetings and 'check ins';
- Staff were positive on working productively saying that it was as effective as being in the office. Direct contact visits such as estate walkabouts were stopped in the first lockdown. However, issues in relation to this service have been addressed and the walkabouts have now been reinstated as it was realised that this was an important service. It was recognised that a productivity matrix was required to better monitor service delivery in remote settings;
- Civic Hall, and Merrion House were two buildings that, as examples, have been identified as remaining within the Council's estate. Buildings in other localities will be assessed to check running costs, maintenance issues, to see if can be updated to become greener or likely investment opportunities; It was recognised that some buildings could become multi-functional with front facing services marrying up with back office services;
- Members were advised that the Civic Hall is currently being heated where people are working. It was noted that the Civic Hall will be linked to the district heating system in the future
- Members were also advised of other factors in relation to estate realisation. Flexibility in the existing lease arrangements and whether recent investment had taken place were two factors to consider.
- It is proposed that Housing Offices will provide services for the community in partnership with other organisations such as health partners which will be beneficial to residents as well as services.

RESOLVED - To note the content of the report.

63 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Governance Services requested consideration of the Scrutiny Board's work schedule for the municipal year 2020/21.

The Principal Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report.

The Board was advised that the meeting scheduled for January would focus on budget proposals and the agile working approach.

The Board requested that the productivity matrix workflow be added to the work programme and could feature as an element of a future report on agile working and estate realisation.

It was noted that the work programme was appended to the submitted report.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report.

CHAIRS CLOSING COMMENTS

The Chair said that this had been a challenging year for everyone. She thanked everyone for all their hard work over the past year.

As the Board do not meet in December, she wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

64 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The date and time of the next meeting of Scrutiny Board (Strategy and Resources) will be Monday, 11th January 2021, at 10.30 am (Pre-meeting for all Board Members at 10.00 am).

The meeting concluded at 12:25