

SCRUTINY BOARD (STRATEGY AND RESOURCES)

MONDAY, 22ND MARCH, 2021

PRESENT: Councillor A Scopes in the Chair

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

CHAIRS OPENING COMMENTS

Cllr Scopes, the Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. He introduced himself as the new Chair of the Board and thanked Cllr Harland for all her work Chairing the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board.

He said that he was looking forward to working on this Board and invited members to share ideas for future scrutiny enquires. He invited the Members and Officers to introduce themselves.

91 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection of documents.

92 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

93 Late Items

There were no late items.

94 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests.

95 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

There were no apologies for absence.

96 Minutes - 15 February 2021

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 18th February 2021, be approved as a correct record.

97 Matters arising

A letter had been sent to Central Government asking for a long term funding solution for Adult Social Care Services from the former Chair of the Board and Cllr Hayden as the then Chair of Scrutiny Board Adults, Heath and Active Lifestyles. A follow up letter requesting a response had also been sent.

Members were advised that there was still no response.

It was noted that this will be pursued, with a letter from the new Chair requesting a response. Members to be kept informed.

98 Financial Health Monitoring and Collection Rates for Council Tax and Business Rates - 2020/21

The report of the Head of Democratic Services provided Board members with information regarding the projected 2020/21 financial health position of those service areas that fall within the Board's remit at Months 9 (December) and 10 (January) of the financial year.

In attendance for this item were:

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

The Board were informed of the following points:

- This report covers months 9 (December) and 10 (January). Month 10 (January) was presented to the Executive Board at its meeting in March, this appended to the report at Appendix 2;
- The Council has a budget of £525.7m for financial year 2020/21. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic there were Directorate, Council Tax and Business Rates overspends of £170.7m, plus costs for pensions and severance through the Early Leavers Initiative (ELI) of £12.9m this gave an overspend position of £183.7m. It was noted that this was being managed through non-covid savings, earmarked reserves and Government funding for both expenditure and income losses;
- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) has an underspend of £9.6m which would contribute to the major repairs reserve. Members asked for additional information in future to monitor the overall housing stock;
- There was a better position in relation to Adults and Health this was through early discharge and additional contributions from NHS. The Chair asked about the level of reserves held by Adults and Health;
- The dedicated school grant deficit was down. An action plan was being developed to manage this in future years;
- A report on the collection fund for Council Tax and Business Rates was attached at Appendix 3. The report detailed the impact on collection rates noting that there had been significant reductions in collection and how this was being managed. It noted that the Council had received grant from Central Government for loss of income.

Member's discussions included:

- Hardship Grant – Members requested more information on this to include how many residents had been assisted through the scheme. It was also noted that, in relation business rates, there may be more issues arise as we come out of the pandemic with businesses continuing to require support as recovery from pandemic begins to take place; Business Rate appeals were also discussed in terms of the

potential for more appeals against the 2017 rating list in the coming financial year

- On the under-spend on the HRA and the transference of money to the major repairs reserve, it was noted that this is a ring-fenced account and that money would be provided for council houses to be upgraded. The upgrades would include energy efficiency works to multi-storey blocks through the District Heating system and under floor heating. Members requested further information on this;
- Members also requested further information in relation to waste Management and the PPE provision that had been provided as the figure quoted seemed to be quite high;
- Members were advised that the HRA underspend was related to work slowing down due to social distancing over lockdown, if restrictions continue to be eased then there will be an opportunity for work to progress more quickly in the coming months;
- Right to Buy scheme and the remaining stock. Members were advised that the Council still has 54,000 properties. The sale of council houses had slowed down through the pandemic, although as we move out of the pandemic there may be renewed interest. Members noted that there was a replacement programme and that there had recently been a relaxation in the rules regarding the rebuild programme which may assist the Council in delivering more new stock;
- Members noted that the savings on transport costs were low and it was recognised that the figures provided were for Resources and Housing only. Members requested figures for all the Council and for more detailed figures in relation to school transport.

RESOLVED - To note the content of the report.

99 Scrutiny Inquiry into Agile Working and Estate Realisation following the Covid-19 Pandemic - summary of evidence to-date

The report of the Head of Democratic Services provided a summary of evidence received to date on the Board's inquiry into agile working, developing new ways of working and estate realisation. It looked at the future areas of interest in terms of this developing work stream.

It attendance at the meeting for this item were:

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

Members of the Board were informed of the following points:

- Appendix 1 provided the initial thoughts on this evolving agenda;
- Planning for a return to work for some staff, a number of surveys are to be sent out which will take account of how staff are feeling currently. It was recognised that over the past 12 months, staff opinions have

changed on how they worked in the past, are working currently and the new arrangements going forward;

- The survey will be sent to all 8,000 staff in late March or April, and will look at gathering information on new arrangements as the Council goes forward and how to balance that with good service provision. In May it is hoped that findings from the survey will be able to be shared and form part of the new arrangements, with a view to return to work from June;
- The utilisation of the buildings that the council use will change. The estate will have buildings located within the City and also in district centres.
- The core buildings will deliver more collaborative spaces for team working with a change in layouts to address a flexible approach to office and home working. Working on Hybrid meetings is ongoing with staff in DIS and this will require a change in protocols and training.

Member's discussions and responses to questions from the Board included:

- Support to staff at all levels during this period;
- Service level response times;
- Flexible working hours and any impact on council services. It was noted that the survey and a toolkit would address wellbeing support, measures for service delivery and standards.
- Costs in relation to ICT. It was recognised that there had been a one off cost to enable people to work from home at the start of the first lockdown, and that where possible recycled kit had been used and will be used moving forward;
- A trade Union working group was looking at policy changes, contracts, funding arrangements in relation to job descriptions and roles as new working arrangements evolve;
- It was recognised that there was still work to be done on achieving a better balance for home and work and managing expectations carefully;
- Some of the buildings to be utilised would require investment to make them sustainable. The change in how we work will also present opportunities to look at accommodation such as leisure centres and community centres and how space within these could be used differently for office space or touch down space. Opportunities may also arise for shared spaces in community hubs with partner organisations;
- Members were keen to ensure that the views of staff are taken into account in relation to travel, and to consider if staff would prefer city centre locations or community based locations. It was noted that this would form part of the staff survey.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report and pass over to the successor Board for further work in early in the next municipal year.

100 **Work Schedule**

The report of the Head of Democratic Services requested Members consideration on the Scrutiny Board's work schedule for the remainder of the current municipal year. With this being the final Work Schedule report of municipal year 2020/21 members were also asked to consider any work items they wished to pass over to the successor Board in municipal year 2021/22.

The Principal Scrutiny Officer presented the report. It was noted that the Members would receive feedback on ongoing issues.

Members' attention was drawn to Appendix 3 of the report which set out the draft work schedule along with the dates for the forthcoming municipal year.

It was noted that the Board would consider the following items at the first meeting in June:

- Scrutiny Board Terms of Reference and Sources of Work
- Performance Update
- Scrutiny Inquiry – Agile Working and Estate Realisation - Staff and HR Feedback
- DIS – Vision, Project and Programme Management and PSN Certification/Data Governance

The Chair requested that there be enough items to afford flexibility for any emergency or urgent items.

Members requested that the following items also be added to the work schedule:

- Devolution – to look at Scrutiny Arrangements going forward and the impact on the Council's resources;
- Resources – Recycling issues

It was noted that issues in relation to recycling would form part of a joint working group with Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report.

101 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Scrutiny Board Strategy and Resources will be on 21st June 2021 at 10:30am (There will be a pre-meet for all Members at 10:00am)