

SCRUTINY BOARD (STRATEGY AND RESOURCES)

MONDAY, 11TH FEBRUARY, 2019

PRESENT: Councillor P Grahame in the Chair

Councillors G Almas, A Blackburn,
K Brooks, S Firth, R Grahame, D Jenkins,
J McKenna, M Robinson and P Wray

64 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection of documents.

65 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

66 Late Items

There were no formal late items.

However, supplementary information was tabled at the meeting with the Boards agreement in relation to Item 11 – The Management and financial implications of void properties in Council ownership – Draft statement of the Scrutiny Board.

67 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

68 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

An apology was received from Cllr. Smart. Cllr. Brooks attended the meeting as Cllr. Smart's substitute.

69 Minutes - 21st January 2019

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 21st January 2019 be approved as a correct record.

70 Elections, Registrars and Land and Property Search Services Performance Report

The report of the Director of Communities and Environment presented a summary of Elections, Registrars and Land and Property Search Services performance against the strategic priorities for the council and the city.

In attendance at the meeting were:

- Councillor James Lewis – Executive Member for Resources and Sustainability
- Gareth Moore – Land and Property Search Manager

- Susanna Benton – Electoral Services Manager
- Steve Coupe – Chief Superintendent Registrar

Discussions took place on a number of issues highlighted in the report. Responding to questions from Members the following information was provided:

- It was reported that the number of voters registered at the universities was low due to new GDPR legislation which prevents the Electoral Registration Officer being able to block register students. Officers agreed to provide a breakdown of student numbers on the register of electors.
- The Board noted that the Elections Office is working to increase student numbers by sending out invites to register; door step canvassing; and holding events at the universities. Universities were also being encouraged to capture key information as part of their own registration processes.
- It was noted that current legislation allows for students to register at home and at university, therefore they would potentially be able to vote twice during local elections. It was acknowledged that more students tend to register to vote during a general election or referendum. Whilst only being allowed one vote at general elections, the Board learned that there is nothing in place nationally to ensure that students are not voting twice in general elections.
- Whilst acknowledging that information on the voting registration form cannot be altered, the Board suggested that the Council could perhaps attach a covering letter to help explain more about the individual's rights and the process itself. It was noted that a pictorial guide is already used currently, but a covering letter could also be considered.
- The Board also discussed the number of non-UK voters registered in Leeds and the work being undertaken to try and increase this number.
- The 'tell us once' service was explained. It was noted that this service has the capacity to signpost to other services such as counselling, bereavement services and third sector agencies. Linked to this, the Board expressed the need to ensure that relevant frontline staff receive appropriate training to enable them to deal with such sensitive matters.
- The Board raised concerns at the potential loss of £250K when land searches are moved to Nottingham. Members heard that in Leeds land searches are conducted quickly. However, this was not the case nationally which is why the decision to move to Nottingham had been taken. There was no confirmed date for the service to be moved.

During discussions, Cllr. Robinson had disclosed that he had recently attended the Registrars Service in relation to his forthcoming wedding and praised the level of service he received. The Chair and the Board then formally congratulated Cllr. Robinson on his forthcoming wedding.

In conclusion, the Chair also thanked the officers for attending and gave general praise for the level of service being provided.

RESOLVED - To note the content of the report.

Minutes approved at the meeting
held on Monday, 1st April, 2019

71 Business Rates Appeals

Further to its meeting last month, the Scrutiny Board expressed a wish to continue discussions around ways of addressing local authority exposure to business rates appeals risk and volatility. To help inform the Board's discussion, the following information was appended to the report of the Head of Governance and Scrutiny Support:

- Appendix 1 – An extract from the report presented to the Scrutiny Board in November 2018 (updated to 31/12/19) detailing factors linked to the continuing volatility of business rates income, including the appeals process.
- Appendix 2 – A briefing paper on the reduction in appeals numbers in 2018/19 and the incidence of the cost of appeals provisions since 2013/14.

In attendance at the meeting were:

- Councillor James Lewis – Executive Member for Resources and Sustainability
- Doug Meeson – Chief Officer, Financial Services
- Richard Ellis – Head of Finance
- Mark Amson – Business Rates Manager

In consideration of the report, the following key points were raised:

- The Board noted that at the end of December 2018, there were 1,475 appeals still outstanding from the 2010 valuation list.
- Whilst acknowledging that no appeals had yet been registered in relation to the 2017 valuation list, Members were informed that it was still early days.
- The appeals process is now digitised and requires more evidence to be provided to justify claims for appeals to be submitted. As such, it was hoped that the change in the appeals process would help to reduce future levels of appeals being registered;
- The Board acknowledged that outstanding appeals cause difficulties for the Council with regard to financial planning and that even though 9 appeals still remain outstanding from the 2005 valuation list, the Council was unable to move the VOA to a resolution quickly. Linked to this, it was noted that the VOA was also experiencing resource pressures.
- The Board discussed the distinctions made between the collection of Business Rates and Council Tax as particular reference was made to levels of written-off debts during a downturn when it is not economical to collect money owed for business rates.
- It was noted that when a business ceases to exist, the debt also ceases. Whilst acknowledging that Companies House can be used to gather information on Phoenix companies, Members expressed an

interest to understand more about the rules surrounding Phoenix companies and the role of the Insolvency Agency.

- Members were also informed that where a business goes into administration, they are usually up to date with their business rates and therefore there is usually no loss to the Council.
- Clarity was provided to the Board in regard to Mandatory Charity Relief which is awarded to academies. Reference was also made to the 'Mazaars Case' and its impact on small business rates relief.

RESOLVED – To note the content of the report.

The Chair advised the Scrutiny Board that Doug Meeson was leaving the Council at the end of March and therefore thanked him for all his support and advice provided to the Scrutiny Board. The Board also showed their appreciation with a round of applause.

72 Employee Health and Wellbeing

The report of the Director of Resources and Housing updated the Board in relation to employee health and wellbeing.

In attendance at the meeting were:

- Councillor James Lewis – Executive Member for Resources and Sustainability
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing
- Chris Ingham – Head of Health and Safety
- Sarah Byrne – HR service Manager

Members were advised of the following points:

- That a previous performance report had come to the Board in January 2018;
- That the Council has a moral duty to look after its staff as a healthy organisation is also a better organisation, and that this links in with the wider public health agenda for the city too;
- Members' attention was drawn to the graphs presented within the submitted report.

In response to questions from the Board the following information was provided:

- The Board learned that flu jabs are made available to Council staff, especially if they work in a public contact area;
- It was noted that information could be broken down to provide specific details in relation to types of illness, recognising the spectrum of mental health issues; seasonal indicators; and demographics of city and work area;
- The Board acknowledged the Council's commitment to Mental Health Champions in the long term and that support and assistance is offered to employees in variety of forms including, counselling and training;

- It was acknowledged that mental health issues would not always be work related and that support and assistance would be offered in all cases;
- It was noted that initiatives such as the blood pressure programme were ongoing to ensure the health of the organisation.

RESOLVED –

- a) To note the content of the report.
- b) That the Board be provided with the information requested.

73 Update - Staff Survey

The report of the Director of Resources and Housing provided a summary of the proposals for the Council's Staff Survey, which is due to launch in Spring 2019.

In attendance were:

- Councillor James Lewis – Executive Member for Resources and Sustainability
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing
- Susan Podmore – HR service Manager
- Frank Perrins – Research and Satisfaction Manager

The report provided an outline of an updated Staff Survey approach to specifically improve the uptake in front line services where employees do not have access to a computer as part of their everyday roles.

Responding to Members questions and comments the Board were informed of the following points:

- Collaborative work is ongoing with trade unions to look at how best to engage with hard to reach staff such as school staff, outside workers and those who do not have regular access to computers;
- The new system now allows links to smart phones. Therefore, the opportunity to use text messages and Whats App are now available;
- It was acknowledged that there are cultural changes with more staff having the opportunity to work from home and that this factor could perhaps be reflected in the survey next time;
- Benchmarking with other cities does take place and alongside other authorities Leeds was performing well;
- It was recognised that Civic Enterprise do well engaging with a dispersed workforce and undertake appraisals and surveys with 100% completed at mid-year review;

RESOLVED - To note the content of the report.

Cllr. Robinson left the meeting 12:30pm at the conclusion of item 10.

74 The management and financial implications of void properties in Council ownership - draft Statement of the Scrutiny Board

The report of the Head of Governance and Scrutiny Support requested the Board to consider and agree its formal Statement in relation to its review of the management and financial implications of void properties in Council ownership.

The draft Statement was circulated separately and tabled at the meeting with the agreement of the Members.

In attendance were:

- Councillor James Lewis – Executive Member Resources and Sustainability
- Neil Evans – Director of Resources and Housing
- Mark Mills – Head of Asset Management

In consideration of the Board's draft Statement, the Director of Resources and Housing had thanked the Scrutiny Board for their good work.

Discussions took place in relation to lease buildings. It was noted that Asset Management would work with Corporate Property Management to monitor leased buildings and work with the leaseholder to ensure that the building comes back after the lease period in a good condition.

RESOLVED - To formally agree the Statement of the Scrutiny Board in relation to the management and financial implications of void properties.

Cllr Wray vacated the meeting at 12:35pm during item 11.

75 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Governance and Scrutiny Support requested the consideration of the Board's work schedule for the remainder of the municipal year.

Members were informed of a meeting to be held on 28th February 2019 at 10:30am to look at emergency planning. It was noted that invites had been sent out to all Board Members.

RESOLVED - That the work schedule be updated to reflect the discussions of the Board during today's meeting.

76 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board will be Monday 1st April 2019 at 11:00 am, with a pre meeting for all Board Members at 10:30am

The meeting concluded at 12:40 pm.

Minutes approved at the meeting
held on Monday, 1st April, 2019

