

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 20TH JANUARY, 2022

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors A Blackburn, D Collins,
A Gabriel, P Grahame, K Brooks, T Smith,
C Howley, K Ritchie, R Charwood,
M Midgley, D Ragan and D Jenkins

39 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

40 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

41 Late Items

There were no formal late items.

42 Declaration of Interests

No declarations of interests were raised at the meeting.

43 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Akhtar and Finnigan. Councillor Jenkins attended the meeting as substitute on behalf of Councillor Akhtar.

44 Minutes - 25 November 2021

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held 25th November 2021, be approved as an accurate record.

45 Performance Monitoring

The report of the Director of Communities, Housing and Environment provided a summary of performance against the strategic priorities for the council and city and other performance areas relevant to the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board and in line with the Best Council Plan.

The report covered Quarter 2 2021-22 performance information. Members were requested to consider the performance information contained in the Appendix to the submitted report and the issues which have been highlighted

and consider if they wish to undertake any further scrutiny work to support improvement over the coming year in any of these areas.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Harland, Executive Member for Communities
- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Resources
- James Rogers, Director Communities, Housing and Environment
- Gerard Tinsdale, Chief Officer Housing
- John Woolmer, Chief Officer Environmental Services
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support
- Tim Rollett, Intelligence & Policy Manager
- Adam Crampton, Head of Property Management

Responding to questions and comments from Members, the Board were provided with the following information in relation to each area:

Housing

- Void properties. All properties have been allocated, and work is on-going to identify ways to move tenants in quicker. Members were asked to provide details of specific cases to officers, to discuss outside of the meeting.
- Disrepair claims. Clarity was provided on trends in particular areas and the use of communication strategies to work with customers on outstanding repairs.
- The impact of the Right to Buy scheme in Leeds. The Executive Member for Resources explained that whilst the Right to Buy scheme has an impact on the Council's ability to provide council housing, it was acknowledged that the Council work with the Private Rented Sector to ensure availability of housing and can offer bonds to people whilst they're waiting for Local Authority / Housing Association properties.
- MEARS contract update – the new contract went live on 1st October 2021 and it was considered that the level of progress remains on track and significant progress has been made on the backlog of void properties. It was noted that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) remain suspended, and KPIs were thought to be re-introduced from 1st April 2022.
- Unauthorised Encampments. There are sites that have been identified in the Site Allocations Plan to expand on permanent traveller sites in the city. Board Members were asked to provide suggestions of any possible sites to officers for consideration.

Community Hubs and Welfare

- Mobile hubs. Responding to a member regarding the operation of minibuses specifically in the Farnley and Wortley ward, it was confirmed that most mini-busses were used for the COVID-19 vaccination programme, and mobile hubs were operational as of January 2022. Further clarity on specific wards will be provided outside of the meeting.

- There are mechanisms in place to ensure that residents are kept up to date with local schemes. Officers confirmed further work will be undertaken to identify how residents are kept well informed.
- Specific details requested by a member in relation to the Members Improvements in the Community and the Environment (MICE) monies, funding Council facilities will be provided outside of the meeting.

Environmental Services

- Bin Collection Rates. The overall number of households missed in Leeds can be provided outside of the meeting.
- Recycling. Current ways of measuring recycling figures vary across Local Authorities, and future ambitions are dependent on the National Waste Strategy. It was noted that there will be a possible requirement to collect food and glass separately. It was also confirmed that the Council are working with consultants to analysis contents of black bins and considerations around which materials have the biggest impact on climate change; findings will be reported at a future meeting.
- It was confirmed that the landfill figure is 0.6%, and information will be sought on how this compares in relation to overall waste and fed back at a future meeting.
- It was noted that there are challenges around the expectations of what feedback people receive after reporting cases of fly-tipping. It was acknowledged that there is some work to do around looking at the information provided on the Council website in terms of providing a statement setting out the process after a report has been made.
- Specific issues with residents being unable to contact offices regarding missed bins will be picked up outside of the meeting.
- Vehicles blocking roads. Members were provided with an update on the TRO scheme, and it was confirmed it is currently in phase 2. Members were encouraged to provide suggestions of areas where bins are regularly missed to feed into the scheme moving forward.
- Road closures in terms of refuse collection. The service liaises with contractors to ensure bin coverage across the city is provided.
- Volunteers and local community groups are a big part of street cleansing and reference to acknowledge the work they have carried out, will be referenced moving forward.
- Covid related absences have reduced to 5-6%, and the service continue to monitor the wellbeing of staff / other illnesses; it was acknowledged that this will be a challenge for the service over the coming months.

Elections and Regulatory

- Parking permits. It was noted that a board member had been advised that parking permit schemes could not be implemented where residents have access to any form of off-street parking. However, since receiving that advice the member had been made aware of several parking permit schemes, including in Wetherby and Farsley, where off-street parking is also available.

- Officers were asked to clarify how many of the 137 parking permit schemes referenced in the performance report are in areas where off street parking is available, and advice was sought as to why that would be the case.

Parks and Countryside

- Park renewals and repairs. It was noted that Executive Board have recently agreed a 10-year Green Park Strategy for the City, that drives ambition in its vision. However, concerns were raised by Board Members relating to the lack of communication on dealing with basic repairs and carrying them out.
- A member referred to the “Love Leeds Parks” organisation and urged that body to be used more widely across Leeds to support the provision of quality parks and green spaces across Leeds.
- The steps in place the Council are taking to mitigate challenges around retirement and sickness. It was confirmed that the Council are aiming to employ apprentices, to change the age demographic across the service.
- Woodland Creation. Responding to a comment regarding enhancing the success of schemes by improving consultation with residents, officers confirmed that the tree planting scheme has been successful city wide, although it was acknowledged that there has been higher engagement in certain areas. Additional work with ward members will maximise the success of schemes moving forward.
- Whilst it was acknowledged that reducing herbicides across the Council presented challenges, work is on-going to identify solutions.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance.

RESOLVED- To note the contents of the report, and the appendix, together with Members comments during discussion of this item.

46 Financial Health Monitoring

Agenda Item 8 – Financial Health Monitoring and Agenda Item 9 – Initial Budget Proposals, were considered together by the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities).

The reports of the Head of Democratic Services and Chief Officer Financial Services provided an update on financial health monitoring as at month 7 (October) in the context of wider discussions about both performance monitoring and the initial budget proposals.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Harland, Executive Member for Communities
- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Resources
- Neil Evans, Director Resources
- James Rogers, Director Communities, Housing and Environment
- Kevin Mulvaney, Head of Finance

- Gerard Tinsdale, Chief Officer Housing
- John Woolmer, Chief Officer Environmental Services
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support

Board Members referred to a summary of discussions following Decembers Budget Consultation working group (included at page 195 of the submitted report) and agreed to endorse such discussions as part of the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) response.

RESOLVED –

- a) To note the projected financial position of the Authority at the end of October (Month 7) and the projected impact of COVID-19 on that position.
- b) Note that for 2021/22 the Authority is forecasting an overspend of £0.909m at the end of October.
- c) Note that the position does not reflect the potential effects of any further local or national lockdown arrangements on the financial projections.
- d) Consider the aspects of the initial budget proposals for 2022-23 that fall within the remit of the Scrutiny Board.
- e) That the comments and recommendations raised by Board Members during the Budget Consultation will be included in a composite statement bringing together the views of all five scrutiny boards. In line with the requirements of the Budget and Policy Framework to be provided to Executive Board in February for its consideration before the final budget proposals are referred to Council.

47 Initial Budget Proposals

This item was considered alongside agenda item 8 – Financial Health Monitoring. Minute No.46 refers.

48 Best City Ambition

The report of the Director of Resources presented a report that outlined the structure of the initial Best City Ambition proposals, highlights where further development work is required and how the public consultation will inform this work and sets out the next steps.

Appended to the submitted report included:

- Leeds 2030: Shaping our Best City Ambition – Consultation Draft (Appendix 1)
- Overview of consultation to date (Appendix 2)

At its meeting on 10th November 2021, Members of Council resolved to approve the necessary constitutional amendments to enable adoption of the Best City Ambition. Council requested a report be brought to February 2022 meeting detailing the final proposals for adoption of the Best City Ambition. As requested by the Budget and Policy Framework, it was also agreed that the

proposals would be referred to Scrutiny for consideration and comments, to inform Executive Board in its final proposals.

Simon Foy, Head of Intelligence & Policy attended the meeting, and introduced the report and outlined some key messages emerging from extensive engagement that has taken place, which have informed the initial proposals and will also inform delivery.

Members' discussions included the following:

- Concern that the language used in reports may be a barrier to engagement for some people and encouraged the use of 'plain English' in presenting public documents. It was suggested that some aspects of the Best City Ambition report are not easily accessible. Members noted that further explanation of technical terms would be helpful, potentially within an appended glossary.
- The level of consultation responses on the Best City Ambition and it was agreed that increased engagement with the public would add value to the proposal. A recommendation was put forward to work directly with local people to better understand what being 'the best' city means to those living in Leeds.
- The evolution of the 'Best City' aspiration and how the delivery of that ambition would be measured.
- It was recommended that Scrutiny be engaged in ongoing performance monitoring in the next municipal year around a set of revised key performance indicators that reflect the new strategic direction of the Council.
- Community Committees may welcome similar performance data at a local level that allows them to understand progress against the aspirations of the Best City Ambition in their respective areas.
- The document be revised to embed the social model of disability with explicit reference to accessibility and health outcomes for people with disabilities.
- It was suggested that it would be beneficial to also reflect the ambition to be a Marmot City in the final iteration of the document.
- How Leeds could learn more from the achievements and expertise of other cities in specific policy areas.

RESOLVED- That the comments and recommendations be included in a composite statement with the views of all five Scrutiny Boards to be provided to the Executive Board in February before final proposals are referred to Council.

49 Reducing Poverty & Improving Financial Inclusion

The report of the Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support provided an update on the work undertaken by Leeds City Council and partners to reduce poverty and improve financial inclusion, with particular focus on the ongoing impact of COVID-19 pandemic. The report also provided an update on Universal Credit in the City.

Appended to the report included a full and detailed account of the activity undertaken over the past year, including a review of evidence and the consideration of the issues emerging.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Harland, Executive Member for Communities
- Lee Hemsworth, Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support
- Rebecca Owen, DWP
- Dianne Lyons, Citizens Advice

The Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support, and partners in attendance, provided the Board with a PowerPoint presentation in relation to further pressures on low-income household as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and pressures intensifying in terms of the reduction in job losses, furlough ending & removal of the £20 uplift, alongside rising costs from energy prices and household bills. Key matters highlighted, included:

- Key activities in the Financial Inclusion Team
- Key activity – continued delivery of short-term national funding programmes
- Welfare and Benefits Activity
- Reducing poverty – food insecurity

Universal Credit

- Youth Employability Work Coach teams
- Re-start programme to support customers affected by COVID-19 pandemic
- Conditionality re-introduced
- Local provision to support individuals of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health
- Leeds Social Justice Team
- Introduction of Specialist Prison Leaver Work Coaches
- Co-location of working arrangements with staff from Housing Leeds
- The service continues to pay more than 90% customers UC in full

Citizens Advice

- Benefits issues dominate enquiries relating to PIP and the withdrawal of £20pw uplift
- Fuel arrears are escalating and nationally Citizens Advice are calling for; 'Energy Support Grant' through the benefits system; uprating benefits by 6%; extend Warm Homes Discount; Reintroduce £20pw uplift
- Citizens Advice Leeds are working with Northern Powergrid to offer a helpline to people experiencing or at risk of fuel poverty
- MAPS debt advice – suspension of regional face to face services
- Help to Claim – the service will move to a national telephone digital service

The Chief Officer Community Hubs, Welfare and Business Support concluded by highlighting that a strong partnership continues across the City to tackle poverty in Leeds, although it was acknowledged that an increasing number of

households are falling into poverty hardship. Support organisations across the city continue to report longstanding concern with Universal Credit and the welfare system, alongside increasing demand, complexity of issues, and the increasing number of clients unable to cover basic living costs. An update on the work carried out by partners and Leeds City Council will be provided at a future Scrutiny Board meeting.

Members' discussion included the following:

- Tackling food insecurity. A member suggested that instead of using food banks as a model, more thought should be put into co-ordinating food pantries in local communities.
- Help to Claim. It was recognised that the loss of a face-to-face service is a big concern, specifically for vulnerable people who require assistance. Clarity was sought on whether an inequality impact assessment has been undertaken. Board Members agreed to form a working group including the relevant Executive Member to consider the impact and loss of a face-to-face debt advice service.
- The Impact of sanctions on claimants and clarity on the processes in place before issuing a sanction. It was noted that the number stands at 0.73% of claimants in Leeds who have been imposed with a sanction.
- Local Welfare Support Scheme work outcomes and measuring success. It was confirmed that contracts are formed nationally and are renewed and reviewed regularly.
- The impact on fuel increasing and the cost of living and concerns regarding companies unable to fund the Warm Home Discount scheme.
- Members requested to receive refreshed Citizens Advice and DWP contacts.

The Executive Member for Communities concluded by recognising the positive impact of partnership working across the city and thanked partners and the work undertaken by Leeds City Council, as well as input from Scrutiny Board Members.

RESOLVED-

- a) To note the contents of the report, together with comments raised during discussion of this item
- b) To note the intention to form a working group with Board Members and the respective Executive Member on further considerations around Help to Claim and the loss of a face-to-face service.

50 Work Schedule

The report of the Head of Democratic Services introduced the Scrutiny Board's work schedule for the 2021/22 municipal year. Appended to the report included a copy of the Executive Board minutes from meetings held 17 November and 15 December 2021, as well as a summary note from discussions taken at a working group on 3 November as part of an ongoing inquiry into the future of the waste service.

RESOLVED-

- a) To note the work schedule for the remainder of the 2021/22 municipal year.
- b) To note the appended Executive Board minutes together with the attached summary of the working group discussion about the future of waste services.

51 Date and Time of Next Meeting

Thursday 24th February at 10.30 am (There will be a pre-meeting for members of the Board at 10 am)