

Minutes of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**6th November, 2019 at 5.45pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

- Present:** Councillor L Giles (Chair);
Councillors E M Giles, Moore and Singh.
- Apology:** Councillor Rollins.
- In attendance:** D Carter (Executive Director – Resources);
S Knowles (Head of ICT and Revenues and Benefits);
I Dunn (Revenues and Benefits Service Manager).

20/19 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd October 2019 be approved as a correct record.

21/19 **Revenues and Benefits Service Update**

The Head of ICT and Revenues and Benefits attended the meeting and presented to the Scrutiny Management Board on the services delivered by the Revenues and Benefits Service and the policy framework that underpinned the Service.

The Service was responsible for the administration of:

- Housing Benefit;
- Council Tax reduction;
- Council Tax billing;
- Business Rates (National Non-Domestic Rates) billing;
- Discretionary Housing Payments;
- Sandwell's Local Welfare Provision scheme.

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It also recovered Council Tax and Business Rates as well as General Debt. The Cashier Services at Oldbury, Smethwick and West Bromwich were also within the Revenues and Benefits Service.

The Board noted that the Service collected:-

- £111.4m Council Tax annually;
- £104.9m Business Rates annually;
- £71m General Debt annually.

For the last five years Sandwell had been rated the best metropolitan council for in-year Council Tax collection rates. In 2018/19 Sandwell was the second best metropolitan borough in the West Midlands for Business Rates in-year collection. The Council Tax and Business Rates collected by the Service provides over 80% of Sandwell's total funding.

The Board was informed that in October the Service had received the 2019 Excellence in Innovation (Performance Management) award from the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation.

There were several areas of Council Tax, Business Rates and benefits legislation which allowed councils to exercise discretion or apply local policy. In order to ensure transparency and consistency in application and decision making there was a Revenues and Benefits Policy Framework.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- Sandwell was the only council in the West Midlands that still offered 100% discretionary relief for Council Tax for the most vulnerable residents.
- The amount of reminder letters sent in a day had been capped to better manage the flow of work. This helped reduce waiting times for residents when contacting the Service.
- Communicating with our residents via text message would help reduce costs and the use of paper. This approach had been successfully used by other local authorities.
- Over 10,000 of Sandwell's 11,000 businesses were small or medium-sized enterprises.

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- It was proposed to keep the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme the same for next year. The Council had recently consulted on the Scheme and no comments had been received.
- There had previously been a Joint Policy for Establishing Eligible Support and Accommodation Charges, but this was transitioning to a Service Level Agreement with Adult Services which it was felt would better address such matters within the Council.
- The Service had automated processes where possible to achieve efficiencies.
- The Department for Work and Pensions did not cleanse data when it sent it to local authorities for processing. This caused additional work for the Revenues and Benefits Service.
- Business Rate appeals could have a significant impact on the Council's ability to predict funding.
- Sandwell was currently part of the 100% Business Rate retention pilot, however the Government intended to move to a 75% retention rate, with the remaining 25% going to the Government.
- When determining the Council Tax base, Revenues and Benefits worked with the Planning department to take into account houses that would be completed in-year.
- The Council had a range of measures available to it to tackle long-term empty properties. The Executive Director – Resources undertook to investigate how some of the measures could be used in Sandwell to encourage or bring properties back into use.

The Board felt that the importance of the Revenues and Benefits Service and what its work was not widely understood by elected members and suggested that an awareness raising session could be arranged as part of the Member Development Programme.

The Chair thanked officers for attending the meeting and commended the Revenues and Benefits Service staff for their hard work and consistent performance.

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Resolved that:-

- (1) the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board place on record its recognition of, and appreciation for, the hard work and consistently high levels of performance by the Revenues and Benefits Service, including its winning of the 2019 Excellence in Innovation (Performance Management) award from the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation;
- (2) the Executive Director – Resources and Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer be requested to arrange an awareness raising session for all elected members on the work of the Revenues and Benefits Service to support the Member Development Programme.

(Meeting ended at 6.47 pm)

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