

Minutes of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

4th December, 2019 at 5.45pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor L Giles (Chair);
Councillors E M Giles and Rollins.

Apology: Councillors Moore and Singh.

In attendance: D Carter (Executive Director – Resources);
R Griffiths (Head of Finance);
S Knowles (Head of ICT and Revenues and
Benefits);
N Biddle (ICT Operational Lead – Digital
Transformation);
A Saunders (ICT Service Manager).

22/19 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 6th November 2019 be approved as a correct record.

23/19 **Quarter 2 Budget Monitoring 2019/20**

The Cabinet, at its meeting on 20th November 2019, had referred the Council-wide budget monitoring report for Quarter 2 for consideration by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

Details of the Council's revenue and capital expenditure as at the end of September 2019 were received by the Board.

At a service level, excluding Public Health and the Housing Revenue Account, there was a forecast year-end overspend of £2.209m made up as follows:

Corporate Management – deficit of £0.040m;
Resources – deficit of £1.109m;

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Adults Social Care – deficit of £0.914m;
Children's Services – balanced budget;
Regeneration and Growth – surplus of £0.092m;
Housing and Communities – deficit of £0.004m.

In addition, there was a projected year end surplus of £1.907m within Public Health. Including Public Health and Central Items, the directorate-level forecast outturn position was an overspend of £0.302m.

The Board noted the reasons for the variances at the end of Quarter 2 for each service area.

It was reported that the increased pressure on Special Needs Transport was due to the complexity of the needs of young people requiring home to school transport. In addition, one of the transport providers had ceased trading, meaning that there was more demand on the remaining providers causing prices to increase.

In relation to the overspend within the Resources directorate, members were informed that these related to pressures within Law and Governance:

- difficulty in recruiting to vacant Solicitor roles on a permanent basis, with agency staff filling posts instead;
- demand for Legal Services by Sandwell Children's Trust that was higher than estimated;
- an increase in the volume of Subject Access Requests and Freedom of Information requests that were complex and resource-intensive to respond to.

Over the last five years other local authorities had faced particular pressures in their Adult Social Care services. Although Sandwell's financial management practices had minimised the impact of these pressures over that time, it was not possible to avoid the pressures completely.

The Executive Director – Resources advised the Board that he was holding weekly meetings with representatives of Sandwell Children's Trust and that the first draft of the Trust's medium term financial strategy was expected this month. This would be brought to the Board for scrutiny in due course.

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

- Sandwell was experiencing similar difficulties as other local authorities in recruiting to some posts. Approval had been given for five Trainee Accountants in Finance; while the trainees would take several years to become fully qualified it was felt that developing staff was an effective approach to meeting future staffing demands.
- Work was underway to reprofile the performance measures for Council Tax collection rates to take into account the option for residents to pay 12 monthly instalments rather than 10. It was expected that yearly performance figures would be comparable to 2018/19.

24/19 **ICT Update**

The Head of ICT and Revenues and Benefits attended the meeting and presented to the Scrutiny Management Board on the services delivered and improvements made by the ICT Service as well as an overview of the Council's ICT Strategy and Digital Strategy.

The ICT Service provided and supported ICT at 77 sites including the Council's four residential centres. The Service also provided ICT for Sandwell Children's Trust under a Service Level Agreement. The Service did not provide the ICT for schools in Sandwell.

The Board was informed that during the BT joint venture contract there had been no investment in Sandwell's ICT infrastructure. This had led to outdated devices that performed poorly, creating high levels of demand for ICT support and meaning that ICT was viewed as a failing service.

In 2018 the Cabinet improved an annual investment fund of £1.2million for ICT. By the end of December 2018 every end user device had been upgraded. This helped to reduce numbers of calls and improve the reputation of the Service. The Peer Review in 2019 recognised the transformation of the Service.

Also in 2018 the Cabinet approved two key strategic documents – the ICT Strategy and the Digital Strategy.

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

- The Council had begun the process of adopting a range of Office 365 tools to enable more agile and collaborative working.
- The Council was migrating its ICT infrastructure to Microsoft's Cloud-based services. This was considered a more cost-effective method than the Council purchasing its own servers and hardware.
- The MySandwell platform had over 110,000 account sign-ups, with over 40% of the Council's tenants having an account. Work was ongoing to launch more services through the platform including reporting anti-social behaviour and applications for finance grants.
- It was planned to roll-out standardised laptop devices to all councillors to help them to carry out their roles. Standardised devices would also make ICT support easier.

The Chair thanked officers for attending the meeting and commended the ICT staff for the improvements that had been made over the last two years.

(Meeting ended at 6.57 pm)

Contact Officer: Alex Goddard Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3178
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