

Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Board

11 February, 2016

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of Councillor P Sandars

The Scrutiny Board met on 11 February, 2016 and the following items were considered. I have selected the main points of the discussion that I feel members of the Council will be particularly interested to know more about. For more detail, a copy of the minutes is available on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS) via the Council's website at <http://cmis.sandwell.gov.uk/cmis5/>

1. Quarter 3 Council Wide Budget Monitoring

The Board received details of the Council's revenue and capital expenditure as at the end of December 2015, together with a forecast outturn for the financial year 2015/16. Details were also submitted on the monitoring of the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

The Board congratulates officers on their hard work in delivering and managing a robust budget and their ongoing foresight, which has placed Sandwell in a more favourable financial position than neighbouring authorities.

2. Consideration of the Council's Revenue Budget and Directorate Business Plans for 2016/2017 to 2019/2020

The Board formally received directorates' business plans for 2016/17 to 2018/19 and proposed revenue budgets for 2016/17 to 2019/20 for consideration.

Further to a workshop held on 4th February, 2016 at which the Board identified a number of questions for directors and cabinet members to address, the Board received the responses for consideration.

Across all business plans, the Board made reference to the importance of ensuring that acronyms are fully explained, along with other terminology that members of the public reading the document may not be familiar with, to ensure openness and transparency.

In relation to the Children's Services business plan, the Board is pleased to note that Sandwell is the top performing authority in West Midlands in relation to having the fewest young people that are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The Director-Education informed the Board that this is a result of the investment that the Council currently makes in maintaining a full Connexions service, which allows for the effective tracking of pupils. The Board feels that this full service should be maintained for as long as possible to continue this performance.

The Board also notes the increase in persistent absence figures. The Director-Education reported on the activities of the Attendance and Prosecutions team in managing this. The Board is aware that persistent absence from school is a factor in cases of child sexual exploitation and expected to see reference to this in the response.

In reference to the Neighbourhoods business plan, the Board was advised that internet facilities in libraries will be used to raise IT literacy levels, using both one to one and class approaches, to assist inexperienced internet users in making and managing claims for Universal Credit. "Digital Heroes" will also work closely with tenants. The Board has asked the Director-Neighbourhoods to ensure that these services are advertised as widely as possible, and made available at a range of times to ensure as wide a take up as possible.

The Board heard about the use of incentive schemes to increase participation in recycling. It notes that these schemes have now come to an end and has asked the Director-Neighbourhoods to give consideration to running these schemes again in the autumn in the run up to Christmas to maintain and boost recycling performance. The Board also notes the work of the waste improvement officers in terms of their engagement work and in visiting 9,000 properties. The Board has asked the Director-Neighbourhoods to ensure that efforts are made to identify any language barriers and ensure that they are overcome where they were known.

The Board is pleased to note the small proposed increase in expenditure on libraries over the next four years. However, it was also acknowledged that, due to the continued reductions in central government funding, this position is subject to change.

In relation to the Housing Revenue Account, the Board was informed that the Council's rent collection rate currently stands at 97.5%. The Board was informed that the Council no longer assumes that a reduction in rent collection rates will occur as a consequence of the introduction of Universal Credit. The Board feels that, given the current financial climate and the impact that Universal Credit is likely to have on some households, it is sensible for the Council's business planning to assume that there will be a reduction in rent collection levels.

The Board discussed the 1% rent reduction that the government has imposed nationally on councils from April 2016. It also noted that the proposed "Pay to Stay" legislation will be implemented from April 2017. The Board feels that members will benefit from training on the Pay to Stay legislation to ensure that they understand the implications of it and are able advise and support their constituents appropriately.

In summary, the Board was satisfied that the proposed budget is robust and balanced commended it to the Council for approval, subject to the Cabinet's consideration of the recommendations set out below. Members of the Board also congratulated officers on their performance, despite the reduced resources available to the Council.

Recommendations to the Cabinet:-

- (a) that in relation to all business plans, where the use of acronyms and terminology that the public may not be familiar with is necessary, they be explained in full to assist the reader and ensure openness and transparency in relation to how the Council's budgets are spent;
- (b) that where it is felt that the use of acronyms and terminology that the public may not be familiar with is necessary in a document, a glossary of terminology be made available on the Council's Committee Management Information System (CMIS) to assist members of the public in understanding the Council's documentation;
- (c) that in relation to the Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing business plan, the terms "Complex Commissioning" and "Non-Complex Commissioning" are fully explained, using examples where appropriate to assist the reader;
- (d) that the Council continues to maintain a full Connexions service for as long as possible, to continue its excellent performance in tracking those young people not in education, employment or training (NEET);

- (e) that the Director – Neighbourhoods ensures that the support that the Council is providing to raise IT literacy levels to assist those entitled to claim Universal Credit be advertised as widely as possible and that the support be available at evenings and weekends;
- (f) that the Director – Neighbourhoods ensures that, where there are known language barriers, communications to residents are written in their first language;
- (g) that the Council’s business planning process in relation to the Housing Revenue Account is sufficiently cautious in anticipating the impact that Universal Credit will have on rent collection rates;
- (h) that training be provided to all councillors on the impact of the government’s “Pay to Stay” legislation to ensure that they understand the implications and can advise constituents appropriately.

Councillor P Sandars
Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Board