

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Thursday, 28 July 2022 at 6.00 pm
at Committee Room 2 - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Anandou, Fenton, Shackleton, Simms and
Bhullar.

In attendance: Ian Dunn (Service Manager for Revenues and
Benefits), Rebecca Maher (Head of Finance), Charlie Davey
(Finance Business Partner for Adults), Abi Asimolowo
(Finance Business Partner), Matt Powis (Senior Democratic
Services Officer) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services
Officer)

29/22 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Hinchliff and E M Giles.

30/22 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

31/22 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 July
2022 are approved as a correct record.



32/22

Additional Items of Business

A Member suggested a review of the current taxi licensing protests should be undertaken by the Board. The Senior Democratic Services Officer suggested that it should, instead, be a concern for the Licensing Committee to investigate before proceeding any further.

It was requested for the Senior Democratic Services Officer to investigate further.

33/22

2021/2022 Financial Outturn

The Head of Finance presented an overview of the 2021 to 2022 Financial Outturn for the Board.

The Board noted that the Council continued to see the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic with the continued reduction in income across many services including car parking and the residential education centre. There was a total overall underspend of £4.8m however, it was noted that the overall net directorate outturn variance excluding the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) increased the underspend to £7.925m which included reserve transfers.

It was noted that multiple Council directorates including Adult Social Care (ASC) and Regeneration and Growth had underspends.

A discussion ensued about whether the underspend could be used to help residents of Sandwell tackle the current cost of living crisis. The Head of Finance explained that due to inflation, it would be extremely unlikely that there would be an underspend for the period 2022 to 2023. It was noted that the Council was monitoring the financial position and preparing appropriate budgetary planning.

Members questioned how the re-uptake of staff after years of a reduced workforce, partly due to COVID-19, would impact the budget. The Head of Finance explained that many teams adapted to hybrid working and therefore many of the vacant posts were no longer required. It was also confirmed that salary budgets and staff pay awards were monitored in accordance with budgetary planning and were included in financial projections.

Adult Social Care

The Board sought clarification on why the underspend for Adult Social Care was so high. The Finance Business Partner for ASC confirmed a number of grants and efficiencies had been received and the following responses were highlighted:

- A £1.6m grant was obtained from the Better Care Fund. The Better Care Fund Pool Budget received additional contributions to the budget and reduced its overall expenditure. Therefore, the Council was able to request additional resources.
- A grant for the extremely vulnerable was obtained to help contact vulnerable people during the COVID pandemic.
- The NHS had funded patient discharges for the first four weeks of support for people moving from hospital into the social care system.
- A Domestic Abuse grant was obtained in line with additional statutory requirements. Therefore, funding responsibilities were already allocated.
- £900k was obtained from efficiencies made within services.
- A previous underspend of £1.8m was carried over from the previous year.

Due to the vast amount of grants currently available to the Council, Members requested a report at a future meeting which highlighted value of each fund and information on the applicable service area.

At this point in the meeting Councillor Bhullar left the meeting at 6.36p.m.

Children's Social Care

A lengthy discussion ensued regarding the highlighted overspend by Children's Services and the historical issues with overspends within the directorate.

The Finance Business Partner for Children's Services confirmed that there had been an increase in children requiring care within the Borough. In addition, there were longstanding issues locally and nationally regarding the recruitment and retention of Social Workers which had been a contributor to the overspends within the directorate. Additional funding had been supplied to the Sandwell Children's Trust to alleviate the budgetary pressures associated with COVID. The majority of the overspend against Children's Services was due to the historical SEND Transport contract, which was not run by SCT.

A Member suggested SCT should prioritise early intervention of children to prevent children requiring care in the first place. This would hopefully reduce the need for foster carers and social workers in the longer term. It was stated that it may be a useful exercise to compare the Council's early intervention programmes with that of other Local Authorities.

Law and Governance

The Chair requested clarification on both the Law and Governance underspend and whether Section 106 agreements would be spent within the allocated timescales.

The Head of Finance explained that Council had received proceeds of crime income from a recent high-profile case which had been appropriately budgeted. However, it was noted that the aforementioned proceeds would need to be allocated to the directorates and parties involved.

In relation to the Section 106 agreements, it was stated that Council conducted rigorous monitoring of the agreements with updates being regularly reported to the Council's senior leadership team. The Chair confirmed that the Board would receive a report on Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funding at a future meeting.

Housing

The Board expressed their concerns in relation to the current housing underspend. Although an underspend was reported, Members questioned why this was not used to address the current housing repair delays. The Head of Finance confirmed that the underspend would be added to the ring-fenced reserves for Housing to conduct the relevant repairs to the housing stock. A Member confirmed that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Board would receive an update report on the timely repairs of Council housing.

A Member sought clarification on whether the Council had dedicated resources for Planning Enforcement. It was confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Head of Finance investigate the viability of providing dedicated funding for planning enforcement;
- (2) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board receive a report on the Council's housing repairs;
- (3) that a report be presented to a future meeting of the Board about the budget pressure in by Children's Services;
- (4) that a report be presented to a future meeting of the Board on the Council's grants and funds.

34/22

Energy Rebate payments update

The Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits was invited to address the Board in relation to the on-going Energy Rebate payment process.

The following updates were received by the Board:

- Over 90% of residents applying for the Energy Rebate via direct debit had received their payments; the majority being processed in the first month with almost 100,000 residents helped to date.

- There were issues with paying residents that had mismatched address and bank account data.
- Some residents did not pay via direct debit and therefore no direct debit details were available on the system for payments to be processed. This was the equivalent to over 60,000 residents however, those that missed the application deadline would instead receive £150 credit towards their next Council Tax bill.
- Over 5300 requests had been received from residents requesting physical cash payments.
- Some of the most deprived households would be provided with additional funds courtesy of the Council.
- Council staff gained experience and understanding of the service as a result of the scheme. This experience put the Council in a better place to deliver high quality customer service in future.
- Although unconfirmed, an additional rebate scheme was rumoured to be coming in the winter.

Members queried about the possible use of the existing system to automatically process the proposed second energy rebate scheme using existing resident information. The Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits confirmed that it would be possible to use the existing system however, further investigation was required and it would depend on the Government's eligibility criteria for future schemes.

At this point Councillor Shackleton left the meeting at 7.22p.m.

The Board raised concerns about the number of residents still not receiving payments. Several anecdotes were provided by Members to better explain some of their concerns. The Service Manager for Revenues and Benefits confirmed that payments were still being processed over the next few months, alongside the implementation of new software. The Board were reassured that any further complaints can be escalated by Members to the relevant officers for investigation.

Resolved that the update on the Energy Rebate payments update be noted.

The Chair of the Board outlined the draft Scrutiny Annual Report for 2021 to 2022 and requested any amended or comments in relation to the report.

It was suggested that the next Scrutiny Annual Report for 2022 to 2023 incorporate digitalisation tools such as video or infographics. There was a consensus that this method might be a better way to show the hard work carried out by each of the Scrutiny Boards.

Resolved:

- (1) that, the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2021 to 2022 be approved for submission to Council.

Meeting ended at 7.34pm

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