

# Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Thursday, 4 January 2024 at 6.00 pm  
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Moore (Chair);  
Councillors E Giles, Hinchliffe, Owen, Taylor and Tipper.

**In attendance:** James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Brendan Arnold (Interim Section 151 Officer), Claire Spencer (Acting Assistant Director of Finance), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead for Service improvement), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead for Corporate Performance) and Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

## **1/24 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fenton and Lewis.

## **2/24 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

## **3/24 Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meetings held on 22 November 2023 be approved as a correct record.



## **4/24 Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

## **5/24 Performance Management Framework - Q2 Monitoring**

The Board considered the Quarter 2 monitoring reports for the Corporate Performance Management Framework.

Areas of concern were broken down by the themes as set out within the improvement plan and were presented to the Board.

### **The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People**

It was reported that for 'financial performance against budget (Sandwell Children's Trust(SCT)) performance was below target and SCT were projecting an annual deficit against the Contract Sum. The Council had therefore requested details of mitigations that SCT were implementing to address the overspend

The number of Children on a Child Protection Plan in Sandwell was slightly above Statistical Neighbour Average – 54.4 and 52.6 per 10k respectively. Reasons given for this were some delays in core groups (review meetings) impacting on plans being updated and progressed, and threshold discussions not taking place consistently prior to a conference being arranged, meaning less challenge on how to manage risk.

The Board was informed that various elements of performance were to be considered by the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board.

### **People Live Well and Age Well**

The Board noted that proportion of section 42 safeguarding enquiries where a risk was identified, and the reported outcome was that the risk was reduced or removed was below target. This was reported as being due to a change in management structure staging in the team creating an increased backlog.

There was slippage around implementing the new day opportunities model, which was on hold whilst barrier to Direct Payments and delays in processing are resolved.

### **Strong Resilient Communities**

There had been an increase in fly-tipping incidents in Quarter 2, this was in part due to a system issue that impacted reports in July 2023 and linked to industrial action causing reduced attendance by Serco colleagues at such incidents. The Board suggested that investing in street cleansing could help reduce fly-tipping.

### **Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods**

The Board was informed that Fire Safety Checks and Asbestos Safety Checks were both below target and rated 'red'. For Fire Safety, this was because the team were completing the data collation, verification and registration of high-rise buildings (55) to the Building Safety Regulator by the 1 October 2023. For Asbestos Safety Checks, it was reported that performance had been impacted as the in-house team that handled such checks was also responsible for carrying out other building surveys. Due to an increased in Housing Disrepair claims the team had been required to focus on this area of work. Recruitment was underway however to increase capacity to manage the Disrepair claims.

It was reported that the number of residents assisted by Welfare Rights was below target; this was due to an increase in complex cases which required officers to spend longer on each case. The service had recruited two new temporary members of staff to help increase the support to residents. The Board acknowledged that this situation had not hindered performance on the monetary gains for Quarter 2, with the service being successful in gaining £1,621,554 for residents, which was above target.

### **A Strong Inclusive Economy**

Performance against the 'number of businesses supported' had been negatively impacted due to delays in funding to support/start business support programmes coupled with lower enquires for business support than anticipated.

The Board noted that the delay in funding was a result of the West Midlands Combined Authority being late in releasing the budget for the business support programmes. The funding had now been released and it was anticipated that performance would be on target by the end of the next quarter.

### **A Connected and Accessible Sandwell**

It was reported that four more road safety improvement schemes had been completed than target in Quarter 2.

Following feedback from indoor market traders in Blackheath there was a low level of support for the Blackheath Interchange scheme, this was therefore subject to review.

### **One Team One Council**

The Board noted that sickness absence levels had increased for the last two consecutive years since the coronavirus pandemic in 2020-21. Housing achieved a reduction in sickness compared to the previous year, and decreases were achieved by Children and Education and Public Health. All other directorates had seen increases, with Adult Social Care and Borough Economy experiencing the highest increases. The most significant increase was for stress-related sickness, but there had been a decrease in absences due to infections due to a decrease in coronavirus cases.

The Board queried what was being done to improve the statistics around complaints. It was suggested that there might be a training need amongst officers to ensure the importance of responding in a timely manner was understood.

Members requested additional detail and clarification on a range of elements of the Quarter 2 monitoring of the Performance Management Framework that had been discussed.

The Chair acknowledged that as the Performance Management Framework continued, the richness of data was growing. He undertook to meet with officers to discuss Scrutiny's needs around future monitoring reports.

### **6/24 Q2 Budget Monitoring 2023/24**

The Board received the budget monitoring report for 2023/24 Quarter 2, this set out the financial position as at the end of September 2023. It was reported that there was an ambition to bring more regular financial reports to both Cabinet and Scrutiny to allow oversight of finances by members.

It was reported that, at the end of September 2023 there was a forecast overspend of £2m. This had to be considered within the context of the operations and financial scale of the Council, where the budget was £317m net and £743m gross.

In relation to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), there was a forecast year end overspend of £500k; although this would be addressed by year end as the Council was obliged to balance the HRA.

The Interim Section 151 Officer confirmed that there were no financial issues to raise regarding the Quarter 2 financial position.

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

- Members of the Board were asked to provide feedback on how future budget reporting could be improved.
- The Council had managed its resources wisely; debt charges as a percentage of the budget were very modest. This meant there was more capacity within the revenue fund retaining a level of flexibility that was not available to some other large metropolitan boroughs.
- Value for Money Panels had been established to encourage managers to carefully consider purchasing decisions. There was a new level of review and control over larger expenditure.

#### **7/24 Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Action Tracker**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

A query was raised around transition to adulthood and the impact due to the delays in recruiting a project lead. The Chair undertook to discuss this with the Director of Adult Social Care.

#### **8/24 Cabinet Forward Plan and Work Programme**

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Board's work programme.

The Chair reported that he had discussed with officers the readability of the Cabinet Forward Plan and that titles needed to

provide greater clarity about the topic of the decision. The Chair invited members to submit any suggestions for improvements.

It was also reiterated that where questions are asked, and officers undertake to respond directly to a member that must be carried out.

Meeting ended at 7.07 pm

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