

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Thursday, 28 September 2023 at 6.00 pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Fenton (Vice- Chair), Fisher, E Giles, Hinchliff,
Lewis, Owen and Tipper.

In attendance: Surjit Tour (Director of Law and Governance), Michael Jarratt (Director of Children and Education), Brendan Arnold (Interim Section 151 Officer), Sue Moore (Assistant Director for Education Support Services), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead for Strategic improvement), Suky Suthi- Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and John Swann (Democratic Services Officer).

58/23 Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

59/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

60/23 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2023 be approved as a correct record.



61/23 Additional Items of Business

The Chair placed on record his thanks to the outgoing Director of Finance Simone Hines and welcomed the Interim Section 151 Officer Brendan Arnold to his role at Sandwell.

62/23 Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring 2023/ 24

The Board received an overview of the Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring 2023/24 report which had been considered by Cabinet on 13 September 2023 and had been referred to the Board for consideration.

The Interim Section 151 Officer outlined that the Council had a projected outturn position for the General Fund of an overspend of 2.188m following the use of reserves. The variance, whilst not predicted to increase, was anticipated due to the net budget of the Council being in excess of £300m and the challenges facing local authorities.

The overspend across directorates was largely attributed to the potential pay award and an increased rate of pension contributions, the largest singular projected overspend was against Special, Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) transportation.

With regards to the projected overspend against SEND transport, the Director of Children and Education outlined the following:

- Procurement of the new SEND transport arrangements had been challenging, with a key operator terminating arrangements the day before services were due to commence.
- The number of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) had increased by 51% since 2019 in the Borough.
- The provision of transport and support for those in receipt of EHCPs was a statutory responsibility of the Council.
- Parents of children with EHCPs had been made aware that they could access personal travel budgets as an alternative to Council operated SEND transport.
- The financial pressures upon the Directorate had been significant and cost saving methods included not recruiting to vacant posts.

- Predictions for service demand to ensure continuity in service offer had been effective and accurate and had resulted in complex SEND cases being retained within the Borough.

The Board acknowledged that savings across all directorates were required prior to the culmination of the financial year.

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

- The use of consultants by the Council was costly in nature, however it was accepted that vacant positions were required to be filled.
- Further information was sought on the projected outturn of a 3.219m overspend within the directorate of public health.
- It was agreed by Members that the projected outturn for the directorate of borough economy of £0.627m would benefit from further scrutiny, particularly the consideration of parks, green spaces, museums, tendered contracts and concessions.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Interim Section 151 Officer outline to the Board why the Directorate of Public Health had an outturn variance of a £3.219m overspend in Quarter 1 Municipal Year of 2023/ 24;
- (2) that a working group be established to review all areas of income, expenditure and staffing levels, particularly focusing on parks, green spaces, museums, tendered contracts and concessions within the Directorate of Borough Economy, with the membership and scope of the working group to be determined by the Chair of the Board.

63/23 Improvement Plan - Quarterly Progress Report

The Strategic Lead for Strategic Improvement provided a progress update on the Improvement Plan up to 3 August 2023. This report was the fifth quarterly progress update to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

Overall progress had been positive in nature and significant achievements had included the first in person all- staff briefing at

Sandwell Aquatic Centre, the approval of the refreshed Corporate Plan and the One Team Framework launch.

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

Organisational Culture

The workstream related to the officer and member relationship had encountered issues due to a lower than desired response rate for the spring officer survey. Semi-structured interviews and a condensed Member survey was planned for the Autumn period which would support the Local Government Association sessions.

Corporate Oversight

An Assistant Chief Executive had been appointed and was due to start in September, once in the role, the timeline for the directorate level restructuring would be confirmed. Oracle Fusion was due to go live in April 2024 and had undergone a successful modelling phase, having been approved by both human resources and payroll. The revenue, capital and performance reporting was due to commence from March 2024 to coincide with the roll out of the Oracle Fusion software.

Strategic Direction

Slippage had been encountered for the stock condition surveys of council housing, the contract award had taken place and recruitment was underway for an officer to manage the project and oversee rollout. The customer journey strategy due date had been re-arranged to March 2024 due to delays with face-to-face customer engagement sessions and the online surveys. The recruitment of a commercial project officer had been unsuccessful and had resulted in other options being explored, in addition, whilst business cases had undergone development to support the commercial strategy, slippage against action plans had been encountered.

Decision Making

No issues were reported.

Procurement and Commercial

Delivery of 16 refuse collection vehicles would be received in late 2023 due to a delay with build slots. The options appraisal for the corporate management system had been delayed until after the Oracle Fusion demonstration and testing phase.

Partnerships and Relationships

The project manager position for the transition to adulthood project remained vacant and was being supported by the corporate transformation office. Benchmarking exercises had commenced and a case file audit was due to be started for the project. The Voluntary and Community Sector strategy was being developed and a report on the topic was due before Cabinet in the autumn.

A stable medium- term financial position and the streamlining of processes to deliver high quality services and improve the customer experience were key components when considering the next steps of the improvement plan.

The transition between children's and adult's services, in particular, the service offer available and the impact upon service users, was discussed by members and it was agreed that a further report on the matter should be considered at a future meeting.

It was highlighted that the improvement process was a continuous journey and that Grant Thornton would be providing a follow up review and making recommendations to support the Council in embedding positive steps.

Resolved that a report on the transition between Children's and Adult's Services, and the impact upon services users, be added to the Board's work programme.

64/23 Section 106 Spotlight Session Outcome

The Board received the report from the Spotlight Session on Section 106 funding and the recommendation contained within: 'That the Assistant Director: Green Spaces, Green Services and Events present an annual update to each of the Town Boards to discuss available Section 106 funds'.

Section 106 funding could be sought from developers towards the costs of community and social infrastructure and were set out in Section 106 agreements between the developer and the Council as the planning authority.

The majority of existing Section 106 agreements related to green space improvements and modifications to the highway.

The Chair outlined that the format of the session had received positive feedback and had allowed a robust discussion of the section 106 spend.

Resolved that the Assistant Director: Green Spaces, Green Services and Events present an annual update to each of the Town Boards to discuss available Section 106 funds.

65/23 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.

66/23 Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme

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

Members agreed that overview and scrutiny boards needed to have opportunities for effective and proactive pre- decision scrutiny to better add value to the decision- making process.

Meeting ended at 7.19pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk