

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Thursday, 13 October 2022 at 6.00 pm
In Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
E M Giles, Fenton and Simms.

In attendance: Councillors Hinchliff and Taylor;

Neil Cox (Director of Business Strategy and Change), Simone Hines (Director of Finance), Surjit Tour (Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer), Mark Satchwell (Service Manager Registration), Gail Hicken (Service Managers Registration), Teresa Armstrong (Service Manager Register Office and Coroners), Comie Campbell (Head of Financial Services), Abi Asimolowo (Financial Services Business Partner), Sarah Sprung (Senior Lead Officer), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

43/22 Apology for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillors Anandou, Bhullar and Shackleton.

44/22 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.



45/22

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 8 August and 22 September 2022 are approved as a correct record.

46/22

Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.

47/22

Impact on Registration related services when the new Midland Metropolitan Borough hospital opens in 2024

The Service Manager – Registration was invited to present to the Board.

From 2024, an increase in demand for Registration related services was certain, as health care services would move from City Hospital in Birmingham to the new Midland Met Hospital in Smethwick.

This would present an increase of up to 5000 registrations events, including 4000 births and 100 deaths, for Sandwell Council. More cases would be referred to the Black Country Coroner resulting in further demand increases in this area. The Bereavement Services team would also see an increase in demand in relation to Public Health Act funerals.

In response, 6 full time posts had been created to help facilitate the increased demand. £189k had already been accounted for as part of the 2022/23 Council Budget setting process. A total income of £55k, generated from certificate services, would partly offset expenditure. Highfields House in West Bromwich, Sandwell's Registrar's Office, had undergone improvements including addressing efficiency and capacity. Jack Judge House was also planned to be expanded to accommodate the new requirements; this would cost in the region of £530k.

It was confirmed that the service would be ready by the expected open date of April 2024.

A lead time would be in place to ensure staff were adequately trained and confident in taking on the work. All births that were to take place in the new hospital would be registered to Sandwell, even if individuals resided outside of the borough.

In response to questions from the Board, it was stated that recruitment for the vacant roles would follow the usual Council recruitment process. Members suggested using a wider variety of advertising avenues to ensure a good response and officers would share the current recruitment process with the Vice Chair of Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment.

The Board gave thanks to the officers' present for their hard work.

48/22

Quarter 1 Budget Monitoring 2021/22

The Director of Finance reported that on 28 September 2022, the Cabinet considered the 2022/23 Budget Monitoring report for Quarter 1 and referred the report to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board for consideration and comment.

The overall projected outturn position for the General Fund was an overspend of £2.129m whilst the overall projected net directorate outturn variance was calculated at £2.097m. Mitigations would be in place to address these overspends such as the use of removing vacancies that were no longer required where possible as well as using the appropriate ear-marked reserves. A large number of reserves had been budgeted for use and this trend was expected to continue. Inflation costs would be built into the following year's budget and more emphasis would be placed on being energy efficient.

It was highlighted that the anticipated pay award, calculated at around £6m, and inflationary pressures due to the cost of living crisis were the main drivers of the overspend.

Prior to reserve transfers, an overspend of £2.653m was budgeted for Adults Social Care; this would be offset by the use of an additional Social Care Grant of £2.736m that had been set aside as a reserve at the beginning of the financial year. Overspends were due to the ever-increasing cost of placements as well as the additional pay award.

It was also highlighted that an overspend of £3.023m would take place in Children's Services. Inflation, recruitment and retention costs, pay award and exit packages as a result of structuring within the directorate were all contributing factors to the overspend.

Clarification was sought by members in relation to the high placement costs currently being faced by Sandwell Children's Trust. Pressures due to the very limited placements as a result of retirements had caused a 30% increase in placements costs. However, it was highlighted that Sandwell should strive to obtain the best possible placements to ensure a positive outcome for children living in the borough.

Following further discussions, the Board was of the view that it should investigate what initiatives were currently being taken to address the cost of living crisis including whether there was a corporate approach to energy saving such as switching lights off and turning down the temperature.

Officers were thanked for their work and attendance.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the 2022/23 Budget Monitoring Q1 report be noted;
- (2) that a further report be submitted to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board on the Council's approach to energy efficiency.

49/22

Performance Framework

The Director of Business Strategy and Change presented the Performance Management Framework update for Quarter 1 to the Board.

In April 2022, Council approved a corporate Performance Management Framework to address the recommendations of the Governance Value for Money Review by Grant Thornton as a key element of the Council's Improvement Plan.

In total, there were four key components to the Corporate Performance Framework:-

- Improvement

- Customer Experience
- Organisational Health
- Financial Performance

Improvement

Progress was highlighted against the Corporate Plan Performance Management Framework (PMF). Since its approval, there were 170 measures across seven strategic outcomes. Work had been undertaken with each directorate to refine the measures and how they could be applied. Each measure would be given a RAG rating to easily track and adapt to changing targets.

Customer Experience

The framework covered a wide range of Key Performance Indicators such as Contact Centre performance, Contact Channel reviews, customer feedback and information requests. Understanding the performance would help enable refinements to be made to ensure that the Customer Experience is efficient and effective and meets the demands required. Ensuring that the Council's service was accessible was a key point to consider.

Due to additional demands as a result of the re-introduction of Council Tax recovery, performance was below target for the Revenues and Benefits contact centre. Administration of the energy rebate as well as staff vacancies were also contributing factors to the underperformance.

Work was being taken to address the backlog of Subject Access Requests (SARs) and Freedom of Information requests (FOIs). A number of actions were being monitored to increase the response times to meet performance targets.

Organisational Health

Performance indicators in relation to Organisation Health focused mainly on the composition of Sandwell Council's workforce to improve equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The newly established EDI team were working to achieve the EDI actions captured within the Council's Improvement Plan.

Sickness absence, which was at an average of 2.74 sick days per employee for quarter 1, was short of reaching the goal of 2.24.

This was an increase of 0.84 days when compared to the outturn of Q1 2021-2022. It was stated that absence review panels and directorate action plans would be in place to help address these concerns.

Data obtained from the most recent employee engagement survey had been collated; the last survey that had been undertaken was in 2018. Overall, 61% of staff responded to the survey. The results were currently being considered and appropriate action plans were being created to mitigate any concerns where possible.

Financial Health

A summary regarding the Financial Health aspect of the Performance Framework was provided. Issues were highlighted with underperforming in relation to retrieving Council Tax. Business Rates collection was exceeding expectations due to the recent COVID Relief Fund.

Sandwell Children's Trust had experienced a slight increase of the number of children in care and therefore, as a result, had been impacted financially. Staffing issues were the main cause of concern; recruiting and retaining Social Workers had been difficult.

The Council's contract with SERCO had been reviewed. Key Performance Indicators had been put in place to help monitor areas of concerns.

In response to questions from the Board, the following details were confirmed:-

- The delays in Council Tax collections were not unique to Sandwell and many other authorities were experiencing similar issues. Collections were in line with the goals set out in the previous year, however, the target increase had meant that collections were now slightly behind;
- Any issues in relation to late payments for voluntary groups should be raised to the Director of Finance for investigation;
- Sandwell Council's Welfare Rights team would help assist and signpost residents accordingly;
- Key Performance Indicators, which were benchmarked against industry standards and other local authorities, would evolve with the financial climate to ensure reliable and effective service is top priority;

- Digital and paper copies of the staff survey were available; anonymity was prioritised throughout the process.

The Board agreed that Sandwell's approach to tackle the cost of living crisis would be added to the work programme.

Resolved that the progress on the further development of the Corporate Performance Management Framework be noted.

Meeting ended at 7.31pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk