

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Thursday, 12 January 2023 at 6.00 pm
In Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Anandou, Bhullar, Giles, Fenton and Taylor.

In attendance: Rebecca Maher (Head of Finance), Abi Asimolowo (Finance Business Partner), Sarah Sprung (Senior Lead Officer - Business Strategy & Change), Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Dawn Winters (Assistant Director - Libraries, Archives, Information Services), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead – Service Improvement), Surjit Tour (Monitoring Officer and Director of Legal Services), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

1/23 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Trumpeter, Hinchliff and Simms.

2/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.



3/23

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 29 November 2022 and 6 December 2022 are approved as a correct record.

4/23

Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider as a matter of urgency.

5/23

Q2 Budget Monitoring 2022/23

It was reported that at its meeting held on 7 December 2022, the Cabinet considered the 2022/23 Budget Monitoring report for Quarter 2 and referred the report to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board for consideration and comment.

In total, the overall projected outturn position for the General Fund in 2022/23 was an overspend of £1.927m. Whilst the projected overspend had reduced since the previous quarter, it was still important to reduce the use of reserves in 2022/23. The recent pay award to Council staff, inflation, Adult Social Care placement costs and shortfalls in income from garages and markets were identified as main contributors for the overspend. Significant costs had also arisen from project work as a result of the governance review. Vacancy controls had been put in place since October 2022 and officers were actively trying to reduce the use of reserves as much as possible. A further report detailing Q3 monitoring would be received by Cabinet in February 2023.

In response to questions from members, it was confirmed that directorates that underspend can utilise the remaining funds in following years, if approved by Leadership Team. If the unspent funds were not used, the first step would be to ensure that the general reserves fund was prioritised. The Head of Finance highlighted details around delayed and future savings in the report and agreed to provide members with figures for the target savings of the current financial year. Members noted that the majority of the planned proposed savings were in place before the cost of living crisis and, therefore, inflation precautions within the budget were underestimated. Future budgets would consider higher inflation rates.

Discussions ensued regarding the significant overspend by Sandwell's Children's Trust (SCT). It was stated that many of the current issues faced by SCT were not directly within their control but, instead, impacted by external factors. A national shortage of social workers meant that retention and recruitment was difficult due to competition with other authorities. Supplements had been introduced to both new and existing staff to assist recruitment and retention; this was a significant drain on financial resources but was necessary to ensure critical safeguarding posts were filled. Limited availability of residential placements for children had also caused significant cost to the Council as rates had increased in-line with demand.

Frequent meetings between the Council and SCT were in place to monitor the performance and finances of the Trust. Despite difficulties, the recent value for money review found that governance arrangements at SCT had improved and relationships were much stronger. The recent Ofsted inspection was deemed positive.

In response to further questions, the following answers were provided:-

- The possibility of in-house residential places was being investigated.
- Officers would confirm if the Government's published reports around the reformation of children's services at local and national levels had been reviewed.
- Social workers were currently allocated 16.5 cases on average, meeting the target of a maximum of 18 cases per social worker.
- More information would be provided to members on how we were currently looking after our social workers.

Reserves would not be used to balance the budget next year.

The Board thanked officers for their attendance and had no specific recommendations for the Cabinet to consider on the budget at this point.

Performance Management Framework – Q2 Monitoring

Council approved a corporate Performance Management Framework (PMF) on 12 April 2022, to address the recommendations of the Governance Value for Money Review by Grant Thornton and as a key element of the Council's Improvement Plan. Since April, the corporate PMF had been further refined and built into business processes. Reporting on Q1 was presented to Budget and Scrutiny Management Board on 13 October 2022. The report on Q2 sought to build on the intelligence gathered for Q1 and offered the opportunity to assess in year progress.

There were four key components to the Corporate PMF. Combined, these provided the oversight and intelligence the council needed to determine progress in delivering the Corporate Plan and how the organisation was performing in key areas. The amount of actions on track had increased although several actions that were listed as "red" had also increased. Further improvements were expected in Q3.

Organisational health

During Q2, an average of 5.29 working days per employee were lost due to sickness. This was against a target of 3.86. The largest cause of sickness was absence due to stress, depression and mental health, followed by infection and muscular-skeletal problems. COVID was deemed the main source of the "Infection" absence. A detailed review was scheduled to take place to analyse causes and trends in sickness absence.

The total percentage of leavers and starters was lower than the previous financial year. The number of apprentices had also dropped from 69 to 48.

Financial Performance

Several KPIs that did not meet their performance target were highlighted to the Board. A backlog of work was currently being experienced in relation to the number of days taken to process Housing Benefit Changes in Circumstances. Good progress had been made and performance would most likely improve within the next quarter.

Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) had seen improvement in comparison to Q1. The Trust was able to bring the number of children unallocated for longer than 5 days figure down to zero in September 2022. This was a red rated KPI at Q1. The total number of children in care, as of September 2022, had also decreased. The general trend across statistical neighbours for the last 12 months has been an increase in the rate of children in care, whereas in Sandwell the rate has fallen.

However, difficulties had remained with recruiting social workers. Three project teams were in place providing interim capacity whilst the Trust continued to recruit to the workforce. Three cohorts of AYSE (assessed and supported year in employment) social workers had joined the Trust.

The high cost of placements, as well as recruitment and retention issues, meant that SCT were forecasting an overspend, against the MTFP, of £570k as at the end of Quarter 2.

Significant improvement had been reported regarding the governance, contract management and overall performance of the SERCO contract. 100% compliance with all governance meetings had been met and on-going conversations were taking place to discuss potential penalties on performance, if necessary. Missed bin monitoring was underway following disruptions in the summer, however, food waste collections had been positive and continued to improve. Street cleansing, data, reporting and systems, annual plans and contractual compliance were all areas for focus moving forward.

A brief update was provided regarding Sandwell Leisure Trust. Services would formally cease after 2 May 2023 and interim contract management measures were in place. Retrospective reports would be provided to the Board at a later date.

Customer Experience

It was noted that all contact centres experienced reduced performance during Q2. The main reasons identified for the reduced performance were staff vacancies and recruitment difficulties; this was estimated to continue to impact performance moving into Q3. Additional workload due to ICT issues, Energy Rebate requests and additional support to customers due to the on-going cost of living crisis also affected performance.

Timescales for responding to Subject Access Requests (SARS) and Freedom of Information (FOIs) requests were below target, however, a slight improvement had been made when compared to Q1. Several system limitations had been identified which impacted data validity. A manual data analysis had commenced to resolve the issue.

In response to questions from members, the following clarification was given:-

- Further information would be provided on the impact of COVID related illnesses on the workforce.
- Directorates had received data from the resident engagement survey and a further breakdown and analysis was taking place.
- HR was currently investigating and identifying the key causes of stress, poor mental health and depression on staff.
- Staff were provided with information on good mental health practice via the wellbeing hub.
- Occupational Health initiatives such as the encouragement to exercise and take frequent breaks were highlighted.
- It was confirmed that a re-run of the staff survey would take place in Summer 2023.
- Further information would be provided in relation to the capital funding required for the replacement of street lights.
- A customer journey plan was currently underway to address the issues of increased demand on the Council's contact centres.

Officers were thanked for their attendance and had no specific recommendations for the Cabinet to consider on the performance management framework at this point.

7/23

Cost of Living

The Director of Housing was invited to address the Board.

It was noted that the Council recognised the key role it had to play in supporting residents through the Cost of Living crisis, with the high levels of inflation and spiralling energy costs having a particular impact.

The Council already had several initiatives in place to help reach out to those in need of assistance; a dedicated webpage had been created to provide “Cost of Living Advice” to Sandwell residents, signposting those who required help where possible. Further initiatives such as the training of 80 “cost of living champions” had taken place with further champions to be identified and trained. The Library service had also agreed to utilise the community bus which would be promoted in due course. Residents could also contact Citizens Advice for further assistance and guidance.

The Household Support Fund was being used in various ways to provide support such as the provision of free school meals during holiday periods as well as providing support to care leavers. A significant increase in the number of referrals received for the Local Welfare Scheme had been witnessed and those in debt were receiving support in a more holistic way although difficulties were still experienced with reaching private sector tenants.

A cross-council piece of work to help assist those who were in debt to multiple areas of the Council was underway. In some circumstances, this could result in intervention and/or debt write off. The Council tax support fund had been agreed and announced for 2023/24.

In total, 486 winter warmth packets had been distributed and a further 114 remained for distribution; winter support packs for pets were also in place. Go Play provision had been expanded by 30 sessions between December 2022 and March 2023, the next grant cycle had been rewritten. Proposed revised actions around improving food networks were also commencing to identify need. A focussed effort was on-going to ensure families were not stuck in temporary accommodation, although, it was highlighted that the opening of Manifoldia Grange had been delayed due to water hygiene issues. Work was scheduled to start in Q4 to help tenants downsize.

Investigations into tackling loneliness and isolation within the Borough had taken place and the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board were examining the concerns further. Additionally, the Better Mental Health programme had been assessed and extended. Employee benefits were being widely promoted with 579 employees signed up in November 2022 and events were taking place to highlight employee benefits, wellbeing and cost of living advice to staff members.

“Warm Space” details were provided to the Board who noted the hard work carried out by staff and volunteers over the Christmas period. Libraries were open for a total of 150 hours over the Christmas and New Year period including at least one library being open on Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year’s Day. 1,879 customers had used a warm space during this time. Donations of presents, jumpers and food parcels were handed out to those in need.

Members suggested that any further recommendations regarding the Cost of Living item be reported to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Communities Scrutiny (SNAC) Board to assist their current Scrutiny Review. It was also agreed that the SNAC Board would receive regular updates on the current position of Manifoldia Grange and invite ward members to those meetings.

In response to queries from the Board, it was confirmed that Libraries would remain flexible and welcoming to those who wished to bring pets to warm spaces. Members were minded that the Council were doing their best to ensure that no one felt left behind. Teams were currently running home checks on a prioritised basis to reach tenants that may not be able to communicate with the Council. Leaflets detailing advice on the crisis had been delivered to those living within the borough and following comments on some residents not receiving these leaflets, officers undertook to investigate.

Members noted the difficult circumstances that officers had to operate in and thanked them for their hard work.

8/23

Scrutiny Review - Customer Journey

The Chair of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board proposed the creation of a working group to further investigate the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review. The invitation was open to the Board. Councillors Moore, Giles, Fenton, Anandou, Bhullar and Taylor all agreed to be a member of the working group.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the draft Scoping Document for the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review, as now submitted, be approved;

- (2) that a working group be established to further investigate the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review comprising of the following members:

Councillors Moore, E M Giles, Fenton, Anandou, Bhullar and Taylor.

9/23

Cabinet Forward Plan

After consideration by members of the Board, no items within the forward plan were considered for pre-decision scrutiny.

10/23

Budget & Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme

The “Update on the review of procurement and contract procedure rules” item, that was originally scheduled for consideration at the Board’s meeting on 2 February 2023, was provisionally deferred to a later meeting that was to take place on 29 March 2023.

Meeting ended at 7.56pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk