

Our Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 30 September 2020

Attendance

Members of the Our Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Roger Lawrence
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal (Chair)
Cllr Udey Singh (Vice-Chair)

In Attendance

Cllr Louise Miles

Cabinet Member Resources

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
David Pattison
Charlotte Johns
Claire Nye
Mark Bassett
Julia Nock
Martin Stevens
Julia Cleary

Scrutiny Officer
Director of Governance
Director of Strategy
Director of Finance
Project Director Regeneration
Head of Assets
Scrutiny Officer
Scrutiny and Systems Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal, Chair, welcomed everyone to the virtual meeting and advised it was being live streamed to the press and public. Cllr Gakhal advised that he was not expecting any exempt or restricted items on the agenda. A recording of the meeting would be available for viewing on the Council's website at a future date
- 2 Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Gakhal explained the protocol to be followed during the meeting for asking questions and reminded everyone that microphones should be muted and cameras off, unless they have been invited to speak. Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, invited all attendees to introduce themselves to confirm they were present at the meeting.

Please note that the following employees were also in attendance at the meeting:

Claire Nye
Julia Nock
Mark Bassett
Charlotte Johns
Laura Phillips
David Pattison
Martin Stevens
Julia Cleary

Cllr Louise Miles – Cabinet Member Resources was also in attendance

3 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following:

Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Denise Pearce

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of previous meeting (15 January 2020)**

Cllr Payal Bedi-Chada advised the panel that she did attend the meeting on 15.1.2020. The panel accepted the correction.

The panel members voted and approved the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2020, subject to the amendment, as being a correct record.

6 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

7 **Our Council Scrutiny Panel - update presentation (report to follow)**

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, explained that this was going to be a joint presentation with other colleagues. The aim of the presentation on the theme of **Our Money** was to provide the panel with an update on work areas within its remit done in response to the Covid 19 crisis.

The Director of Finance outlined how the Council responded at start of the crisis, a review on learning and future plans for managing the crisis during the recovery period.

The Director of Finance outlined the key priorities related to Our Council Scrutiny Panel and the focus on adopting good practice and having the right financial controls across the Council to enable it to respond to the crisis. An important part of this work was to continue to exercise good financial discipline only spending where there is budget and authority allowed throughout the crisis, despite the need to make decisions at speed.

The service was also responsible for managing the different Government grant allocations awarded to the Council and using this information to prepare a budget.

The Director of Finance reassured the panel that all spending decisions followed correct procedures and also new financial systems were introduced to manage service budgets and to support colleagues. A regular financial update was produced for colleagues across the Council and a financial tracking system was introduced.

The Director of Finance commented on the different challenges facing the service during the crisis, while also ensuring for example, the service continued to provide a normal range of transactional functions and support, for example payment to suppliers.

The Director of Financial detailed the financial support offered to businesses and residents during the crisis.

Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy, introduced the **Our Data** theme part of the presentation to the panel. The Director of Strategy briefed the panel about the work of data and insight performance team and ICT service. The Director of Strategy highlighted the importance of making evidence-based decisions at the heart of the Council's response to the Covid 19 crisis.

The Director of Strategy advised the panel that an Insight and Performance Lead was appointed to the every Covid 19 workstream, for example, Stay Safe Be Kind Helpline, Business Grants to develop robust mechanisms needed to capture data which was used to inform future planning. The work involved developing dashboards to visualise data in an easy and accessible way to enable the Council to better understand the impact of Covid 19 on different parts of City. The analysis of evidence was also used to inform recovery plans and the development of the Relighting Our City document published on 16 September 2020.

The Director of Strategy explained the work done to better understand the impact of Covid 19 on council employees and also on residents, and from the economic view. The work was done to check that the Council was effectively responding to the impact of Covid 19 and also supporting business as usual activities.

Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy, introduced the **Our Technology** theme part of the presentation to the panel. The Director of Strategy advised the panel of the work being done to support the rapid introduction of arrangements to support mobile working such as Microsoft Teams and ensuring employees had the right devices and services.

The findings from a 'life in lockdown' survey of employees reported that 60 per cent of employees had never or rarely previously worked at home, which gives an indication on the scale of rapid introduction of systems to support agile and home working.

There are a number of key Covid-19 work streams and ICT was integral in helping deliver key systems to support the Council response such as the Stay Safe Be Kind hotline. In addition, work was done to provide a secure infrastructure and network for employees working from home. The Director of Strategy advised the panel that the service had been externally accredited to show that it had effective cyber security

arrangements. The service is continually to roll out key infrastructure projects and ICT and digital service improvements.

Julia Nock, Head of Assets, introduced the **Our Assets** theme presentation. The Head of Assets outlined the work done with colleagues across different service areas during the early stages of the pandemic to ensure council buildings were safe to access and to support the Council's wider Covid response.

The Head of Assets detailed the health and safety checks done to ensure council buildings would be able to open safely, for example, legionella testing. The service provided reassurance other council buildings were safe to use, including those buildings that remain closed. The Head of Assets outlined the work to be done to comply with current and future safety requirements to reduce the risk of disease transmission, for example, reviewing cleaning specifications across all buildings.

The Head of Assets outlined the support given to commercial tenants with "rent payment holidays" to assist with financial pressures arising from the lockdown in business who have either not been able to open or operating on much lower levels of customer footfall.

The service is undertaking security and compliance checks for all buildings, whether they've remained open or closed throughout the lockdown which will continue going forward.

David Pattison, Director of Governance, introduced the **Our People** theme presentation and advised the panel that at the start of the pandemic there was a commitment from the Leader and Chief Executive to provide continued reassurance that employees jobs were safe, and their pay would be protected.

The Director of Governance praised the response of employees to support residents and local businesses in the setting up of the food distribution hub and the stay safe be kind helpline.

The Director of Governance commented on the important work to communicate changes with employees and managers and to keep them safe in challenging circumstances. There is a recognition that some employees working from home may also need other support and the focus on employee wellbeing.

The Director of Governance explained the plans for the re-opening council services and added that a risk assessment would be done to keep employees safe. Employees would be consulted about the working arrangements. The Director of Governance advised the panel that individual risk assessments have also been done to consider other risk factors, such as age, existing health issues, family circumstances to get a better overall picture of an employee needs.

The Director of Governance commented on the redeployment policy and work done to support people who were not able to undertake their existing duties during the lockdown.

The Director of Governance commented on the offer of local testing and the ongoing work to consult with trade unions on developments.

David Pattison, Director of Governance, introduced the **Governance** theme outlined the work done to ensure that all decisions were properly authorised using existing delegations or a formal decision. The Director of Governance commented on the introduction of new ways working such as remote meetings with a focus on making sure that the Council was doing the things in right way with a formal signoff under the Coronavirus Act.

The Director of Governance that there is a now a full calendar of remote meetings scheduled for the current municipal year. The panel was advised that when Annual Council was postponed the original post holders remained.

The Director of Governance advised the panel that a protocol for making urgent decisions was developed. All decisions made under the authority given to the Council are recorded and then shared with all Councillors as part of the regular weekly communication to keep them updated. The risk registers of Covid-19 is now produced alongside Strategic Risk Register to show a proper audit trail for all actions and justifications including evidence supporting these decisions.

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, commented on the new working arrangements in place as part of the Council recovery plan and gave a summary of the key priorities and specific areas of future work linked to each of themes.

The panel thanked each of the presenters and members were invited to comment or ask questions about the presentation.

The panel queried a press report which stated that £200,000 of business grants had been fraudulently claimed in Wolverhampton and that investigations were ongoing, and more information was being sought.

The panel asked for an explanation about how this might have occurred, while accepting that any grant giving body is at risk for fraud, and any lessons that have been learnt to reduce the risk of this happening in the future. The Director of Finance responded that the issue itself was highlighted in a report presented recently to the Audit and Risk Committee. The report detailed the financial controls in place to prevent potential fraud arising from the award of government grants.

The Director of Finance offered to present a copy of the same report to the panel to review progress. The Director of Finance advised the panel that the figure quoted is an estimate of the risk of potential fraud based on the number of claims and offered reassurance about the financial checks being used to prevent this. In some situations, people who have claimed a grant have been asked for provide further information to support their application, without there being any implication of the claim being fraudulent.

The panel welcomed the report.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the presentation.

8 **Our Assets Programme**

Julia Nock, Head of Assets, presented the headlines of a report on the work done with the Our Assets service area to respond to the issues arising from the pandemic.

The Head of Assets advised the panel that the work of the service is presented to the Asset Management Board for comment. The Head of Assets commented on the important role of Our Council Scrutiny Panel in reviewing draft documents and giving feedback before moving forward with proposals.

The Head of Assets commented on the fundamental changes to the future demand for built assets as a result of the pandemic which was expected to change the way in which some buildings are used and in some cases some buildings will be left empty.

The Head of Assets added that the findings from employee survey showed support for a blend of remote and office working. In addition, the feedback showed people see the benefits of this arrangement. The Head of Assets commented the opportunities presented by the pandemic to consider ideas for working differently and to become more efficient which will lead to changes in current policy.

The Head of Assets commented that the Council will pro-actively reviews and rationalise the current property portfolio to look for opportunities to save money, reduce the carbon levels and improve outcomes for our communities. The work will be done in discussions with local partners and communities.

The Head of Assets outlined the outcomes for the programme.

The Head of Assets commented on the key drivers that will inform the review of Council assets and added that there was likely to be some form of rationalisation in the current portfolio which will then have a reduction in the levels of carbon emissions. A smaller property portfolio will have other benefits such as reduced expenditure on running cost repairs and maintenance. The overall aim will be to have the right buildings and assets in the right place that delivers better outcomes for residents, employees, partners and local communities which works alongside the Council's future operating model.

The Head of Assets outlined some of the factors that will help to maintain a more manageable property portfolio, which could in some situations mean the Council acquiring new assets with the aim of making make sure that Council assets contribute to the economic recovery of the City and links to other work areas.

The Head of Assets commented on the work being done to improve the quality of data to help make more informed decisions about the management of Council assets. This will be a key workstream in the future work plans and also provide a challenge about whether we have the services in the right places.

There is a separate workstream considering the future use of the Civic Centre which involves working with health partners in discussing ideas about how assets could be used to deliver services in the future.

The Head of Assets commented on the disposal of assets policy and the work done to support the transfer of assets to community groups to manage.

The views of the panel will be useful in helping to develop this policy in the future and also to better understand the impact of such decision on the property estate and the importance of working with a range of stakeholders.

The Head of Assets commented that many Council buildings were closed following the lockdown, however some buildings were needed to remain open to deliver services, for example the setting up of the Food Distribution Hub at Aldersley Centre. The buildings to be used were checked to make sure they still safe for occupation and also the necessary building maintenance work was completed before they were opened.

In preparation for the reopening of buildings a range of work was done to allow people to do so safely and in compliance with guidance on social distancing. The Head of Assets detailed examples of new cleaning specifications in all buildings with a focus on key touch points areas in an office environment such as desks, keyboards and screens and the provision on hand sanitisers at main entrances.

In addition, work is also ongoing to identify buildings that potentially will not reopen in the future and discussions with health partners about reshaping the current property estate. This may involve changes in the location of services which can more directly benefit the communities across the city.

The panel were invited to comment and or ask questions about the presentation.

The panel queried if there was any unexpected learning or surprises since the start of the pandemic. The Head of Assets responded that she was surprised how quickly people responded positively to the challenge of having to work from home overnight, not only within her own service but also across the Council as a whole. The Head of Assets praised the response and highlighted the fact that services were able to continue to deliver services when people are working remotely with minimal impact to customers.

The Head of Assets added that the pandemic has opened up opportunities and led to new thinking about how the Civic Centre could be used differently in the future.

The panel discussed ideas for the future use of the Civic Centre and possibility of voluntary groups or businesses using spaces within the building. The panel commented on the need to recognise the importance of strategic assets, which need to be maintained and will contribute to future regeneration plans.

The panel expressed concern about any plans for the rapid disposal of Council assets in response to the economic impact of the pandemic but suggested that the policy could move from the position in the past where soft market testing of assets was done, to a situation in the future of moving much more quickly towards a negotiated sale.

The panel discussed the community asset transfer policy. The Head of City Assets explained the policy and process for checking that the organisation wanting to take over the management of an asset has the capacity to manage the building and also a plan to secure it, if it becomes empty at a future point.

The Head of City Assets added that the Council will work with people who are looking to buy land or property but will check that there is a plan to develop the site within a reasonable time scale, to avoid examples in the past where approved developments have not gone ahead as expected.

The panel queried the difficulty in finding out the owner of empty properties in the City. The Head of City Assets advised the panel that a tool has been developed to collate this information.

The panel query the loading limits which has prevented the use of the piazza space and requested further evidence to support the policy. The panel suggested the space would be ideas for mobile Covid 19 testing units. Head of City Assets agreed to investigate and report back to a future meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Resources advised the panel that the sale of Council assets has been part of the budget planning process for several years. The Cabinet Member added that the approach is to focus on the services needed by different communities in the city and how they can best deliver them from the portfolio of buildings.

The panel discussed the important symbolic role of the Civic Centre and the different ideas about how it might be used in the future and the range of factors that might influence the decision about how services might be delivered regardless of the impact of Covid 19.

The panel expressed concern about ideas for the future use of the building which may be based on employees continuing to remote working on a large scale and the unused space could then be made available to community or local businesses, given the significant level of investment in refurbishing the building.

The Cabinet Member for Resources commented on the need introduce changes to support employees to work remotely from home, but there was also an acceptance of employees who are finding it difficult to work from home and therefore there will remain a need to have a main central building that can be used to deliver services.

The Head of City Assets advised the panel of further work planned to the mezzanine and the registrar's office building in the future.

The Council will consider a business case from any organisation or public sector partner interested in using the space in the Civic Centre.

The Head of City Assets added that the Civic Centre is a very important building for the city.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

9

Our Council Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme

Julia Cleary, Scrutiny and Systems Manager, presented the draft work programme and explained the new approach agreed at Scrutiny Board meeting for all panels to consider the cross-cutting theme of 'Connected City' and digital considerations when developing ideas for the work programme.

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager outlined the list of suggested topics for future meetings of the panel based on discussions with the Chair and Vice Chair of the panel and commented on the rollout of 5G and other digital infrastructure enhancements.

The panel were invited to comment on the draft work programme and to suggest ideas, following the guidance, of topics that could be added.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

10 **Treasury Management Activity Monitoring Report 2019-20 Quarter 3**

The Director of Finance introduced the report and briefed the panel about the key points in the document.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

11 **Specific Reserves Working Group (9 January 2020) - Draft Minutes and update on actions**

The Director of Finance introduced the report and briefed the panel about the key points in the document. The Director of Finance commented on the importance of the work of group and the changes made to the reserves policy in response to recommendations made.

The panel queried if the minutes were still draft. The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel that the minutes are draft and will be presented the next meeting of the group to be formally approved.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.