

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Paul Sweet (Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Crofts (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Phil Page
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Mak Singh
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal

In Attendance

Councillor Louise Miles, Cabinet Member for Resources
David Pattison, Director of Governance
Claire Nye, Director of Finance
Alison Shannon, Chief Accountant
Sarah Campbell, Customer Engagement Manager
Julia Cleary, Scrutiny and Systems Manager
Earl Piggott Smith, Scrutiny Officer
Martin Stevens, Scrutiny Officer

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence**
There were no apologies for absence.

- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.

- 3 **Minutes of the previous meetings**
Resolved:
 - a) That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

 - b) That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2020 be agreed as a correct record.

4 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising.

5 **Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024**

The Chair welcomed Cllr Louise Miles, Cabinet Member for Resources and Alison Shannon, Chief Accountant to the meeting. Cllr Miles introduced the Draft Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy Report for 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. It was confirmed that the draft report had already been considered by the other scrutiny panels and comments from the panels were included with the paperwork.

Section two of the report provided an overview of the Council's financial position and showed that the Council had set a balanced budget for 2020-2021 without the use of general reserves and was reported to Council in March. However, it was projected that the Council would be faced with finding further estimated budget reductions totalling £15.5 million in 2021-2022 rising to around £20 million over the medium term to 2023-2024.

It was important to note that the budget was prepared prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of reporting to Council, the full impact of Covid-19 was not known and the impact on both the finances and operating environment could not have been foreseen. The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant international, national and regional impact, and would continue to have, significant financial implications for the Council.

Work had been ongoing across the Council to review corporate resources assumptions, growth and inflation assumptions and income generation opportunities in line with the Five-Year Financial Strategy to support the budget strategy for 2021-2022 and future years, whilst also detailing the emerging pressures that the Council currently faced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the 11 November an update was provided to Cabinet on the financial strategy, progress against the deficit and how the Council had responded to the pandemic including the projected financial implications of the pandemic against the one-off grants that had been awarded to the Council. However, following announcements made by Government it has been assumed that sufficient grant funding would be provided to cover the cost pressures arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking this into account, the 2021-2022 projected budget deficit stood at £4.5 million rising to £19.6 million over the medium term. In the event that the Government did not provide sufficient grant funding to meet the cost pressures arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2021-2022 projected budget deficit would be in the region of £23.2 million rising to £40 million over the medium term. This would have a significant impact on the Council and result in the Council undertaking a fundamental review of all services in order to identify budget reductions sufficient enough to set a balanced budget.

The Chair thanked the Chief Accountant and the Cabinet Member for the report.

The Board considered that this was a difficult situation and hoped that the Government would be able to cover the costs associated with the pandemic.

The Board requested information in relation to the current rate of Council tax and business rate collection and any impact that this may have on the Council's current assumptions. It was stated that these could be circulated by email after the meeting but that there was a reduction to the normal levels of income generated and that at this stage there was a forecast of around a £15 million reduction which the Government had indicated could be spread across three years and that grants of up to 75% of the irrecoverable loss would be available and that work was continuing to review this forecast. This was a very hard area to forecast as businesses and residents were struggling and the full impact of the pandemic was as yet unknown.

The Council was keen to support as many of its residents and businesses as it could and a lot of work was being carried out in relation to this. An update would be brought before the Cabinet in January on the matter. The Cabinet Member confirmed that many ongoing conversations were happening with local businesses and citizens though a number of avenues including the recently launched Talk to Us campaign. The number of welfare support officers had been increased and the voluntary sector were also playing an important part in reaching and advising citizens and businesses. The Council remained under a statutory obligation to bring in business rates and Council tax but were also aware of the increase in applications for universal credit and wanted to help wherever possible.

The Board thanked all of the officers and front-line staff who were working to keep citizens safe and requested to know what additional updates would be made available to ensure that all of this work was kept on track and monitored.

It was stated that there were already good controls in place in relation to finances which had been embedded into the ongoing Covid work. Good work was being carried out with budget holders across the Council, working together to understand where the pressures were. The biggest challenge was forecasting going forward as so much was still unknown. Monthly returns were being sent to the Government to further try to understand the situation as a collective whole. When compiling budgets, officers were also aiming to separate out the base budgets and the budgets associated with the pandemic whilst also remaining aware of how these interacted. There was also work to be carried out to monitor and report on all of the different grants and the criteria associated with them. The Cabinet Member confirmed that she would be happy to bring a report on any of the above areas to Scrutiny Board should it be requested.

The Board praised the work that had been and continued to be carried out by Public Health in the City but there were some concerns raised as to the impact of the cost of all of the work that had been carried out and requested assurance that support to vulnerable individuals were not lost sight of.

The Cabinet Member assured the Board that if there were vulnerable residents already known to the Council and if they fell into arrears with areas such as Council tax then the Council would reach out to them through their existing support workers to help and support them.

The Board expressed some concern that not all of these people would be previously known to the Council and that due to the pandemic may be experiencing issues for the first time and would not know how to access the necessary services.

The Cabinet Member offered to provide copies of the new materials to the Board including leaflets about the Talk to Me campaign.

The Board thanked the Council staff who had been managing the grants from the Government and getting them out to the businesses.

The question was raised as to whether there were any staff shortages due to Covid that were impacting on services. It was stated that careful management of service delivery was crucial to manage this and that there would certainly be staff self-isolating or unable to work due to the pandemic.

The Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel informed the Board that there would be an item in relation to mental health at the next Health Scrutiny Panel meeting on 14 January 2021 which was a public meeting.

Resolved: That the report be agreed and all comments noted.

6

Quarter 1 Social Care, Public Health and Corporate Complaints Report

The Customer Engagement Manager provided an overview of the quarter one social care, public health and corporate complaints report for the following areas:

Children's
Adults and Public Health
Corporate

In relation to children's complaints the Council had received 8 stage one children's services complaints which was a decrease of 18 cases in comparison to quarter one in 2019/20 and was outlined in Appendix 1.

There were no stage two or three complaints received and out of the 10 complaints closed and resolved during this period, no cases were upheld (at fault), 7 cases were partially upheld (partially at fault) and 3 cases were not upheld (not at fault).

In relation to adult's and public health Complaints, the Council had received 12 stage one adult services complaints which represented a decrease of 8 cases in comparison to quarter one in 2019/20 and was outlined in Appendix 1.

The Council had received no public health complaints. Out of the 5 cases closed and resolved during this period no cases were upheld, 2 cases were partially upheld and 3 cases were not upheld.

In relation to corporate stage one complaints, the Council had received 74 stage one corporate complaints which represented an increase of 19 cases in comparison to 2019/20, details of which were outlined in Appendix 2. Out of the 74 cases received, 22 were upheld (at fault). The highest figure of 54 complaints referred to Waste Management where out of 54 received, 20 complaints were upheld which was in comparison to 15 stage one complaints received during quarter one 2019/20. Waste management complaints and service requests increased during this period.

The Complaints Team had worked closely with the Waste Management Team to ensure responses were issued in a timely manner and that appropriate remedies

were put in place to achieve the best outcomes for customers. It was noted that Covid 19 pandemic restrictions and revised working procedures had impacted on service delivery during this period.

In relation to stage two complaints, if a customer remained dissatisfied they could escalate to stage two of the complaints procedure. In this period the council received 5 stage two cases and out of these, two cases were upheld (at fault) and three cases were not upheld (not at fault).

The council had received two Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) enquiries; one case for Children's Services and one case for Regeneration, the outcomes were as follows:

- Children's complaint - outcome, not upheld, no maladministration.
- Regeneration complaint – outcome awaiting final report.

The council had also received three enquiries from the Housing Ombudsman (HO) for Wolverhampton Homes and one assessment enquiry from the LGSCO and two assessment enquiries from HO.

The Board considered the impact that the pandemic had on the complaints procedure. It was noted that customers were notified that the Council was focusing its attention on addressing the challenges of the pandemic and that confirmation had been given that the Council may not be able to meet the corporate complaint deadline of a reply within 21 calendar days or statutory complaint deadline of a reply within 10 working days.

The LGSCO and HO paused casework during this period to allow local authorities to focus on Covid19 and customers were sign posted to their guidance via the Council's website.

Waste management complaints and service requests increased during this period due to the Covid 19 pandemic restrictions including health & Safety matters and the need to protect staff and customers. Revised working procedures had impacted on waste service delivery and resources.

It was noted that the Complaints Team had worked closely with the Waste Team to ensure complaints were logged and responded to accordingly, with the focus of achieving the best outcome for the customer.

The Board were shown a compliment that had been received in relation to the Waste Team and the service that was being provided.

The Board thanked the Customer Engagement Manager for the report and in particular for sharing the compliment with them.

A Board member stated that he was uplifted by the report and stated that where there had been increases that was to be expected during the pandemic. Clarification was sought as to the regulations and how the informal complaints were different from the formal complaints and who made that differentiation. It was stated that the decisions were made as a Team when a complaint was received and where

appropriate logged as a service request in the first instance and work carried out with the service area to resolve the issue if possible.

A Board member stated that residents were very pleased when a service worked well and that this seemed to be doing so. There were however issues with the stickers and getting them out to people, payment for the green bins did not appear to be flexible enough and there had been complaints as to the quality of the purple bins and timeframes to get them replaced.

The Customer Engagement Manager stated that she would feed these concerns back to the relevant service area and confirmed that these areas were representative of complaints received and work was being done with the service area in relation to them.

Resolved:

- a) That the report be received and noted.

7 **Work programme**

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager provided an update on the Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Scrutiny Chairs and Scrutiny Officers provided updates on the work that had been carried out by the panels they covered and upcoming items for consideration.

A Board member provided comments in relation to types and rates of crime in his ward and across the City and stated that it was vital to scrutinise areas around crime and disorder in the right way.

A Board member requested that levels of educational achievement be added to the list of possible items for the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel.

It was also requested that consideration be given to scrutinising strategic partners of the Council.

Resolved: That the Work Programme be agreed.