

Scrutiny Board

Minutes - 8 February 2022

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Paul Sweet (Chair)
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Simon Bennett (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
Cllr John Reynolds
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Ellis Turrell
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN

In Attendance

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer
Claire Nye, Director of Finance
Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy
Allison Shannon, Chief Accountant
James Amphlett, Head of Insight and Performance

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Asha Mattu.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
Cllr P Bateman declared a non-pecuniary interest as a member of the Canal and River Trust.

It was confirmed that there was no requirement for members do declare an interest if they were a governor at a local school.

- 3 **Financial Inclusion Strategy - Engagement and Consultation**
Board welcomed Alison Hinds, Deputy Director of Children's Social Care and Kate Lees, Partnership Manager Children's Services, to the meeting.

Board considered the presentation, but it was resolved that due to not having had sufficient time to process the information contained in the presentation, that any

discussion on the matter be deferred until a later date. It was noted that the full Financial Inclusion Strategy was scheduled to come before the Board on Tuesday 15 March 2022 as pre decision scrutiny.

Resolved: That the item be deferred and considered at a subsequent meeting.

- 4 **Council Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Performance Framework**
Scrutiny Board welcomed David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer; Claire Nye, Director of Finance; Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy, Allison Shannon, Chief Accountant and James Amphlett, Head of Insight and Performance to the meeting.

Scrutiny Board considered the Council Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy and Performance Framework. Scrutiny Board noted the aims and objectives highlighted in the Council Plan and what it would be seeking to achieve for residents, businesses, and the city. The Council Plan was linked and supported by a detailed performance framework setting out exactly how the Council would measure and evaluate the impact of the aims and objectives listed.

Scrutiny Board noted the importance of understanding and monitoring how the Council was performing in relation to the Plan objectives and how the Council's finances were linking in and being used to support and promote the Plan objectives and framework.

Board considered the matter of digital by design and noted that it was also important to take into consideration the number of children who were living in poverty. It was agreed that a huge amount of progress had been made and a lot of good work done to help citizens be more digitally connected but that there were still issues with connectivity at home and with poor internet connections. It was stated that driven by digital was a cross cutting theme in the Council Plan because it touched on every facet of life. Underpinning this was the forthcoming digital Wolverhampton Strategy that was currently being consulted on and had been considered as pre-decision scrutiny recently. This Strategy aimed to look at digital in the round and it was stated that the city had really pushed ahead in terms of digital infrastructure whether that be full fibre broadband in the ground or 5 G masts in the sky, it was vital to ensure that the infrastructure was in place. Officers were however still very conscious of the challenges around inclusion and poverty and were taking care to ensure that people had got the means to access equipment and the skills and support required to be able to capitalise on the opportunities that digital could bring.

Some members noted that even though the Council Plan was refreshed every year they struggled to see the benefits for residents and how it translated into positive outcomes for the city. The majority of Board members welcomed the new plan. The importance of having a council plan was welcomed as a way of bringing together the council's strategic priorities which would then inform how the council aligned its budget and resources to deliver those outcomes whilst also linking in with performance and improvement issues. A key part of the Council Plan was about the monitoring of performance going forward and in the context of the Levelling Up White paper it was also an opportunity to articulate what levelling up meant in the context of our city to support the ongoing conversations with central government

Board agreed that having a council plan was vitally important for the democratic function. Some members considered that it might be useful to include areas in the

plan such as where there had been success from European Regional Development Fund initiatives and how the council was going to build upon this with whatever funding opportunities would take its place. Moving forward it was also considered potentially useful to see and understand what had been achieved or where initiatives had not been as successful as planned. Areas such as this in the Council Plan would help to steer the council in the right direction, provide accountability and give members the opportunity to provide constructive commentary and recommendations.

Board did request that for future meetings where the budget would be scrutinised, that a more detailed breakdown of the draft budget be provided. Scrutiny Board welcomed the fact that there was a balanced budget and that the financial situation looked healthy which was commendable given what the city and the country had been through during the pandemic.

Board queried the situation in relation to vaccinations for staff working in social care and the possible knock-on effect if they were no longer able to work. It was stated that this was being carefully monitored and that close work was being carried out with the Adult Social Care Team who were best placed to monitor the pressures in the system in terms of the ability of providers to manage service provision. Information such as this was factored into the report and the question of market sustainability was being very carefully monitored.

A recommendation was proposed and seconded that Cabinet consider not implementing the 1% Adult Social Care precept and instead seek to fund the additional revenue that it would raise for adult social care through alternative means. Board debated the recommendation. Clarity was sought from the Director of Finance who considered that should this be agreed that it would not be a one-off decision, it was a decision that would then have impact over the medium term because the funding would then be taken out of every budget going forward if a one-off grant was used instead of the council tax increase. There would be an incremental impact each year so it would have a bigger impact over the medium term. The proposer and seconder of the amendment suggested that this be only for the 2022-23 financial year as an alternative to raising council tax.

Board voted on the recommendation, with the majority voting against. The recommendation was not passed.

Board welcomed the intention to bring a multi-year budget position, especially given the current context and uncertain funding positions. Board also welcomed the intention to consider the MTFS in terms of core council business and to really consider where money was spent and activity undertaken in terms of current priorities such as the promotion of independence and wellbeing, (specifically in terms of adult social care) and investment in the City (including embedding the Wolverhampton Pound).

Board supported the aims detailed in the presentation to ensure that the Council sought to capitalise on what was best for residents. Board also supported the key areas mentioned which included innovation, balancing of risk, reducing demand across services, more targeted service delivery and how the Council worked with organisations and partners to deliver sustainable services in line with corporate priorities.

Board sought clarity as to the budget associated with the Strategy Directorate and it was explained that Strategy included policy and strategy, insight and performance, data analytics, organisational development (including council and councillor training budgets) external funding, digital projects, customer services and the council's digital and IT services. Board also considered the budget associated with communications with the majority of members in favour and supportive of the importance of communication for democratic accountability and keeping residents informed of what was going on, especially during a pandemic.

In relation to the indicators, Board suggested that it might be useful to include whether a school was a local authority run school or an academy. In relation to the section on homes, Board noted that this was about energy efficiency for homes and that many UK homes were poor on energy efficiency; it was suggested that a definition on fuel poverty might be useful to provide more context to this to understand the percentage of fuel spend required in relation to income.

Board welcomed the draft indicators and the report and noted the importance of monitoring the indicators effectively once they had been agreed through the relevant scrutiny panels. This would need to include detailed information on school performance, arboriculture matters, placements for children in care, ward data and unemployment statistics. Board also considered that an objective in relation to the Wolverhampton Pound be included in the statistics and be monitored regularly by the appropriate scrutiny panel.

Resolved: That the presentation be received, and comments considered by Cabinet.