

# Our Council Scrutiny Panel

## Minutes - 20 January 2021

### Attendance

#### Members of the Our Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw  
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha  
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE  
Cllr Simon Bennett  
Cllr Roger Lawrence  
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal (Chair)

#### In Attendance

Cllr Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member Governance

#### Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Martin Stevens	Scrutiny Officer
Julia Cleary	Scrutiny and Systems Manager
Alison Shannon	Chief Accountant
David Pattison	Director of Governance
Charlotte Johns	Director of Strategy
Claire Nye	Director of Finance
Jin Takhar	Equality, Diversion and Inclusion Manager
Julia Nock	Head of Assets
Mitchell Spencer	Estates Officer

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## 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, confirmed the list of attendees at the meeting.

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

Claire Nye  
Charlotte Johns  
Alison Shannon  
Mitchell Spencer  
Jin Takhar  
Julia Nock  
David Pattison  
Martin Stevens  
Julia Cleary

Cllr Paula Brookfield – Cabinet Member Governance was also in attendance

3 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following:

Cllr Udey Singh  
Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal  
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P.

4 **Declarations of interest**

The following declarations of interest was recorded.

Cllr Simon Bennett declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 10 as a member of WV Living Company Shareholder Board.

5 **Minutes of previous meeting**

The panel members voted and approved the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2020, subject to the correction below, as being a correct record.

Page 9, correction to minutes.

The service is continuing to roll out key infrastructure changes such as the 5G network which will connect 170 public sector premises in the City and work on this continued during the lockdown. This should read such as the Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN) and not 5G as stated.

6 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

7 **Treasury Management Strategy**

Alison Shannon, Chief Accountant, introduced the report. The Chief Accountant briefed the panel on the requirements on the Council under The Local Government Act 2003 and supporting regulations to 'have regard to' the CIPFA Prudential and Treasury indicators. The aim is to ensure that the Council's capital investment plans are affordable, prudent and sustainable.

The Chief Accountant advised the panel that treasury management includes the following functions, borrowing, investments and cashflow. The Council can only borrow to fund its capital programme. The capital programme plans in the treasury

management strategy provide a guide to the borrowing needs of the Council to ensure that it can meet its capital spending obligations.

There is a risk management strategy to support this process which is approved on an annual basis at Annual Council. In addition, details about the performance and updates are reported quarterly to Cabinet and Our Council Scrutiny Panel. The Treasury Management Strategy is approved at Annual Council meeting.

The Chief Accountant detailed the six elements of the Treasury Management Strategy and gave a brief description of each.

The Chief Accountant detailed the eight prudential indicators that the service has been reporting against during this financial year.

The Chief Accountant briefed the panel on Public Works Load Board (PWLB) and changes to future lending terms introduced in November 2020. The changes were introduced to prevent local authorities from using the loans to support the purchase of investment assets primarily for the purpose of yield. In addition, Local Authorities will also need to include a breakdown of the expenditure under the six listed categories, for example, service spending – activity on areas such as education, highways & transport, social care, public health, cultural and related services, environmental and regulatory services.

Local authorities are now required to submit a high-level description of their capital spending and financing plans including the expected use of PWLB loans. The Section 151 Officer will be required to confirm that there is no intention to use the loan to buy investment assets primarily for yield with the aim of letting it out at market rates or continue to operate on a commercial basis without any additional investment.

The Chief Accountant reassured the panel there were no Council projects with the capital programme that fall within the new restrictions.

The Chief Accountant panel advised the panel a full treasury management strategy update report will be presented to the panel at a future meeting.

The panel were invited to comment on the Treasury Management strategy.

The panel queried the forecast in the presentation detailed in prudential indicators (PL3) authorised limit for external debt and whether it was correct that the current borrowing would be reach about one billion pounds by 2020-2021 and the implications of this for the Council.

The Chief Accountant advised the panel the figure refers to the authorised limit which the Council cannot exceed and that the current borrowing forecast for 2021- 2022 is £733 million. The indicators are set at the beginning of the year 2020 – 2021 and this figure referred to is updated quarterly and is what was anticipated that the debt could rise too at that time.

The panel queried the impact on the treasury management strategy in a situation where the HRA is under pressure. Claire Nye, Director of Finance, advised the panel that HRA Business Plan was presented to Cabinet at a meeting today. The report showed that the over the medium term the HRA was not under financial pressure and there has been a surplus each year. The surplus on the HRA has allowed the

Council to repay some of the debt and increase the financial headroom for the capital HRA programme.

If there was pressure on the HRA then this would directly affect the amount of borrowing for investment in new or existing housing and the amount of borrowing available for the capital programme. The prudential forecast indicators in the treasury management strategy would be adjusted in this situation.

The panel queried if the Council has ever been refused a loan from the PWLB. The Chief Accountant advised the panel that the Council has never been refused a loan during her time at the Council.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the presentation.

## 8 **CWC Employee Equalities Update Briefing**

David Pattison, Director of Governance, introduced the presentation to the panel. The Director of Governance gave a brief outline to background to equalities work across the Council. The issue of equalities is embedded in the Council Plan and the Relighting Our City documents. The Relighting Our City document was approved by Council in September 2020. The Council was awarded Excellence in Equality Framework for Local Government in October 2018.

The Director of Governance commented on the importance of equalities and that this important work continues to make a difference in tackling the inequalities in local communities and reflects the values of the Council. The Director of Governance commented on the renewed focus on equalities within the Council in response to events of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter campaign and the impact of Covid-19. The events have given the Council the opportunity to think about its role as an employer and how things can be done differently. The new ways working has created challenges but has also created opportunities to really engage with people across the board and build on the excellent platform of progress. The Director of Governance advised the panel that in response to the events in June 2020 a virtual session was held with 120 employees and the Chief Executive attended to listen to employee experiences and concerns. The event provided an excellent platform build on existing learning to improve and build partnership with employees, communities and partners.

A new Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy is due to presented to Cabinet in March 2021.

The Director of Governance briefed the panel on the good progress of the four employee forums, which have flourished over the time reflected in an increased levels of attendance. Each forum is supported by a member of SEB which has helped support the discussion and allowed them to hear directly about the concerns of employees. The Director of Governance commented on the work of the Equality Advisory Group. The group is chaired by the Equalities Champion. Each of the forums has appointed a Chair and Vice Chair and they are invited to attend meetings of the Equality Advisory Group.

The Director of Governance commented on the work with external partners and other community groups such as Wolverhampton Equality and Diversity Partnership and the importance of listening to the views of local communities and people particularly those with protected characteristics, in making sure their voice is listened to.

The Director of Governance commented on the work done to invest in employees by giving them opportunities for training and development and show the Council's commitment to tackle inequalities.

The Director of Governance commented the areas where further work is needed. To support this, work the Equalities Team led by Jin Takhar, Corporate EDI Manager, has had its resources increased in response in comments from the employee forum. In addition, there are plans to further support the work with a graduate placement.

This is an example of the commitment of the Council to tackle race inequality and diversity. The Director of Governance commented on the plans for four identified priority areas for action and highlighted achievements to date.

Cllr Paula Brookfield, Cabinet Member for Governance, expressed her appreciation for the leadership shown by Director of Governance since his appointment and the progress in successfully pushing forward the equalities agenda in all parts of the Council. The establishment and support of employee forums has provided the Council with the opportunity to really tackle equalities and inequalities issues.

The panel queried the progress in building inequalities into the assessment of employee performance and recruitment and suggested it would be helpful to have a report presented to a future meeting. The Director of Governance commented on work being done to support managers in addressing inequalities and agreed to attend a future meeting to provide more details of work being done in this area.

The panel thanked the Director of Governance for the presentation and praised his leadership in taking forward the issues of equalities and diversity and responding to concerns expressed at the time of his appointment.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the report.
2. The Director of Governance agreed to present a future report on the inclusion of inequalities in the assessment of employee performance and recruitment to a future meeting of the panel.

- 9      **Our Council Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme**  
Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, presented the draft work programme and invited panel members to comment.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.

- 10      **CWC Asset Disposal Programme**  
The panel approved the following statement

That in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information on the grounds shown below

(Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information))

The MS Teams Live Event will now end, and the panel will meet in closed session to discuss the following exempt report.

#### CWC Asset Disposal Programme

Julia Nock, Head of Assets gave a presentation on the process for disposing of Council assets. The Head of Assets briefed the panel on progress of the 2020/21 disposals programme.

The Head of Assets briefed the panel on the 2021/22 disposals programme.

The Head of Assets briefed the panel on future plans and priorities of the disposal programme.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report and progress.