

Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 14 September 2016

Attendance

Members of the Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Jasbir Jaspal
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
Cllr Andrew Wynne (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Louise Miles

In Attendance

Cllr Andrew Johnson Cabinet Member for Resources

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Sue Martin	Head of Revenue and Benefits
Mark Taylor	Director of Finance
Tracey Richards	Recovery Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:

Cllr Harbans Bagri
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.
- 3 Minutes of previous meeting (29 June 2016)**
Corrections

Future Works – ensuring that we have a right IT infrastructure and business

The reference in the minutes about the level of digital exclusion was incorrect – the figure of 55 per cent to 65 per cent should have stated that this refers to the level of digital inclusion in Wolverhampton.

The reference in the resolution 2 should have stated – The Head of Service to include details of the current number of people using new Council services compared to the expected number.

Cllrs Udey Singh and Cllr Bedi-Chadha submitted their apologies for the meeting but were not listed as attending.

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 June 2016, subject to the agreed changes, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **Matters arising**

Minute 6: Future Customer - Improving Customer Service

Mark Taylor, Director of Finance, presented a briefing paper in response to a request for more information about the budget issues linked to the transfer of staff to City Direct as part of the Customer Services Transformation Programme.

The panel noted the information.

5 **Outcome of the Local Government Association Finance Peer Review**

Cllr Andrew Johnson, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the report and commented that the findings present a favourable review of the Council. The report also acknowledges the progress made by the Council to achieve financial stability. The Cabinet Member commented on the work done by corporate finance and audit to respond to the recommendations.

The Cabinet Member referred to the reference in the review report that it would be timely for the Council to take stock and reflect on its overall financial. The Cabinet Member suggested that members of the panel may wish to consider setting up a working group to undertake this work. The finding and recommendations of the review would be presented to a future meeting of Cabinet. The panel supported the idea and agreed to nominate members.

The Cabinet Member commented on discussions with Deputy Chief Executive of Leeds to look at how the Council can build on its achievements. The Cabinet Member wanted to formally record his thanks to the team for the work done to prepare for the peer review and also to members of the LGA Peer Review team for their work.

The panel discussed the reference in the report about the need for the capital programme to be made more robust.

The Cabinet Member for Resources commented that comment refers to the issue of slippage in the capital programme and the need for more realistic forecasting. The Cabinet Member supported this approach and highlighted the importance of good forward financial planning.

The panel queried the recommendation in the report to reviewing the plan for addressing the projected budget deficit. The Cabinet Member accepted the recommendation and commented that this was work in progress, but also advised the panel that this was a peer review and not a financial audit of the Council finances.

Resolved:

1. The panel welcomed the report and wanted to also record their congratulations on the positive comments detailed in the LGA peer review about the performance of the Council.
2. The panel agreed to set up a working group to review the Council's overall financial strategy as suggested in the LGA Peer Review report. The findings to be reported to a future meeting of Cabinet.

The following members to be part of the review group

Cllr Potter (Chair)
Cllr Wynne
Cllr Miles
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Sweetman

The terms of reference and date of meeting to be agreed in discussion with the Director of Finance.

6 **Budget Update and Review**

Cllr Andrew Johnson, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the report about the Council's finances and invited panel comments on the findings.

The panel queried the reasons for the increase in the overall deficit figure of £9.9 million in the Collection Fund. The Director of Finance explained that the Council has to make provision to meet successful appeals about business rates. The Director of Finance that making adequate provision to meet the cost of successful business rates appeals is a challenge for all local authorities.

The panel queried the £3.4 million underspend within the Children and Young People Service. The Cabinet Member for Resources commented that the term 'underspend' is not an accurate description - the sum of £3.4 million are early savings linked to the success of a range of intervention programmes, for example investment in funding extra social workers has delivered significant savings in other areas.

The panel queried the Council's debt write off policy. The Director of Finance, Mark Taylor, explained the work done to recover outstanding debts and that he has delegated authority to write off debts of less than £5,000. The Director of Finance explained that this would be done only after all attempts to recover the debt would have been attempted.

Resolved:

The panel welcomed the report and progress made

7 **Debt Management Update Report**

Cllr Andrew Johnson, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the report and congratulated the work of Sue Martin and members of her service in successfully improving the debt collection performance rate. Tracey Richards, Recovery Manager, briefed the panel on the progress made and the changes made to deliver a better customer service experience. The service is looking at issues from the customer viewpoint. The Recovery Manager explained the Council's write off policy.

The Recovery Manager explained that the team had received training from the CAB on providing debt advice and will signpost customers to organisations such as Christians against Poverty, a charity offering financial advice, where appropriate.

The panel discussed the different options available to recover a debt. The Recovery Manager explained that the team understand the legal options available to the Council to pursue the recovery of a debt. The team will explain the impact on a debtor of not paying a priority debt – for example, non-payment of council tax. The service will in certain circumstances accept smaller payments to settle a debt.

Resolved:

The panel welcomed the report and congratulated the service on the improved performance in recovering debts owing to the Council.

The meeting closed at 6.40pm.