

Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 16 November 2016

Attendance

Members of the Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Andrew Wynne (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Ian Brookfield

In Attendance

Cllr Andrew Johnson Cabinet Member for Resources

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith Scrutiny Officer
Andy Hoare Head of Services - ICT
Mark Taylor Director of Finance

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 Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Milkinder Jaspal – Cabinet Member Governance

2 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

3 **Minutes of previous meeting (14 September 2016)**

Corrections

Cllrs Udey Singh should have been recorded as submitting apologies for the meeting.

Outcome of the Local Government Association Finance Peer Review

The Cabinet Member for Resources commented that ***the reference** 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.

Budget Update and Review

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 ***commented** that making adequate provision to meet the cost of successful business rates appeals is a challenge for all local authorities.

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2016, subject to the agreed changes, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Matters arising

Minute 5: Outcome of the Local Government Association Finance Peer Review

Cllr Andrew Wynne chaired the review group held on 15 November 2016 to consider the Council's overall financial strategy. Cllr Wynne commented that the meeting was very constructive and the information provided gave a positive snapshot view of the local economy.

5 Budget Review - Draft Budget 2017/18

Mark Taylor, Director of Finance, gave a brief of the report and invited panel comments on the update information about the Council's finances. The panel welcomed the report.

Resolved:

The Panel noted the report and information provided about the Council finances.

6 Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 - 2019/20

Cllr Andrew Johnson, Cabinet Member Resources, introduced the report and invited panel members feedback on the budget proposals. The Cabinet Member advised the panel that there had been a good attendance at public meeting events arranged by the Council to explain the budget savings proposals. The Chair advised the panel that comments on proposals would be collated and sent to Scrutiny Board. The panel discussion on the budget proposals are shown below:

Appendix A

Corporate Administration Review

Colin Parr, Head of Governance, explained that the £50,000 savings would be achieved by deleting unfilled held vacancies. The savings target of £250,000 for 2018/19 is an indicative figure.

Organisational Development

The Head of Governance explained how the savings target would be achieved and referred to the use of Agresso as example of savings that could be achieved as a result of introducing changes in current working practices.

Further development of YOO Recruit

The Cabinet Member for Resources explained how the savings target would be achieved by entering into a partnership with a recruitment agency that would help generate savings. The panel queried the rationale for the Council wanting to involve an external agency which would be reduce the current level of income. The Cabinet Member explained that in order to grow the business the Director of Finance would be required to dedicate more time to manage the project and the view of the Council was that this would not be appropriate. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained that the Council would retain control of the project and determine its future direction. The project would retain its public sector ethos. The Cabinet Member for Resources commented that the aim of the planned change is to make the service attractive to external companies. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained how future risks would be managed to ensure that the Council is guaranteed to receive an agreed level of income.

Governance Service Restructure

No comments

Review of External Legal Fees

No comments

School Admission Appeal Fees

The Head of Governance explained that Council incurs considerable costs in dealing with admission appeals on behalf of schools, particularly when hearings do not go ahead as planned.

In addition, the increasing number of appeals has added to the demand on staff resources. The Head of Governance explained that changes will be made to the current service level agreement and that work will be done to look at the feasibility of offering the appeal service to schools outside Wolverhampton who may be interested in buying the service.

The panel discussed the risk of schools choosing to buy in appeal services from another provider. The Head of Governance explained that there would be market testing work done to check that the fees cover the costs involved providing the service.

Appendix B

The panel discussed the Council's approach to budget management and forecasting. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained that rationale underpinning the budgetary assumptions detailed in the report.

The Director of Finance explained that the work had been informed by findings and recommendations from the LGA Peer Review. A key finding from the report was that the Council approach to financial planning was prudent and where necessary changes have been made to respond to changes in the level of risk – for example, assumptions about future changes to interest rate policy.

The panel discussed the challenge facing the Council in achieving the budget savings target of £130 million. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained that the Council has a contingency reserve to help it respond to future financial challenges. The Director of Finance explained that the Council gets regular updates from financial advisers about future finance issues and the assumptions used when drafting the budget report.

The panel suggested that it would be helpful for the public to collate all the separate reports linked to the budget consultation document into a single document. The Director of Finance agreed to make the changes.

The Director of Finance advised the panel that the Council had received 27,000 emails responding the budget consultation.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for presenting the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel comments and feedback on the draft budget proposals to be incorporated into the response to scrutiny board.
2. The Director of Finance agreed to make the changes to the Council website to include a link to all budget reports.
3. The panel agreed that the final response be finalised by the Chair and Vice Chair.

7 **Future Works - Digital Transformation Programme Update**

Andy Hoare, Head of ICT, gave an overview of the progress against the delivery of the Future Works Digital Transformation Programme. The Head of ICT advised the group that the programme has been operating for 12 months. The Head of ICT explained the aims of the programme and explained that it consisted of four integrated themes of work.

The Head of ICT explained the governance and project management arrangements for the programme. The programme is supported by a mix of council employees and external contractors. The Head of ICT commented on the work done to ensure the Council becomes self-sufficient in the future through activities aimed at transferring skills and knowledge to Council employees from specialist contractors and others.

The Head of ICT gave some examples of the progress made by each of the project streams and the benefits to the Council of delivering services more efficiently and how the information collected by the programme is being used to support decision making across all levels of the Council. The Head of ICT commented on work done to enhance the service in response to customer feedback and to look for opportunities to improve the quality of data. The Head of ICT commented on the work currently underway to allow citizens to engage with the Council by registering on-line and creating a 'My Account'. The service will take citizens to a menu of council services.

The current range of services will be further enhanced in the New Year by adding other services to the menu that can be accessed using a range of devices.

The panel queried the vision for the Digital Transformation Programme and expressed concern that when such changes were introduced elsewhere, with the stated aim that people would have choices about how to access Council services, the changes introduced resulted in the services only being accessed digitally.

The Head of ICT reassured the panel that the aim of the programme is to offer good digital alternatives to existing communication methods so that people used whichever channel is convenient for them. The programme will adopt 'digital by design' principles and not 'digital by default', where citizens will retain a choice about how they access council services.

The panel queried the data protection implications of the information that residents need to register to access online services and the potential for people to abuse the system by giving false details. The Head of ICT explained the authentication process used to confirm someone's identity. A user will be asked to provide a valid email address to activate an account and this will be used for all future communication. In addition, a person can choose to access some digital services as a guest user. The Head of Service explained that in the future the system will be able collate information from other sources to assist in the verification of a person's identity.

The panel discussed the future expansion of the 'My Account' portal and the planned future rollout of the services that will be available to users to request and pay for (when appropriate).

The panel queried if the system used by the public to report issues using the ReportIt App still needs a person to action the matter. The Head of ICT confirmed that further work is needed to deliver the full functionality - from a person reporting the issue to the Council, to it being referred directly to the service to be dealt with, however the Head of ICT confirmed this is the desired outcome that is being worked on. The current process still needs a council employee to refer the issue to the relevant service area to action.

The panel discussed the use of the email address as an identifier and expressed concern about cases involving domestic violence and what will be done to maintain confidentiality. The Head of ICT reassured the panel the level of security would depend on the type of enquiry and that cases involving domestic violence will have extra security checks done.

The panel discussed the range of languages spoken in Wolverhampton and how the Digital Transformation Programme will deal with these enquiries. The Head of ICT advised the panel that the system uses Google translate to ensure consistent and accurate translation of information is offered to meet the needs of different groups. In addition, the accuracy of translation will be tested by members of the citizen panel.

The panel suggested that evidence collected by Equalities Group includes a list of staff who can offer a translation service would be helpful to the work of the service. The panel requested that a report on equalities monitoring data presented by Human Resources should be added to a future agenda for discussion by the panel.

The panel queried the legality of the Council using data collected from Experian and other such organisations, as well as other partner agencies, and the checks to ensure that data protection rules are being adhered too. The Head of ICT explained the benefits to the Council of having access to such information and advised the panel that checks will be undertaken by the Council with these data sharing organisations to ensure people providing their contact and email details have been informed that their information could be shared with a third party.

Resolved:

1. The panel noted the progress against delivery of the Future Works Digital Transformation Programme.
2. The panel agreed to receive a report at a future meeting on employee equalities monitoring data.

- 8 **Terms of Reference and Nominations for Specific Reserves Working Group**
The panel were invited to support the establishment of the specific reserves working group. The scrutiny officer advised the panel of members of the working group.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to establish the specific reserves working group and approved the terms of reference.