

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Philip Bateman MBE (Chair)
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
Cllr Ellis Turrell (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Qaiser Azeem
Cllr Jacqui Coogan
Cllr Anwen Muston
Cllr John Reynolds
Cllr Gillian Wildman (Substitute)

In Attendance

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Acting Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy)
Cllr Louise Miles (Cabinet Member for Jobs and Skills)

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Scrutiny Team Leader)
David Pattison (Chief Operating Officer)
Claire Nye (Director of Finance)
Charlotte Johns (Director of Strategy)
Alison Shannon (Chief Accountant)
James Amphlett (Head of Data and Analytics)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence and Substitutions**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Val Evans and Cllr Simon Bennett.

Cllr Gillian Wildman was substituting for Cllr Val Evans.

- 2 **Declarations of interest**
Cllr Phil Bateman MBE declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to Ashmore Park and Phoenix Nursery Schools Federation, as it was referred to in the paper on the item Performance and Budget Outturn 2022-2023.

3 **Minutes of the previous meeting - 13 June 2023**

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 June 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **Performance and Budget Outturn 2022-2023**

The Director of Finance and the Director of Strategy introduced the Performance and Budget Outturn 2022-2023 report.

The Director of Finance stated that the Council continued to demonstrate effective budget management and delivered within the budget last year, despite hugely challenging circumstances. The Council had responded to in year emerging pressures, particularly on inflation and pay. They were able to implement the agreed strategy to contribute to essential earmarked reserves. The outturn for last year was in line with the budget strategy. The Housing Revenue account for last year was also balanced overall but this was after in year adjustments which were made to reflect emerging pressures, largely due to inflation.

The Director of Strategy commented that the report integrated the financial information with the wider performance reporting. Assessment of performance took a variety of means. It was not just indicators but also assessment of external bodies such as Ofsted as well as vigorous assessment through internal and external audit functions. Risk management had been integrated into the report, with the Strategic Risk Register included. There were 49 indicators in the report, of which 40 were showing sustained or improved performance. A summary of those areas was included in paragraph 3.9 of the report, with the detail included in Appendix 1.

The Vice-Chair referred to the overspend in the Homeless Budget. He stated that the report had referred to an increase in referrals and asked where the pressure was coming from. He asked what was being done to mitigate the increase. The Director of Finance responded that there were low levels of homelessness in the City, but there were significant referrals for accommodation and temporary accommodation. This is what was leading to the pressure. The Chief Operating Officer referred to a breakdown in relationships and people not being able to afford the accommodation they were previously in as some of the reasons why accommodation had to be found. Officers agreed to send a further written response in answer to the question. A Panel Member referred to the fact that homelessness and rough sleeping were two different categories.

A Panel Member asked a question about the Council principle of, Driven by Digital and the need to think of those were not adept in the use of digital technology. The Director of Strategy gave a detailed response on the Council's Digital Strategy and reassured the Panel Member that people would still be able to access Council services in a non-digital way.

The Vice-Chair raised a concern that a savings target in the Regeneration Directorate of £152,000 had not been achieved. The Regeneration Directorate had a 9% overspend. Communications had a 6% overspend. This ultimately meant there was less money for resident services. Savings need to made so the money could be reinvested, he felt the Council needed to increase its efforts.

A Panel Member raised a concern that when footage had been provided of fly tippers it had not always been followed up by the Council. The Chief Operating Officer

stated that where the Council had evidence of criminal activity in relation to fly tipping it should be taking action. Fixed penalty or prosecution were the options available to the Council. He was aware the Cabinet Member wanted to be tough on fly tipping and that the matter was coming to the Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel later in the Municipal year. Strong enforcement action would have an impact on the reduction in fly tipping.

A Panel Member commented on the rising cost of hotel rooms in the City and there increased scarcity. This was important because she was aware some hotel accommodation had been used in the past to provide shelter to homeless families. She asked for some information and a definition of the term, City of Sanctuary. She was concerned about the availability of hotel rooms for Wolverhampton residents that were homeless particularly as more were being used for asylum seekers. The Chief Operating Officer responded that there would be a report provided to the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel later in the Municipal year on hotel provision. He believed that anecdotally it was becoming harder to find hotel accommodation in the City. There was a Planning Application being submitted for a new hotel and that others were in the pipeline. The Council were meeting their legal duty under homeless legislation. He would give a definition of the term City of Sanctuary once he had taken advice.

There was a discussion about the importance of mental health and the difficulties in accessing services, particularly for adults. It was agreed that mental health as a strategic cross directorate item would come before the Scrutiny Board at some point in the Municipal year. It was already listed on the Health Scrutiny Panel for September 2023 and later in March 2024. The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Skills stated that mental health was a key factor surrounding employment statistics in the City. Anecdotally she felt there were more issues surrounding mental health on public transport and at places such as the City Centre bus station.

A Panel Member commented that they worked in mental health and she could see the problems of long waiting lists and staffing issues. Some staff had left to go and work in private hospitals due to higher wages. People could easily wait two years now to see a psychiatrist and this was also the case for children. She had asked for the head of CAHMS to present a paper at Corporate Parenting Board. The Acting Leader spoke in support of the Scrutiny Board considering the important issue of mental health.

The Vice-Chair referred to the Strategic Risk Register which stated that the number of business closures had seen a huge rise of 170% in quarter 1 2023, compared to those in quarter 4 2022. He said that everyone should be shocked and alarmed by the figure. He could not understand why it was only an amber risk. He commented that business closures should feature on the Scrutiny Work Programme. A Panel Member commented that the objective of businesses was to make money and if they did not, then they would close. This was the fundamental issue. Some people preferred to shop online. If not enough people used physical shops then they would close.

A Panel Member raised a concern about unemployment levels in Wolverhampton as referred to in the Strategic Risk Register. The Council did not seem to be having the impact that she would like on employment levels. The Council needed to do more to

help improve employment levels, she felt the issue needed to be considered in depth.

The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Skills agreed that the employment figures for the City needed to be improved. There were two areas of focus presently. The first was to look at specific targeted groups. The second was to analyse the unemployment figures themselves provided by the Government, which on their own did not necessarily present the full picture. The Employment and Skills Strategy was currently out for consultation and had recently been considered by the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel.

The Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy referred to encouraging new investment in the City. He was aware of a skills gap, which needed to be addressed.

A Panel Member referred to the changing environment and markets in business and the need for the Council to enable the rising stars of business to take advantage of the changes. She commented that the performance report could show new business being established in the City as well as those closing down.

A Panel Member raised the issue of childhood obesity which had been referred to in the report. She asked if this could be considered by Scrutiny. The Scrutiny Team Leader responded that this was normally considered as part of the Public Health Annual Report. The Chief Operating Officer stated that he would ensure it was covered in the Annual Report.

5 **Forward Plan of Key Decisions**

The Vice-Chair asked why there was no reference to hotels on the Forward Plan of Key Decisions. The Chief Operating Officer stated the application by Wetherspoons did not involve any Council funding and so therefore the matter would go to Planning Committee in the normal way. Hotels as a general item was listed on the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel Work Plan for November. If there was to be a Cabinet decision in relation to hotels, it would first come as a pre-decision scrutiny item.

A Panel Member asked for Officers to consider how the Scrutiny Work Programme could be communicated to all Members. The Scrutiny Officer suggested it could be sent out as part of the weekly Councillor email, when there had been significant changes made.

6 **Scrutiny Work programme**

The Vice-Chair commented that he was hoping to see more pre-decision Scrutiny in the Municipal year. He added that he thought the five years Event Strategy was an item he felt should come before Scrutiny. The Creation Day Festival was another item he suggested be added to the Work Programme. He was very concerned with some of the elements he had read about in the local newspaper. The Chief Operating Officer stated that the Creation Festival could be added to the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel Work Programme, it was not able to be added at the present time due to legal discussions. The Five-year Event Strategy had not been received at Cabinet due to the passing of the Leader. It would come before the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel in September.

The Vice-Chair stressed the importance of Scrutiny and how it had been an important feature of the most recent 3 day Local Government Association (LGA) Conference. Scrutiny led to better decision making in the long-term.

The Chair stated that he had asked for proposals on a Scrutiny Review Group on the Night-time economy and a second one on Flooding to be brought to Scrutiny Board in the future. He referred to previous scrutiny work on the Night-time economy and considered that this would be good to review as part of the remit of the group.

A Panel Member referred to a group she had Chaired on the lower sector of private housing. She felt standards still needed to be improved and was unsure of the impact the Scrutiny Group had ultimately had in their recommendations. She agreed with the Chair that it was important to review progress when Scrutiny Review Groups had made recommendations. She acknowledged that licensing was now being introduced to Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs).

The Chair of the Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel commented that Private Sector Housing had been received at the last meeting of the Panel. Licensing had been discussed and a further report would be brought in the future.

The meeting closed at 5:52pm.