

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Wednesday, 29 March 2023 at 6.00 pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Dunn, Fenton and Hinchliff.

In attendance: Simone Hines (Director of Finance – Section 151 Officer), Sue Moore (Group Head for Education Support Services), Fiona McGlaughlin (Procurement Manager), Michael Jarrett (Director of Children and Education), Rebecca Jenkins (Senior Lead - Service Improvement), Sarah Sprung (Senior Lead Officer), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead - Service Improvement), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager, Statutory Scrutiny Officer) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

26/23 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Chidley, E M Giles and Trumpeter.

27/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.



28/23 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 1 March 2023 be approved as a correct record.

29/23 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

30/23 **SEND Transport Performance Update**

An update on the SEND Transport Performance was provided to the Board. It was a statutory duty of the Council to provide travel assistance for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The baseline SEND transport budget was £7.52m however, based on projections, the expected final outturn cost for the financial year of 2022-23 was £11.2m. The difference of £3.7m was highlighted as a budget pressure and was inclusive of all travel assistance provided. This scenario was not unique to Sandwell and the stated 51% increase of individuals with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) since 2019 reflected the immense pressure on the local authority. Details were also provided on the 25% increase of pupils in receipt of travel assistance since January 2021. Many authorities, including Sandwell, had confirmed that the position was unsustainable, and requests were made for a change in legislation. Further increases of children with an EHCP were expected which would inevitably impact the costs and demand for travel assistance going forward.

Discussions continued regarding the new procurement exercise which sought to address recommendations received from the Grant Thornton review that had taken place in December 2021. Recommendations from the Council's own internal review, and the Childrens Services and Education Scrutiny Board, were also taken into account. The new framework was developed to ensure the delivery of several key components including effective communications with between parents, carers and operators.

The template produced for the SEND transport project was expected to be applied to other major projects within the Council due to the vigorous testing and scrutiny that the framework had received. Potential tweaks had been identified to continuously improve the service going forward. Members were minded that the process for the next SEND Transport plan would take place sooner to enable adequate time. This would allow needs to be aligned with other policies across the Council as well as the use of robust contract management arrangements and pre-procurement consultation to parents and key stakeholders.

In response to questions from members, it was confirmed that benchmarking with other authorities enabled officers to cherry-pick and cost the best ideas to help form Sandwell's plan. The introduction of the Fusion software would enable key performance indicators to be tracked more efficiently with tools available to view live spend and monitoring.

31/23

Improvement Plan Progress, Phase 2 Refresh and External Follow-up Reviews

A single Improvement Plan was agreed by Council on 7 June 2022 to address recommendations from the Value for Money Review into the council's governance arrangements, a CIPFA financial management review, an LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, and Statutory Directions from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The single Improvement Plan replaced the Governance Review Improvement Plan which was approved in January 2022.

A follow-up review had been received which recognised the significant progress that had been made. Four new key recommendations had been highlighted alongside some additional 29 improvement recommendations which had all been embedded into the refresh of the improvement plan. Out of the 17 key lines of enquiry, 4, including SEND transport, had been closed with no evidence of significant weakness.

Feedback was also received from the LGA and CIPFA follow-up reviews which both highlighted substantial improvement including an increase from a 2* to a 3* rating.

Significant progress had continued to be made to deliver the actions within the Improvement Plan. This included the completion of the Phase 1 Governance Review with changes to the Constitution agreed, preparations for the new Chief Executive taking up post on 6 February, approval of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the completion of the reviews of the Serco and Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT) contracts. Phase 2 of the governance review would embed these changes.

Positive feedback on the Council's scrutiny processes was recognised, especially in relation to the Council's culture and professional behaviour within key committees.

The following areas of slippage were identified:

- Slippage was highlighted in delivery of the workforce strategy and delivery of effective decision making training.
- Slippage had been experienced in the establishment of the customer journey programme board (which had met since the report had been completed) as well as the review of KPIs and project management system.
- Some delays and issues relating to the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda had been witnessed as well as slippage relating to commercial business cases.
- The Council were still relying on external bodies to conduct some of their necessary procurement exercises.
- Slippage was still being experienced with the transition from children's to adult's services. Work was underway despite not having a manager in place after 2 unsuccessful recruitment attempts.

Next steps were discussed which included ensuring a stable medium term financial position, improving customer experience and embedding organisational values into "business as usual".

In response to questions, members were minded that the Lion Farm issue was still ongoing. The other party had submitted additional information as part of their response. The expert determinator had given the Council time to respond to the evidence. It was expected that a final determination would be made towards the middle of May 2023.

It was agreed that a summary of events detailing the Council's current situation with Lion Farm be prepared and circulated to the Board.

Agreed that:-

- 1) a summary and chronology of events explaining where the Council is currently with regards to the proposed development on Lion Farm, and how it reached the expert determination process, be circulated to the Board;
- 2) a copy of the recent internal review in relation to SERCO be provide to the Board;
- 3) with consultation with members of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, a report be submitted to the Board in relation to issues around the recruitment to the Childrens to Adults service project manager post.

32/23

Performance Management Framework – Q3 Monitoring

An update was provided on the Performance Management Framework for Quarter 3. In total, the amount of “Actions on Track” had increased from 258 to 273. Medium issues now totalled 101, up from 90 in the Quarter 2. The amount of significant risks had decreased from 9 to 3 and the amount of risks with no available update reduced to 33 from 53.

Details in relation to the three red risks were highlighted to the Board:-

- “Bringing together governance arrangements and budgets to ensure voluntary community sector (VCS) grants were aligned to corporate objectives”. The team was operating at less than full capacity due to sickness.
- “Development of a corporate strategy” – Resources continued to be dedicated to deliver the improvement plan; the Corporate Performance Manager would lead development when in post.
- “Review of Council’s payment process” – This would be part of the business process review.

Key contracts were also discussed with points being made as follows:-

- Improvement in performance against the KPIs by the Childrens Trust with 13 out of 15 KPIs now green. A reduction in the total number of children in care had also taken place.
- Serco had attended all governance and contract meetings during quarter 3. The Street cleaning improvement plan was live and service resilience had improved following the summer disruptions
- SLT memberships had reduced in the quarter which, although an increase on December 2021 levels, was still below those seen pre-pandemic. Going forward, benchmarking against other comparators would take place to monitor post-covid trading levels. The transition to LATC would also be supported.
- Places Leisure had a total of 90,752 visits in Q3.

Organisational Health

Sickness absence had increased during Q3 with a total of 8.28 working days per employee being lost; this was in comparison to the target of 6.21. 1/3 of the sickness was short term with the largest cause of sickness being stress, depression and mental health followed by infection and muscular-skeletal problems. A detailed review was underway to analyse trends and to review sickness absence management processes.

Customer Experience

The Council's contact centres were improving and closer to target although turnover and sickness had caused a slight increase in wait times. Impact of the recruitment drives would be seen in Q4's performance. Information requests were still below target although significant improvement had been made in complying with requests through FOI request routes.

Members sought clarification on why recycling provisions for high-rise blocks was taking so long to proceed with, members also expressed concerns raised by residents regarding the standard and cleanliness of some SLT sites. Answers would be provided to members once investigated further.

Officers confirmed that there had been no issues regarding the availability of contacting tax specialists within the Council although further queries would be made to ensure that this was the case. The Revenues and Benefits contact centre had experienced

difficulties with call volume due to energy rebate calls. Call waiting times had significantly reduced since due to the drop in demand for energy rebates. Despite recruitment difficulties, officers assured members that performance was improving. A new web chat function with live officer responses was also now available to assist with enquiries.

Following further discussions in relation to sickness and absence of Council staff, officers offered to provide further information at a future meeting to highlight reasons for sickness and any correlations discovered in the process.

33/23

Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations

Members requested that all actions be included in the tracking and monitoring document at its next meeting.

Meeting ended at 7.49pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk