

# Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Thursday 5 October 2023 at 6pm  
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Moore (Chair);  
Councillors Fenton (Vice- Chair), Anandou, Fisher, E Giles,  
Hinchliff, Lewis and Owen.

**In attendance:** Surjit Tour (Director of Law and Governance), Tony McGovern (Director of Regeneration and Growth), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead for Strategic improvement), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Officer – Corporate Performance Management), Suky Suthi- Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager), Stephnie Hancock (Deputy Democratic Services Manager) and John Swann (Democratic Services Officer).

## 67/23 **Apologies for Absence**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Taylor.

## 68/23 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Moore declared an other interest in the matter referred to at 76/23 (Lion Farm – Secondary options Agreement), in that he was a Cabinet Member when the matter was considered by Cabinet.



69/23

## **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

70/23

## **Corporate Performance Management Framework – Q1 Monitoring**

The Strategic Lead for Service Improvement provided an outline of the Corporate Performance Management Framework – Q1 Monitoring to the Board.

The Corporate Performance Management Framework (PMF) was a key element of the Council's Improvement Plan and had addressed recommendations of the Governance Value for Money Review by Grant Thornton. Subsequent to approval at Council in April 2022, in June 2023, the Corporate PMF had been revised with a refreshed set of Corporate Performance Indicators.

Comprehensive monitoring tools were in place to ensure accountability and continuous improvement, with key performance indicators being RAG rated to identify issues as they had presented. The Corporate PMF themes were aligned to the objectives of the Corporate Plan:

### **The Best Start in life for Children and Young People**

No significant issues or risks had been identified under this theme, slippage on projects such as the Early Help Strategy had been identified with a review of the existing school admission appeals service arrangements having been commenced in Summer 2023.

Sandwell Children's Trust was predicted to have an end- of- year overspend of £0.224m, however, it was noted that in real terms, this represented an overspend of £0.996m due to the expectation that the Trust achieve a budget surplus of £0.742m.

### **People Live and Age Well**

Upgrades to Walker Grange residential units were identified as being behind schedule, as were projects relating to the relocation of Community Alarms. The prevalence of childhood obesity at 34% was a concern, however, due to the childhood measurement programme not taking place during the pandemic, this figure could not be compared with the previous year.

The overall satisfaction of service users accessing care and support was high and above target at 71.6%, and performance indicators relating to drug use, alcohol and smoking were above the national average.

### **Strong Resilient Communities**

The replacement of the Council's diesel vehicle fleet with sustainable fuel vehicles was the only significant issue identified. It was noted that technological limitations for larger vehicles and the lack of infrastructure to support electric vehicles had contributed to the delay.

Reported incidents of domestic abuse in the Borough had increased significantly in the past year and would continue to be monitored by the Council. The Council had recently commissioned a new 5- year contract with Black Country Women's Aid to provide refuge for those fleeing domestic abuse and violence.

### **Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods**

The viability of projects financed by the Housing Transformation Fund was the only highlighted concern as the government had withdrawn the funding.

The amount of homelessness cases prevented under the Homelessness Reduction Act had slipped below the target of 65% to 58.7%. It was outlined that this was due to a historical backlog and prevention levels were expected to return to target levels before the end of 2023.

### **A Strong and Inclusive Economy**

No significant issues or risks had been identified under this theme, however, it was highlighted that the employment rate in Sandwell had decreased to 63.9%, which was below regional and national averages.

Collaborative work with partners was continuing to take place to retain local spending with the Borough and support employment opportunities locally. Capital projects also continued to support local businesses and the supply chain.

### **A Connected and Accessible Sandwell**

No significant issues or risks had been identified under this theme. Highways infrastructure capital programme of maintenance and the Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan projects were progressing well and were on track for completion.

It was highlighted that bus services within the Borough had been reduced to issues of footfall and viability which had impacted the public transport provision across Sandwell, the Council was liaising with Transport for West Midlands on the matter.

It was acknowledged that the Covid- 19 pandemic had resulted in some metrics not being directly comparable to previous years.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The development of the Customer Access Strategy had encountered delays and the revised date for the draft strategy to be completed was projected to be March 2024.
- The Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board undertook to ascertain why the Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) target for care- leavers (aged 19- 21) was 50% when 41% of care- leavers were NEET in England.
- Further information was sought on the increased prevalence of domestic abuse within the Borough.
- Service demands had resulted in slippage in the 10- day target response time for complaints, whilst the existing backlog was a factor, responding to complaints related to multiple service areas within timespan was challenging.
- The Director for Regeneration and Growth noted that the Council had successfully recruited roles within the complaints team to address capacity issues and undertook to identify complaints as complex to better reflect the service.
- The target Ofsted rating for the Directorate of Children and Education Services was 'good', the last inspection of the service was in 2022 and it received the rating of 'requires improvement to be good'.
- Further information was sought relating to service pressures in the homelessness team and the prevention of homelessness cases, to incorporate data relating to Section 21 evictions and financial support.
- Active Travel funding available from government had been utilised to provide a cycling network across the Borough; usage of which was expected to increase following completion.
- That monitoring the usage of the cycling network could better inform decision making related to the Active Travel Policy.
- Sickness due to work- related stress had increased and officers undertook to provide the reasons behind this.

**Resolved** that the Director of Regeneration and Growth be recommended to monitor usage of the cycling network via a representative sample to inform the Active Travel Policy.

72/23

### **Annual Scrutiny Report 2022/ 23**

The Chair of the Board outlined the draft Scrutiny Annual Report for the municipal year 2022/ 23.

It was acknowledged that positive steps had been made within the past year with the role of scrutiny being elevated within the Council's decision- making process.

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer outlined that the strengthening of relationships between Scrutiny Chairs and Cabinet Members, as well as the effective tracking and monitoring of recommendations via the Scrutiny Board Action Trackers, were demonstratable improvements which had taken place.

In particular, the Chair highlighted the steps taken to address recommendations made by Grant Thornton.

**Resolved** that the Annual Scrutiny Report 2022/ 23 be approved for submission to Council.

73/23

### **Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Action Tracker**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

74/23

### **Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme**

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan and the Board's work programme.

75/23

## **Exclusion of the Public**

That the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial and business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that information.

(Councillor Moore left the meeting).

(Vice- Chair in the Chair).

76/23

## **Lion Farm – Secondary options Agreement**

The Director of Regeneration and Growth provided an outline of the Lion Farm Playing Fields site.

The site was 49.6 acres and wholly owned by Sandwell Council, it represented a significant development potential due to its location.

The Council had been subject to the terms of a legally binding agreement in respect of Lion Farm Playing Fields, with a developer since 2013 to explore the establishment of a retail outlet village.

At the meeting of Cabinet in January 2022 (Minute No. 13/22), it was agreed to trigger the Arbitration Clause of the existing agreement to refer the matter for Expert Determination.

The Expert determination was completed in May 2023, with the details of the Secondary Option Agreement having been determined in accordance with the 2013 agreement.

The Council had an obligation as part of the Secondary Option Agreement to work collaboratively with the developer.

From the comments and questions by members of the Board, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The Council had sought expert legal advice on the issue and had a duty to work with the developer in relation to the site.
- The costs of the expert determination process were to be incurred equally between the Council and the developer.

(Councillor Anandou left the meeting during consideration of this item).

Meeting ended at 7.33pm.

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