

SCRUTINY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 September 2021 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Committee Members Present Councillor Murray (Chair)
Councillor Nawaz (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Ali
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor Hicken
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor Rasab
Councillor Samra
Councillor Singh-Sohal

Officers Simon Neilson – Executive Director (Economy, Environment & Communities)
Deborah Hindson – Interim Executive Director (Resources & Transformation)
Sally Rowe – Executive Director (Children’s and Customer)
Stephen Gunther – Director – Public Health
Paul Gordon – Director – Resilient Communities
Gordon Falconer – Community Safety Manager
Elise Hopkins – Director – Customer Engagement
Craig Goodall – Principal Democratic Services Officer
Sian Lloyd – Assistant Democratic Services Officer

Others in attendance Geraint Griffiths-Dale – Clinical Commissioning Group

Portfolio Holders Councillor Bird – Leader
Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader and Resilient Communities
Councillor M. Statham – Internal Services
Councillor Craddock – Health and Wellbeing
Councillor Martin – Adult Social Care
Councillor Towe – Education and Skills

329/21 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Harrison and Councillor Jeavons.

330/21 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

331/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

332/21 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

There were no items to be considered in private session.

333/21 **MINUTES**

A member re-iterated their concerns about the accuracy of the information regarding section 106 (s106) funds and the spending thereof which had been submitted to a previous meeting of this Committee. Following a discussion it was agreed to consider an in-depth report on s106 at the next meeting of the Committee.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. The minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2021, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved.**
- 2. an in-depth report on s106 spending to be brought to the next meeting of this Committee.**

334/21 **COVID-19 INFECTION AND VACCINATION RATES UPDATE**

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing presented the Committee with the most up to date information regarding Covid-19 infection and vaccination rates in Walsall. He advised that the latest figures indicated an infection rate of around 350 per 100,000 inhabitants and it was expected that this figure would rise, particularly in the 12 – 15 year old age bracket as schools returned. It was noted that there had sadly been 6 Covid-related deaths in Walsall the previous week and that death and serious illness continued to be much more likely in people that had not had the vaccination.

The Director of Public Health added that everyone was encouraged to take up the offer of vaccination and continue to adhere to the mantra of ‘hands, face, space and fresh air’ to offer themselves the best protection against Covid-19 which had not gone away.

The Walsall Managing Director of the Black Country and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group (the Managing Director) emphasised that residents could still come forward for their vaccinations at any point. He advised that within the next week vaccination programmes for 12 -15 year olds would begin in schools and primary care would begin to offer booster injections. The Saddlers Centre would continue to operate to reduce pressure on primary care services.

Members sought assurances about what preventative measures were being taken to reduce the spread of Covid-19 in schools. The Director of Public Health explained that since rules around the wearing of facemasks and using ‘bubbles’ to reduce mixing the rates of Covid-19 in 12-15 years old had increased. Some schools had retained these measures. The Council continued to offer advice and support to all schools.

A Member asked for further information on the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic vaccination take up. The Managing Director explained that whilst vaccination rates were increasing daily particular challenges were being experienced with persuading the black Caribbean community to come forward. Vaccination rates for Asian groups were improving. The Director of Public Health noted media campaigns and community champions were being used to encourage take up of vaccines in hard to reach communities.

Following questions the Managing Director acknowledged that demand for primary care services had increased by 25-50% compared to previous years. With regard to the hospital, pressures continued to be felt in planned care, with those awaiting non-life-threatening care experiencing the longest delays. He reassured the Committee that contingency plans were in place for winter and that additional supplies of the flu vaccine had been ordered to cater for the expected increase in demand.

Members discussed the current meeting arrangements for Council Committees, asking when they would stop meeting in a socially distanced manner in large meeting rooms. The Director of Public Health explained that as the virus was airborne it was important to maintain social distance to protect members and officers attending meetings.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

335/21 **DOMESTIC ABUSE STRATEGY**

The Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities presented the draft Domestic Abuse Strategy which was to be submitted to October Cabinet. It was noted that it was a legal requirement for the Council to produce such a document and for this to be submitted to the Secretary of State after going through due process. The Portfolio Holder expressed the Council's wish to turn victims of domestic abuse into victors and that the Resilient Communities model be used to raise awareness and offer additional support. It was emphasised that domestic abuse can often go unnoticed and unreported and anyone can be a victim.

Following questions the Director of Customer Engagement explained that anybody fleeing domestic violence could approach any local authority in the country for housing without having to have any connection to that area. The Director of Resilient Communities also confirmed that the Council works closely with the Police under the Safer Walsall Partnership.

Members of the Committee noted this was a very comprehensive document and thanked officers for their work. They offered their suggestions for amendments to the strategy, noting there were limited references to male victims of domestic abuse. Members of the Committee also recommended more engagement and training with children and young people.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the strategy be noted;**
- 2. the Committee recommends that the strategy contains explicit reference to both men and women as victims of domestic abuse;**
- 3. Figures relating to the number of safe houses available in the borough be provided to the Committee.**

336/21 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGY

The Director of Customer Engagement presented the Committee with an updated version of the draft Customer Experience Strategy which was to be submitted to December Cabinet. The strategy was designed to provide a vision for how the Council will achieve excellent customer experience in the future in a way that aligns to the ways of working, the Walsall Proud promises and Corporate Plan outcomes. Any improvements identified were based on customer feedback with surveys, focus groups and telephone feedback being received.

The Director of Customer Engagement shared some results from the surveys that had been conducted, highlighting that 81% of customers valued the provision of up to date and accurate information, 91% of Members strongly agree that customers are put at the heart of services the Council delivers and 53% of staff felt they provide a consistently high quality customer experience.

It was noted that the strategy still had work to do to align with the new Corporate Plan and Digital Strategy and that there would also need to be a stronger emphasis on the Resilient Communities Agenda to ensure that the Golden Thread running through Council policies and strategies was maintained.

Members of the Committee noted that modern technology is part of day to day life and represents the best way forward but that it was important to ensure that some face-to-face provision remained for those vulnerable residents who require more support from specialist members of staff. It was suggested that children should also be surveyed on their opinions as the future taxpayers of the borough.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the strategy be noted;**
- 2. the Committee provide feedback on a draft of the Customer Experience Strategy as part of the consultation process.**

337/21 **PRE-AUDIT OUTTURN 2020-21**

The Leader of the Council presented a report on the pre-audit financial position for 2020/21 to allow for the scrutiny of the financial performance of the Council and the services within the Committee's remit. It was noted that the information in the report had been reported to Cabinet in July and agreed by Audit Committee the previous evening.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the pre-audit outturn 2020/21 for the Council as a whole – a revenue underspend of £0.45m, and net capital break even position net of £38.87m council funded carry forwards into 2021/22 be noted;**
- 2. the pre-audit outturn 2020/21 for services within the remit of this Committee – a revenue underspend of £2.20m, and net capital break even position net of £27.64m carry forwards into 2021/22 be noted.**

338/21 **QUARTER 1 FINANCIAL MONITORING – FORECAST REVENUE AND CAPITAL OUTTURN FOR 2021-22**

The Leader of the Council presented the Quarter 1 Financial Monitoring report which set out the forecast financial position for 2021/22 and thanked the Finance team for their diligent work which ensured that the Council was in a good financial position.

The Executive Director for Resources and Transformation highlighted that the Quarter 2 report would be discussed at the next meeting of the Committee and that this would provide more timely figures.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the forecast 2021/22 year-end financial position for the Council as a whole – a predicted net revenue overspend of c£4.49m, and net capital break even position be noted;**
- 2. the forecast 2021/22 year-end financial position for services within the remit of this Committee – a predicted net revenue underspend of £0.12m and net capital break even position, subject to full review, be noted.**

339/21 **AREAS OF FOCUS**

The Committee considered its work programme and the Forward Plans of Walsall Council and the Black Country Joint Executive Committee.

The following items were identified for the next meeting of the Committee:

- Section 106 spending;
- Update on Covid-19 infection and vaccination rates;
- Scrutiny survey results;
- Q2 financial monitoring; and
- Budget setting for 2022-23.

Resolved:

That the Areas of Focus and Forward Plan be noted.

340/21 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 9 November 2021.

The meeting terminated at 8.00 p.m.

Chair:

Date:.....