

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**Wednesday 20 March 2024 at 6pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Fenton (Vice-Chair in the Chair);
Councillors E Giles, Lewis and Owen.

In attendance: James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Brendan Arnold (Interim Section 151 Officer), Dean Epton (Interim Director of Housing), Claire Spencer (Head of Finance Business Partnering – Place), Mark Satchwell (Assistant Director – Law and Governance), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead – Service Improvement), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Officer), Teresa Armstrong (Services Manager - Register Office and Coroners), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic and Member Services Manager) and Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

23/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fisher, Hinchliffe, Moore and Tipper.

24/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.



25/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 1 February 2024 are approved as a correct record.

26/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

27/24 **Impact on Registration related services when the new Midland Metropolitan University Hospital opens in 2024**

At its meeting on 13 October 2022 (see Minute No. 152/22), the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board considered impact on Registration related services when the new Midland Metropolitan University Hospital opened. As the hospital was now expected to open in autumn 2024, an updated impact report was presented to the Board.

Registration events (especially births and deaths) had to be done in the district they occurred. With acute healthcare services, including maternity services, moving to the new Hospital site from Birmingham there was an expected increase of 5,000 registration events per year. In addition, the site would come under the Black Country Coroner.

Officers had analysed the impact and identified additional posts that were required to meet the additional demand. This was accounted for in the current financial year and was budgeted for thereafter. At the time of the meeting five of the six posts had been recruited to; the remaining post was expected to be filled by June 2024.

Staff training and development had also taken place, both formal external training and internal coaching. This had focussed on birth and death registration.

It was reported that significant investment had been made to ensure facilities at Highfields House, where Registration Services were based, remained accessible and inclusive for access. This included a new reception area, new appointment rooms, new welfare facilities for staff and more.

Members acknowledged that the 'Tell Us Once' service had been maintained, which was a service valued by the public.

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

- All registration events currently had to be conducted face to face, however there were potential legislative changes that could introduce registration by telephone.
- Other services could be delivered online including booking appointments, ordering archive certificates and renewing memorial options.
- The additional appointment rooms at Highfields were considered to be adequate to meet the expected increase in demand for the registration of births and deaths that the Hospital would create.
- The Council continued to offer affordable options for funerals.

Resolved that Tenant Satisfaction Survey results and complaints be considered on a neighbourhood level at Town meetings.

28/24

Performance Management Framework – 2023/24 Quarter 3 Monitoring

The Board considered the Quarter 3 monitoring reports for the Corporate Performance Management Framework. The format of the report had been amended to take into account feedback from the Board.

It was reported that overall performance was improving, with plans in place for those areas that were not yet sufficiently improved. It was anticipated that the Quarter 4 monitoring report would demonstrate further improvement.

Achievements and areas of concern were broken down by the themes as set out within the improvement plan and were presented to the Board. The following areas were highlighted during the discussion and in response to questions from members.

Achievements

The Corporate Contact Centre average call wait time in Quarter 3 was 3 minutes 11 seconds, this performance was better than the target set out in the plan.

Forge Mill Farm was now performing above target with improved performance across all income strands.

The Council had successfully launched the Priority Education Investment Area programme and it was hoped this investment from the Department for Education would further improve attainment rates across the borough – which had already demonstrated continual improvement over the last five years.

The three statutory recommendations from Grant Thornton had been lifted due to sufficient progress being made by the Council.

The Best Start in Life for Children and Young People

It was reported that for 'financial performance against budget (Sandwell Children's Trust (SCT)) performance was below target and SCT continued to project an annual deficit against the Contract Sum. This was caused by a variety of factors including the increase in numbers of children placed in residential care and an increased average unit cost for each placement. Discussions continued with SCT on what transformation activity could be undertaken in respect of placements. The Board asked for further information on the budgetary position of SLT.

People Live Well and Age Well

Although performance on average waiting times in the Adults Contact Centre was higher than target, there had been some improvement since Quarter 2. Abandonment rates in the Adults Contact Centre were better than target.

Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods

The percentage of homelessness cases successfully prevented was below target. This was due to a range of factors including a low turnover of Council properties and the accessibility and affordability of private rented properties being at its lowest point in years. There would be an increase in Local Housing Allowance rates in April 2024, which would help bridge the affordability gap, but the market was anticipated to remain challenging for years. Although Quarter 3 performance had been below target, there had been improvements in November and December 2023.

The deployment of additional resources on a temporary basis that was planned for Quarter 4 would enable Housing Services Officers to focus more of their time on Home Checks. These would be prioritised where most needed – where there was a risk of damp and mould. Delays had been caused by a number of particularly complex cases, although additional staff were being trained to undertake Home Checks.

The Council was working with the charity sector to understand what its processes around hoarding should be, recognising the importance of support for the tenants involved.

One Team One Council

Both the abandonment rate and average wait time for the Revenues and Benefits Contact Centre had improved compared to Quarter 2 and to the same time last year.

An increased focus organisation-wide on prompt responses to complaints was driving improvement in this area. This focus also reinforced the importance of quality of responses, including resolving queries at the first point of contact wherever possible.

It was noted that volumes of requests made online were significantly higher than those that came via the Contact Centres.

The Board noted that sickness levels, and therefore associated costs, were above target. This was largely attributable to stress, mental health and depression and included increased instances of long-term absences. HR were investigating the situation to better understand causes and where improvements could be made.

Members requested further information around where complaints came from as well as other data around complexity and which services the complaints related to. It was also suggested that this data should be shared with Town-level member meetings.

The Board noted that this would be Kate Ashley's (Strategic Lead – Service Improvement) final meeting as she was due to leave on a secondment. The Board placed on record its thanks for her hard work, particularly in relation to the Performance and Improvement Plans and wished her well for the future.

30/24

Quarter 3 Budget Monitoring 2023/24

The Board received the budget monitoring report for 2023/24 Quarter 3, this set out the financial position as at the end of September 2023.

It was reported that, at the end of December 2023 there was a forecast underspend of £2.9m.

In relation to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), there was a forecast year end overspend of £500k; although this would be addressed by year end as the Council was obliged to balance the HRA.

The Interim Section 151 Officer confirmed that there were no financial issues to raise regarding the Quarter 3 financial position.

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

- The projected underspend was due to Council vacancy management savings, in addition to some increased grant income from central government on Adult Social Care. Reduced projections on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Transport had also contributed.
- A piece of work would be undertaken to determine if there was any link between vacancy management and increased sickness levels relating to mental health and stress.

The Board noted that this would be Brendan Arnold's (Interim Section 151 Officer) final meeting. The Board placed on record its thanks for his hard work in relation to the budget and how he had increased understanding of financial issues amongst members.

31/24

Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations

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

32/24

Cabinet Forward Plan and Work Programme

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

Meeting ended at 7.03pm

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