

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Wednesday 31 July 2024 at 6pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair);
Councillors Davies, Dhatt, Fitzgerald, E M Giles, Gill,
Rahman and Williams.

Observers: Councillors J Giles and J Singh.

In attendance: Alan Lunt (Executive Director of Place), Alex Thompson (Executive Director of Finance and Transformation), Mike Jones (Monitoring Officer and Assistant Director – Legal and Assurance), Elaine Oxley (Interim Assistant Director – Social Work), Claire Spencer (Head of Finance Business Partnering – Place), Helen Green (Strategic Improvement Manager), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Officer), and Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer).

33/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hinchliffe, Lewis and Trumpeter.

34/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.



35/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 20 March 2024 are approved as a correct record.

36/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business.

37/24 **Election of a Vice-Chair**

It was reported that at its meeting on 21 May 2024, Council had established the membership of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board, excluding to the role of Vice-Chair. As such, the Board was asked to appoint a Vice-Chair for the 2024/25 municipal year from amongst its membership.

Resolved that Councillor E M Giles be appointed as Vice-Chair to the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board for the 2024/25 municipal year.

38/24 **Performance Management Framework – 2023/24 Quarter 4 and Annual Monitoring**

The Board considered the Quarter 4 and Annual monitoring reports for the Corporate Performance Management Framework. Members noted that this would be the last report against the set of measures associated with the previous corporate plan; the next Quarter 1 monitoring report would cover the new Council Plan.

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 success of the Council campaign “School Attendance is Everybody’s Business” as part of the wider transformation of support to schools to improve attendance had contributed to the improvement of performance figures (93.4% Primary and 91%

Secondary). The new campaign 'Miss School Miss Out' would launch this year and would target persistent absence.

The outturn for Educational Attainment CIC – KS4 attainment of English and maths at Grade 4 or above was 32% against a target of 20% (National 2023 20%, West Midlands 2023 20%).

The Healthy Aging App and the Better Mental Health Programme have been shortlisted for the Public Health Award at the LGC Awards.

For Personal Education Plans for Children in Care there was a 97% completion rate (September-December). Sandwell Children in Care were performing half a grade per subject better than All Children in Care Nationally.

The 2023 National Highways and Transportation (NHT) Public Satisfaction Survey concluded that Sandwell were the 3rd best local authority nationally for the condition of its highways. Sandwell was the best performer for dealing with potholes and damaged roads out of all the West Midlands Highways Alliance partners and the West Midlands Combined Authority.

The average number of working days to respond to Councillor casework enquiries had reduced from 10.9 days in Q1 to 7.2 days in Q4.

The Board was informed that officers and teams across the Council had been shortlisted for and/or won multiple national awards.

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 due to pressure from placement demand and costs, and also pressure from transport costs. The Council was working with the CIPFA Advisory Council to look at how to collectively agree MTFs savings with SCT and how the overspend can be managed.

People Live Well and Age Well

Satisfaction of carers with social services (for them and the person they cared for) was below target. The Council was committed to

improving the support for informal carers in Sandwell and the Carers Strategy had been refreshed, co-produced with carers.

Quality Homes in Thriving Neighbourhoods

The percentage of homelessness cases successfully prevented remained below target. This was because of the challenging housing market and the volume of cases that were presenting very late in the process. The housing market was at its most challenging for securing longer term alternative accommodation for clients. The turnover of council properties had seen a 30% reduction over the last 12 months (meaning there were less properties becoming available) and the accessibility and affordability of private rented properties was at its lowest point in years. Further data was requested on the reasons for households presenting as homeless.

The proportion of homes for which all required fire risk assessments had been carried out (Fire Safety Checks) was below target (56.26% against a target of 100%). After an independent review of the data and review of the previous reporting, it was highlighted that data was reported against a plan to recover to 100% over three years (currently year 2 of 3). The measure should report on actual performance of Fire Risk Assessments completed within timescales. This would be corrected moving forward and a plan was in place to bring the service to 100% compliance by March 2025.

One Team One Council

In Q4 an average of 11.35 working days were lost per employee due to sickness, compared to 10.81 working days during the same period last year. The top three causes of sickness were stress, depression and mental health, other, and muscular skeletal problems. Just under 30% of the working days lost due to sickness were short term and 70% long term (4 weeks or more).

The cost of sickness in 2023-24 was £5.602m compared to £4.890m in 2022-23, this was an increase of £712k. The increase was most significant for the Housing, Assistant Chief Executive and Borough Economy directorates.

Members noted that this would form part of the work programme for the Scrutiny Management Board.

Resolved that additional information be provided to the members of the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board on the following topics:-

- (a) further detail on what is being done to work with Sandwell Children's Trust around the projected budget deficit;
- (b) the reasons for Care Leavers in Education, Employment or Training being below target;
- (c) ways in which Children's Services and Education think councillors could help with raising educational attainment and school attendance;
- (d) reasons for households presenting as homeless in Sandwell.

39/24

2023/24 Financial Outturn

The Scrutiny Management Board was informed that the overall outturn position for the General Fund was an underspend of approximately £6.002m. This was an underspend of 1.9% when compared with the Council's net budget of £317.623m. This outturn position excluded variations from budget for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), as these were ringfenced budgets where expenditure should match income without impacting on the General Fund.

Net service expenditure, within the Council's service directorates, had resulted in an underspend of £1.398m following the use of reserves. Variances to budget for Corporate Items and Sources of Funding were represented by an underspend of £4.604m.

This outturn underspend represented an improved position when compared with the Quarter 3 forecast. This was principally due to an improved position relating to Treasury Management payments and receipts as well as an improved position across the Council's directorates largely due to increased vacancy management savings and savings related to supplies and services.

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

- The SEND Transport Transformation Review, which included a diagnostic by an external provider would be subject to further review by both Scrutiny and the Cabinet.

- It was the intention to support Sandwell children remaining in Sandwell in suitable schools close to them that can meet their needs. Further work was required, beyond the SEND Transport Transformation Review, to look at what was required over coming years and see what building adaptations and staff training might be required to help meet that need.
- It was prudent financial planning to maintain reserves, and the Council's reserves remained in line with expectations for general fund reserves.
- Where service areas and directorates did not spend funds in-year, they were not reduced for future years beyond where agreed amendments (including approved savings, planned adjustments for inflation or movements between service areas) had been made.
- The underspend in Borough Economy was attributed to an unexpected rise in income for Highways. Therefore, the underspend was not anticipated to have any impact on service delivery in that directorate.
- Given the expected overspend that was projected mid-year, the fact that the Council had ended the year with an underspend showed sound financial controls were in place. It was vital to protect reserves, especially against a background of other local authorities nationally running out of funds.

Members noted their appreciation of the work put in by officers around implementing and operating financial controls to ensure the Council's effective management of funds.

40/24

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.

41/24

Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme 2024/25

The Scrutiny Management Board considered its work programme priorities for the 2024/25 municipal year. There had been a public call for suggestions and of those, items around the use of resources and work experience placements were selected to be considered in 2024/25.

Resolved that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme for 2024/25 be approved.

42/24

Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 7.34pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk