

**MINUTES OF TOURISM, ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING -
THURSDAY, 2 FEBRUARY 2017**

Present:

Councillor Hunter (in the Chair)

Councillors

Mrs Callow JP
G Coleman

Galley
Matthews

Mitchell
Ryan

Singleton

In Attendance:

Councillor Simon Blackburn

Alan Cavill, Director of Place

Chris Kelly, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser (Scrutiny)

Bernadette Rigby, Blackpool Council

Councillor Mark Smith

Steve Thompson, Director of Resources

Philip Welsh, Blackpool Council

Chris Kelly, Acting Scrutiny Manager

Bernadette Rigby, Democratic Governance Adviser

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 15 DECEMBER 2016

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 15 December 2016 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PUBLIC SPEAKING

The Committee noted that there were no applications from members of the public to speak at the meeting.

4 EXECUTIVE AND CABINET MEMBER DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Executive and Cabinet Member decisions within the portfolios of the Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader of the Council, taken since the last meeting of the Committee.

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Councillor Blackburn, Leader of the Council, responded to questions and concerns from the Committee relating to decision PH78/2016 'Sundry Debt and Business Rates Write Offs'. He provided the Committee with details of the debts that had been written off and advised that whilst companies could be named, individual debtors could not. Mr Thompson, Director of Resources explained to Members that there were very prescribed and robust debt recovery processes in place and it was noted that attempts to recover the debts continued to be made after the write off, but that it was important not to overstate the income owed in the Council's financial accounts.

The Committee discussed business rates collection further and Members were advised that flexible payment options and the recent re-evaluation of business rates should have a positive impact for local Blackpool businesses.

The Committee agreed to note the Executive and Cabinet Member decisions.

5 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the items contained within the Forward Plan, January 2017 – April 2017, that related to the portfolios of the Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader of the Council.

The Committee raised questions in relation to the evaluation of the impact of the South Beach Selective Licensing scheme and plans for regulation of housing in the area after the scheme ended. Councillor Blackburn advised that future decisions would be dependent upon the outcome of the results of the evaluation, but that feedback on the scheme's outcomes received so far had been positive, especially from residents of the area.

The Committee further discussed the plans for once the scheme had ended with Councillor Blackburn and he provided details of potential future options that included establishing a self-regulation scheme that landlords could voluntarily sign up to, which had been successful in other local authorities, notably the 'Home Safe' scheme in Doncaster. It was noted that a benefit of such an option would be that the Selective Licensing scheme, which required Secretary of State approval and could only be in operation in certain defined areas, could then be operated in a different area of the town.

Members raised queries regarding the plans for the City Learning Centre redevelopment. Councillor Smith, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Enterprise and Economic Development, provided the Committee with plans for the redevelopment, advising that there would be a number of shops and a pharmacy at the redeveloped centre.

The Committee raised questions relating to the Housing Plan for an Ageing population. Councillor Blackburn advised that the report would provide details of a number of options to be considered, including sheltered accommodation and 'extra care' accommodation. He added that an aim for any new accommodation would be for it to be easily adapted to be suitable for people at all stages of life.

The Committee agreed to note the Forward Plan items.

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6 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING AS AT MONTH 8 2016/2017

The Committee considered the financial performance monitoring report, which set out the summary revenue budget position for the Council and its individual directorates for month 8, the period April 2016 – November 2016, together with an outlook for the remainder of the year. The report was complemented with an assessment of progress to date against the latest capital programme.

Members raised concerns regarding the overspend in Children's Services. Councillor Blackburn reported that the main reason for the overspend was due to the high costs of placements for the significantly high number of Looked After Children. He provided the Committee with an update of the recruitment process of a new Director of Children's Services, noting that a key interview focus for candidates had been their plans to reduce the number of Looked After Children, as well as reduce the costs of placements.

The Committee discussed the unsustainability of the high cost of placements and it was considered that a significant proportion of the costs of placements was for security rather than for therapeutic work to address the issues of the child and family. Councillor Blackburn advised the Committee of the plans to address the issues of the high costs of placements, providing Members with details of the a short term 'crash pad' facility, which was hoped would help to avoid the commencement of court proceedings and expensive care placements for some cases.

The Committee also raised questions relating to the overspend of £250,000 by the illuminations service. Mr Cavill, Director of Place advised that the overspend had been as a result of the Lightpool project not achieving its targeted level of income, as well as other illuminations projects costing more than had been initially expected. Mr Cavill reported that it was hoped the overspend figure would be reduced before the end of the financial year as there still remained some income sources yet to be accounted.

Members raised questions relating to the sustainability of the Lightpool project and Mr Cavill advised that the project would be sustainable in the longer term and that some of the costs had been initial start-up costs that would not be recurring costs for future years. He explained that the Lightpool village had not been as successful as had initially been hoped due to the difficulty of selling food, drink and merchandise concessions, as a result of there being many vendors already established for making those type of sales in Blackpool. The Committee discussed the difficulty in trying to ensure visitors bought official merchandise and Councillor Blackburn explained that unfortunately there appeared to be very little that could be done to prevent sales from non-official vendors, especially if the vendor had a pedlar's certificate.

The Committee raised questions relating to the overspend of £100,000 in print services. Councillor Blackburn advised that due to technological advances there was a reduced demand for a centralised print services unit and whilst the service was not losing money, it was not currently meeting its income target. As a result, he noted that the service would remain under review.

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The Committee noted the deterioration of the working balances and questioned whether the Leader of the Council was confident that there were adequate reserves. Councillor Blackburn advised that it was important to ensure reserves were at a healthy level as in the current financial climate it had to be accepted that there were higher levels of risk for the local authority. He explained that the overall financial position if not for the overspend in Children's Services would be on target and it was noted that there were still significant earmarked reserves and four months of the financial year remaining to improve the level of working balances to at least £3 million.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

Background papers: None.

7 TOURISM PERFORMANCE REPORT

Mr Welsh, Head of Visitor Economy presented a report on tourism performance between April and December 2016 using various indicators including number of visits, footfall, tram usage, satisfaction ratings and events.

Members noted the car parking data and queried the usage of the parking spaces for coaches. Mr Welsh advised that growth was still being seen in terms of coach visits and that at times of particularly high demand, for example during the illuminations, there was not currently sufficient spaces for all coaches. Mr Welsh explained that discussions were ongoing with coach companies to ensure that facilities were fit for purpose and were capable of meeting peaks in demand

The Committee considered the footfall in the town centre and it was questioned how the level could be improved. Councillor Blackburn advised that some of the retail offer in the town centre was not sufficient to attract higher numbers of people into the town centre and it was considered that there was a requirement for more shops with a higher end retail quality. It was noted that the Hounds Hill development did attract visitors but often those visitors did not visit other areas of the town centre. Councillor Blackburn advised that the Conference Centre development would play a central role in helping to attract higher quality shops into the town centre and to increase the level of footfall.

Members noted national reports relating to the possible closure of a number of Marks and Spencer's stores and raised concerns that the future of the Blackpool store, which would have a further adverse impact on the retail offer in the town. Councillor Blackburn reported that he had not heard any suggestions that it would be one of the stores that would be closing and noted that most stores thought to be due for closure were located in towns where there was an additional store located on a nearby retail site. Members considered that the signage for the collection point at the store was poor and that it could be improved to help raise the numbers of shoppers. Councillor Blackburn noted that the issue would be raised with representatives of the store.

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The Committee discussed the concentration of shops in and around the Hounds Hill Shopping Centre and the impact that it had on shops in other parts of the town centre, raising questions on what could be done to assist local, independent shops. Mr Welsh advised that more work needed to be undertaken to try to provide reasons to visit different areas of the town centre and to develop routes through the town centre for visitors.

Members raised questions relating to the Lightpool project and Mr Cavill advised that work was being undertaken with the Arts Council England in order to run the festival part of the programme again during the illuminations. He explained that a lot of lessons had been learned from last time and there would now be sufficient time to market the event properly, which there had not been last time. Mr Welsh added that the Lightpool Festival had positively contributed to changing perceptions about Blackpool, which was an on-going process. He noted that feedback and public relations coverage had been very positive and the festival provided a new reason for visitors to come to Blackpool.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

Background papers: None.

8 SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

The Committee considered its Workplan for the remainder of the current Municipal Year. The Chairman explained that it was a flexible, working document and he was open to suggestion from members for Workplan items at any time.

The Committee also considered the monitoring recommendations table which had been included, enabling Members to monitor progress on the implementation of scrutiny recommendations.

The Committee agreed to note the Workplan and scrutiny recommendations table.

Background papers: None.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee agreed to note the date of the next meeting as Thursday, 16 March 2017.

The Committee further agreed to note that the date of the Budget Consultation Meeting with Non-Domestic Ratepayers and Trades Union representatives as Friday, 10 February 2017.

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Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.30 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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