

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING - THURSDAY, 11 MARCH 2021

Present:

Councillor Mrs Callow JP (in the Chair)

Councillors

Burdess
Galley

Hugo
Mitchell

Mrs Scott
Stansfield

Walsh

In Attendance:

John Blackledge, Director of Community and Environmental Services

Steve Thompson, Director of Resources

Lisa Arnold, Leisure Services Manager

Annie Heslop, Green and Blue Manager

Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 15 OCTOBER 2020

It was agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 15 October 2020 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING

Mr Steve Thompson, Director of Resources advised that there had been many changes since the Month 9 financial performance monitoring report had been published and that the Month 10 report to the Executive was currently being finalised and provided a very different picture. He advised that in December 2020, the Council had received £120 million of Covid grants from the Government, which had increased considerably to £160 million by the end of January 2021, due to the further national lockdown.

It was reported that the largest Covid related costs to the Council had been experienced by Adult Social Services and that in Month 10, a more realistic picture of spending had been visible with an underspend of £1.9 million recorded in the directorate due to additional Government funding received. In comparison, Children's Services had recorded an overspend of £1.7 million. In relation to non-Covid related costs the largest overspend was within the Growth and Prosperity Team as a number of income producing schemes had been delayed and carried forward to 2021/2022 with the overspend being met from reserves in the current financial year.

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In respect of the Council's wholly owned companies, Mr Thompson advised that it had previously been expected that the deficit range for the companies would be between £12 million and £18 million, however, these figures had been revised down twice to between £4.6 and £4.8 million due to more certainty in the ongoing Government financial support to be provided to the companies.

Mr Thompson reported that in relation to Covid the total net costs to the Council had been calculated as £2.9 million and that income collection would be key in maintaining this figure. It was noted that Council Tax collection to the end of December 2020 had been over 70%, which was similar to the equivalent figure 12 months prior. In relation to business rate collection, it was noted that this was more difficult to assess with business rate relief funding received directly from Government to cover a large proportion of business rates to be collected in the town. Not including business rates received from other public sector organisations, the total business rates left to be collected was approximately £10/11 million and in Month 9, 69.2% of this total had been collected.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board thanked the Director of Resources and his team for their work over the previous 12 months and credited all with the strong position the Council was in despite the pandemic.

The Board requested further information regarding the overspend in the Growth and Prosperity Team and queried any lessons that could be learned. Mr Thompson reported that many of the large schemes being worked on by the Team had been delayed until the 2021/2022 financial year and that the overspend had been identified as a non-Covid related cost as the Council could not claim Government financial support for the schemes. It was expected that the income from the schemes would be received in the following financial year.

In response to a further question, Mr Thompson advised that focus had been placed on recovery and ensuring that there was suitable capacity in services. He noted that channel shift had emerged almost by default which had created capacity and allowed services to refocus.

Members queried how quickly it was expected that the Council's wholly owned companies could recover and how fully. In response, Mr Thompson reported that the pandemic had had very little impact on some of the Council's companies such as Blackpool Waste Services Limited and Blackpool Coastal Housing, however, the impact on Blackpool Entertainment Company Limited, Blackpool Operating Company Limited (BOCL) and Blackpool Transport Services Limited (BTS) had been more significant. In respect of BTS, Mr Thompson advised that bus services had been maintained throughout the pandemic with a much lower patronage and that a number of grants had been received from the Department of Transport in order to support the company. In relation to BOCL, Mr Thompson advised that there were plans to reopen the Sandcastle Waterpark from April 2021. It was expected that recovery would depend on a number of factors including success of the vaccine, the number of people choosing to holiday in the UK and the easing of lockdown restrictions.

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Concern was raised regarding the collection of Council Tax via Direct Debit and a potential issue that had been identified. Mr Thompson advised that use of Direct Debits was encouraged and that he would investigate the issue raised further and report back following the meeting.

4 GREEN AND BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT

Ms Lisa Arnold, Leisure Services Manager presented the report to the Board and provided an overview of the key achievements and highlights in relation to each of the four objectives in the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy. She advised that it had been a challenging 12 months and that despite this the progress made against the actions had been good.

The Board referred to the impact of the pandemic on the 'friends of parks' groups and queried whether anything could be done to support those struggling groups and potentially consider a Parks Foundation Model. In response, Ms Arnold advised that the impact on 'friends' groups had been recognised, but also highlighted that many more people than ever were utilising local parks and green spaces due to the pandemic resulting in a wider range of people to engage with. It was considered that the increased use would continue for at least the current year and the Council would be working alongside groups to identify challenges and opportunities.

Members discussed the upcoming planting of 4,500 trees and highlighted a point raised during the scrutiny input into the development of the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy that trees must be planted at the heart of communities. Ms Arnold reported that trees were being planted in urban areas and cited that 3,000 trees were scheduled to be planted in the Grange estate in the autumn as an example. She added that the Tree Strategy was currently being finalised and would be submitted back to the Board in due course for further consideration.

The action regarding the 'leadership of the Green and Blue Infrastructure agenda' was referred to and it was queried how and when it would be considered as completed. In response, Ms Arnold suggested that a pledge could be developed that all Elected Members could sign up to to somewhat fulfil the action.

In response to questions raised regarding the lake at Stanley Park and the green bus shelters, Ms Arnold advised that the result of a funding application for work on the lake was awaited and that it was the Council's ambition to dredge and deepen the lake to allow it to be used for more activities. Ms Annie Heslop, Green and Blue Manager added that a green bus shelter had been trialled and it was hoped that more could be introduced. She noted that the roof and walls of the shelters could be made of edible plants or flowers and that initial talks with Blackpool Transport Services Limited had been held. Members suggested that a toolkit might be put together for Councillors should they wish to introduce such bus shelters in their ward.

Members also commented on the junior ranger information and it was noted that groups and individuals could request the packs from the Parks Team.

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5 SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORKPLANS

The Chair of the Scrutiny Leadership Board invited the Chairs of the Audit Committee and the three scrutiny committees to provide an update on the recent work of their Committees.

The Chair of the Audit Committee advised that CCTV and Channel Shift had both been areas identified through the Audit Committee that had been referred on for scrutiny review and that it was his intension that the Committee continued its work to strengthen the relationship and increase the number of recommendations made to the scrutiny committees.

The Chair of the Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee reported that a wide range of issues had been considered over the previous few months. She highlighted topics including mental health, infant mortality and the response of services to Covid and noted that the strength of collaboration in Blackpool had been identified as a key strength. She also advised that through work on Blackpool Fulfilling Lives and the ongoing Drug Related Deaths Scrutiny Review, the importance of lived experience had become apparent.

The Chair of the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee referred to the draft workplan of the Committee and the aim to ensure all topics were fully considered. She highlighted the ongoing review of 'A Better Start' and a training session led by Robert Arrowsmith on 'babies born into care' which would be rolled out to all Members. The Committee was also feeding into the development of the Literacy Strategy and seeking assurance that the succession plans in place for the replacement of key officers were robust.

The Chairman of the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee advised that Members had been focussing on topics including town centre regeneration, climate emergency and arts and culture recovery. He noted that a public speaker had attended the previous meeting of the Committee to raise concerns regarding public rights of way and that a report on the topic would be received to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration. He noted that the Housing and Homelessness Scrutiny Review final report would be considered by the Executive at its next meeting and that future areas for review would include the Illuminations and CCTV.

The publicity of meetings was referred to and Ms Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager advised that all scrutiny meetings would now be advertised using the Council's social media outlets and that a link to the Council's Youtube site would be included for ease should members of the public wish to view the meetings.

The Scrutiny Leadership Board noted the updates provided.

6 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The date and time of the next informal meeting of the Board was noted as 28 April 2021, commencing at 6pm.

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Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.08 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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