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MINUTES OF SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING - THURSDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER
2021

Present:

Councillor Mrs Callow JP (in the Chair)

Councillors

Burdess

Hutton

Mrs Scott

Walsh

In Attendance:

Mark Golden, Head of Accountancy

Kate Aldridge, Head of Corporate Delivery and Performance

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 13 JULY 2021

The minutes of the last meeting held on 13 July 2021 were agreed as a true and correct record.

3 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING AS AT MONTH 3

Mr Mark Golden, Head of Accountancy presented the financial performance monitoring as at month 3 to the Board. He highlighted that after a successful year with regards to financial performance in 2020/2021 the forecast as at month 3 suggested that the Council was expecting a challenging year ahead with an overspend of £6.6 million predicted, which would eradicate the working balances brought forward from the previous financial year. He noted that a significant proportion of this related to Covid at £3.5m. Added to the £3.2m from 2020/2021, there were now total Covid costs of £6.7m not reclaimable or covered by government grants and so lobbying needed to continue in this regard.

In relation to Children's Services, an overspend of £3.6 million had been forecast and whilst looked after children numbers were currently below 600 for the first time since September 2019, unit costs were increasing and had risen by 25%. This was representative of the market and a national issue. A medium term financial plan for Children's Social Care had been approved last summer and whilst savings were not happening as fast as planned there was a year on year reduction in costs forecast. In 2020/2021 children's social care spend was £54.3m and at month 3 in the current financial year the service was forecast to spend £52.6m, so a reduction of £1.7m.

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It was noted that whilst Adult Services was only forecasting an overspend of approximately £300k there were underlying pressures emerging that were currently covered by Covid funding, however, it was expected that the funding would not continue into the new financial year. The service was currently providing more than 2,000 hours a week in homecare than before the pandemic. Earlier hospital discharges were resulting in more clients but also because of early release the patients tended to require more support. Funding had been received in 2021/2022 from the Clinical Commissioning Group but there was no confirmed grant support for 2022/2023. The Board was informed that partnership working with health colleagues in advance of the 2022/2023 budget was planned and Members noted that the overspend within Adults Services was an area of concern and a high risk area due to different behaviours post Covid. It was an emerging demand that required close scrutiny.

Mr Golden noted that the financial performance of the Council's wholly owned companies had been better than expected due to better trading and government support, particularly with the transport company. At month 0, losses had been forecast at £5.6m but at month 3 this had reduced to £4.5m and the trajectory was improving. He also reported that Council Tax and Council Tax Reduction Scheme income collection rates were slightly higher compared to last year. It was reported that the government had recently announced that a three year spending review would be held on 27 October 2021 alongside the Autumn Budget and that this would aid financial planning, an improvement on the annual settlements of the previous two years.

Members specifically referenced the overspend caused by the extension of the illuminations and queried whether it was a priority. In response, Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council advised that the additional funding had been agreed as an investment into the town in order to extend the season and provide additional customers for businesses across the town for longer. Further concern was raised that leaving the illuminations fixtures up year round also increased costs and might potentially impact their maintenance and longevity. Mr Golden agreed to look into the maintenance programme of the illuminations to ensure that it was cost effective.

4 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT - Q1 2021/2022

Ms Kate Aldridge, Head of Corporate Delivery and Performance provided an overview of the quarter 1 Council Plan performance and noted that there were some gaps in data due to it not being available at the time of writing the report.

In reference to Priority 1: The Economy - Maximising growth and opportunity across Blackpool, Ms Aldridge noted that car park usage indicated a positive tourist season and that the traffic on some key roads had been exceptional. It was meaningless to compare figures to 2020 due to the pandemic but when looking at 2019 there had still been a significant increase in footfall in the town.

In relation to employment, it was noted that there had been difficulties in enabling people to access work due to the pandemic due to the reduce ability to meet with people in person. There had also been a number of retailers leave the town centre resulting in a high vacancy rate of town centre shops.

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The Board went on to consider the indicators relating to Priority 2: Communities: Creating Strong Communities and Increasing Resilience and noted that there had been a reduction in the number of looked after children, whilst recognising again the increased costs associated with providing care, and demand remained high. The high level of demand was reflected in Adult Services and in mental health services.

Ms Aldridge reported that the education data was not yet available, however, the number of young people not in education, employment or training was concerning.

In reference to Priority 3: Organisational Resilience it was reported that it was difficult to compare current levels of sickness and absence with previous years due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. The monitoring of attendance at mandatory training had been put on hold, however, it was noted to be at over 90%. There also remained high satisfaction levels recorded with Customer First.

In response to questions, it was noted that 174 looked after children resided outside of the Blackpool area. This could be due to many reasons including a need to be removed from the town, family members located outside of the area or the right type of care only being available outside of the borough. It was agreed that additional information could be provided on this subject matter following the meeting. Ms Aldridge added that costs to the authority of care were regularly benchmarked with other local authorities and there was a north-west purchasing system in place in order to negotiate with providers.

Members discussed footfall in the town centre and the number of vacant premises in more detail. Concern was raised that vacant shops often appeared unkempt in key areas of the town, which was impacting the image of Blackpool and it was queried what action was being taken in order to attract new business to the town.

Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager advised the Leadership Board that the Tourism, Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee was undertaking a review of economic development which would include discussion on the town deal. An invite would be extended to members of the Leadership Board to attend and contribute to discussions.

In response to a further question, Ms Aldridge advised that she did not have the figures of how many people living in the FY postcode area had been appointed to the new jobs at the enterprise zone but that the information was recorded and she would provide it following the meeting.

It was further requested that the data on children and young people's mental health services be provided as soon as it was available.

The Leadership Board agreed:

1. That further details pertaining to looked after children placed out of the borough be provided following the meeting.
2. That Kate Aldridge provide the information requested relating to the new jobs at the enterprise zone.
3. To receive the data on children and young people's mental health services as soon as possible.

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5 SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD WORKPLAN

The Scrutiny Leadership Board agreed its workplan for the remainder of the 2021/2022 Municipal Year.

6 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The date and time of the next formal meeting of the Scrutiny Leadership Board was noted as Wednesday 2 March 2022, commencing at 6.00pm.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 6.42 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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