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MINUTES OF SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2022

Present:

Councillor Mrs Callow JP (in the Chair)

Councillors

Burdess	Mrs Scott	Walsh
Critchley	Stansfield	

In Attendance:

Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council

Councillor Jane Hugo, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment

Mr Steve Thompson, Director of Resources

Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager

Ms Rochelle Morris, Research and Intelligence Officer

Ms Lisa Arnold, Strategic Head of Service – Community and Wellbeing

Ms Annie Heslop, Green Infrastructure Development Manager

Mr Paul Hodgson, Parks Development Manager

Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 13 JULY 2022

The Committee agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 13 July 2022 be signed by the Chair as a true and correct record.

3 GREEN AND BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT

Ms Anne Heslop, Green Infrastructure Development Manager provided an update on the work undertaken around the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy (GBI) since it was last discussed by the Committee. She noted that an internal audit had recently been carried out which had returned no high risk recommendations. She highlighted key areas of work as ensuring the Town Centre Strategy was developed with the GBI in mind, developing a management plan for Marton Mere and gaining approval for the Greening Supplementary Planning Document.

The Committee discussed tree planting and in particular Christmas tree planting in detail. In response to questions it was noted that the planting period was between October and March and that a tree planting plan was in place. Lessons had been learned from the planting of Christmas trees last year and it was noted that many varieties were not hardy enough to live for a year in exposed places in Blackpool. Therefore following Christmas, it was proposed that trees would be moved to a retirement place where they could thrive.

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A new Christmas tree could then be ordered and planted the following year.

Members went on to discuss the development of the new parks website and requested that a demonstration be provided once it was completed. In addition a query was raised regarding whether an audit of all parks had been undertaken. In response, it was noted that such an audit had been undertaken with all information published on the Council's website. Each park had been graded to demonstrate how work would be prioritised and work had commenced on park development plans by empowering 'Friends of' groups to shape long term plans.

4 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE UPDATE

Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager provided an overview of the report which detailed the response to issues raised in relation to the Council Plan end of year performance report which was considered by the Committee in July 2022. He highlighted the research carried out into town centre vacancies and noted that the core retail area was identified as having a number of sites that had businesses of a temporary nature before becoming vacant in comparison to out of town areas.

The Committee noted the level of vacancies in the town centre and queried whether any more could be done in order to fill these premises. In response, Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council advised that work was ongoing to encourage businesses into the town, however, there were limited resources. It was noted that a Town Centre Strategy was currently in development that would set out the future vision for the town centre.

In response to further questions, it was agreed that Nick Gerard, Growth and Prosperity Programme Director be contacted for further detail regarding the production of the strategy, the level of engagement with current businesses in the town centre and how they were being engaged specifically in the development of the Strategy.

Further comments were made regarding the impact of the national press on visits to the town, ensuring the town centre was a nice place to visit by preventing anti-social behaviour and encouraging people into the town to spend.

5 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE MONITORING AS AT MONTH 4 2022/23 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2023/24 - 2026/27

Mr Steve Thompson, Director of Resources provided an overview of the financial monitoring as at month 4 2022/23 and the Medium Term Financial Plan noting that there had never been more uncertainty in the system. He highlighted that the total adverse full-year forecast budget variance as at the end of month 4 of 2022/23 was £11.9 million. Of that overspend, £4.4 million was attributed to Children's Social Care, however, the current management team of the service was having a positive impact and reducing the level of overspend through work to safely reduce the number of children in care.

Other significant areas of overspend included Adult Social Care, however, Mr Thompson advised that he expected the service to return to a break even position by year end.

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The overall financial performance had been notably impacted by predicted pay awards including an increase to the living wage, inflation and increasing energy and fuel costs. Interest rates had also had an impact and further pressures were expected as short term lending deals came to an end.

Mr Thompson emphasised the level of uncertainty, noting that the Consumer Price Index was currently at 9.9% and the Retail Price Index at 12.3% with the next announcement due within the following seven days. He also noted how cost increases were having an impact on all aspects of the Council's budget such as external auditor fees which were to increase by approximately 150%. All areas considered it was predicted that the budget gap for the following financial year would be significant.

The Board thanked Mr Thompson and his team for their work and queried how the increases in interest rates were impacting upon the Council's loan fund. In response, Mr Thompson advised that some loans were fixed at the time the loan was drawn whilst others were on a variable rate, but all were covered by asset security. The pooled rate utilised by the Council was slower to react to increases and decreases in interest rate and was currently at 3.5%, however, this would increase as short term borrowing came to an end and new deals were entered into. In response to a further question, Mr Thompson reported that every loan had its own risk register and the Business Loan Group met regularly to monitor affordability of loan repayments and security of debt.

6 SCRUTINY WORKPLANS

The Board considered its workplan and the workplans of the Scrutiny Committees. Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager advised that a referral had been made from the Audit Committee to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee on community engagement with schools which that Committee would be requested to consider for inclusion in its workplan.

The Board noted the workplans.

7 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The date and time of the next meeting was agreed as Tuesday 7 March 2023.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 6.59 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:
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