

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD MEETING - WEDNESDAY, 13 JULY 2022

Present:

Councillor Mrs Callow JP (in the Chair)

Councillors

Burdess	Galley	Stansfield
Critchley	Mrs Scott	Walsh

In Attendance:

Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager

Ms Louise Jones, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services

Mr David Fish, Finance Manager, Capital and Regeneration Finance

Mr Steve Maher, Finance Manager, Strategic and Technical Finance

Mrs Sharon Davis, Scrutiny Manager

Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council

Councillor Neal Brookes, Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Public Safety, Highways and Transport

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING HELD ON 2 MARCH 2022

The Scrutiny Leadership Board agreed that the minutes of the last meeting held on 2 March 2022 be signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

3 PROVISIONAL OUTTURN 2021/2022

Mr Steve Maher, Finance Manager, Strategic and Technical Finance and Mr David Fish, Finance Manager, Capital and Regeneration Finance presented the provisional outturn for 2021/2022 to the Board and highlighted that it had been one of the most challenging years for the Council financially. It was reported that the overall position for the year had been a small overspend but that considering the challenges this was an achievement and the overspend represented a very small percentage of the Council's overall budget.

It was reported that the overspend of Children's Services was considerable at £4.4 million despite an additional £8.2 million included in the budget for the service. This was largely due to the cost of placements which continued to escalate. It was noted that a refresh of the Medium Term Financial Strategy for Children's Services would be undertaken to try to identify a way forward. The Board raised concern that the overspend in Children's Services was an ongoing issue that had not yet been successfully addressed and it was noted that this was something that was regularly considered by the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee.

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Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council noted that the management team within Children's Services was now complete and positive feedback continued to be received from Ofsted. She noted that large families was a particular issue unique to Blackpool and that the budget was kept in sharp focus through regular monitoring meetings. She advised that improvements were on the horizon but that some aspects were out of the Council's control.

The Board noted that there had also been an overspend in Children's legal services and queried what this related to. It was noted that more cases had been required to go to court than expected and that it was a consequence of the high levels of work by Children's Social Care and was all related to the same key challenges within the service.

Mr Maher highlighted a number of other key areas of overspend and underspend including a £300k overspend within the Governance and Partnerships Directorate which had been offset by a staffing underspend in resources.

It was reported that the Council had maintained working balances of £6.1 million and that no overspends or underspends were being rolled forward in 2022/2023 other than the underspend in ward funding. In response to a question, it was reported that the new financial year was expected to be challenging enough without services also needing to account for previous areas of overspend with significant financial challenges expected to include inflation, increasing utilities costs, staff pay award alongside the continuing challenges to Children's Services and growing demand and pressures in Adult Social Care.

With regards to the capital outturn position, Mr Fish advised that large investment had continued into a number of regeneration schemes with many funded by prudential borrowing alongside significant levels of grant funding.

In response to a question, Mr Maher noted that there was a working group that met regularly to refresh and revisit the Medium Term Financial Strategy. It was noted that there were significant and ongoing financial concerns which made predicting the future financial position particularly difficult. In relation to loans, Mr Fish advised that although the interest rate was expected to rise, it was expected that there would be time to consider rates when granting new loans. In addition, Mr Maher reported that the Treasury Management Panel reviewed the Council's portfolio regularly and that all loans were considered individually to determine the best option with regards to term and rate.

In relation to the Town Centre Deal, it was noted that some funds had already been allocated and spent. A specific query was raised in relation to the spend related to Topping Street which had been recorded as zero and Mr Fish agreed to investigate this issue and report back in writing following the meeting.

To conclude, Members discussed the spending of ward funding in detail and noted the length of time of the process and what could be done to encourage Councillors to spend their allocation. It was considered that it would be useful to know how much of the £71k underspend had already been committed to projects and just not drawn down.

The Board agreed:

1. That Mr Fish report back on the spend on Topping Street in writing following the meeting.

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2. To find out whether any of the £71k underspend in ward funding had been already committed to projects.

4 COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE

Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager advised that following comments made at the last meeting of the Scrutiny Leadership Board, resident satisfaction with the town centre would be included in the resident survey. In relation to the collection of data round delayed transfers of care, it was noted that the data was no longer collected nationally and it was therefore difficult to acquire data on this indicator.

It was noted that the adult social care satisfaction survey had been recently carried out and the results of overall satisfaction had declined from 82.2% to 76.2% at the end of 2021. At this time there was no national comparator data available.

Members raised concern that Blackpool had the highest number of out of work benefit claimants and queried what could be done to encourage those able to work back into work. In addition to this it was noted that the number of job opportunities appeared to be high with many unfilled vacancies. In response, Mr Butterfield advised that he would explore this issue further with the appropriate officers and report back to Members.

In response to a question, Mr Butterfield advised that the resident survey would be carried out over the summer with the results expected soon after when the outcomes could be reported to the Board.

In relation to the town centre, Members noted the importance of quality retail providers and noted the developing Town Centre Strategy. Councillor Lynn Williams, Leader of the Council advised that town centre shopping habits had changed prior to the pandemic and that leisure services tended to draw people into the town centre such as a good restaurant offer. Members further requested that a detailed report on the number of empty retail premises including whether they were of a temporary nature and their quality be included within the next performance report.

Members also queried the number of children waiting longer than 20 weeks for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) noting that the number was very high and requested further detail of the reasons for the delays. Mr Butterfield agreed to seek a response to this question in writing following the meeting.

The Scrutiny Leadership Board agreed:

1. That Mr Butterfield explore the issue of unemployment and vacancies with the relevant officers and report back in writing following the meeting.
2. To receive the outcomes of the resident survey in due course.
3. To include a detailed report on the number of empty retail premises including whether they were of a temporary nature and their quality be included within the next performance report.
4. That Mr Butterfield explore the reasons for the delays for Education, Health and Care Plans and report back to the Board in writing following the meeting.

5 FINANCIAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

Mr Scott Butterfield, Strategy, Policy and Research Manager and Ms Louise Jones, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services presented the draft Financial Inclusion Strategy to the Board and outlined the process to date utilised in developing the Strategy. A public consultation had been undertaken with input also sought from partners across the town.

Key comments raised on the draft Strategy by the Scrutiny Leadership Board were as follows:

- That it did not include reference to low paid single workers who were unlikely to qualify for any additional help or benefits and what could be done to support this cohort.
- The importance of digital inclusion for all residents and ensuring a wide range of publicity was utilised.
- The extra pressure placed on private tenants required to purchase electric cards off landlords or from local shops and those with coin-operated meters which could often have a mark-up making prices even higher.
- The importance of education and ensuring that Blackpool residents could upskill themselves. It was considered that the value of education should be promoted through the Strategy. This should also include financial education.
- Concern was also expressed regarding the risks attached to the informal economy, for example, pyramid schemes and sales on ebay and it was considered that the Strategy should include reference to this in addition to information on lower risk generation of wealth and the opportunities available.

The Board considered that the Strategy was of importance and noted the current pressures related to the cost of living. Councillor Neal Brookes, Cabinet Member for Enforcement, Public Safety, Highways and Transport noted that the Strategy was one of a number of tools designed to build financial resilience. He advised that the draft strategy had been presented to the Scrutiny Leadership Board for comments and these would be fed into the development of the strategy as appropriate.

6 CHANNEL SHIFT SCRUTINY REVIEW FINAL REPORT

Councillor Paul Galley, Chair of the Channel Shift Scrutiny Review presented the final report of the panel to the Board. The importance of involving residents in decisions taken and inclusion was highlighted. The important contribution from officers and Members to the review was noted with thanks given for the time and effort of all of those involved.

The Scrutiny Leadership Board approved the report for consideration by the Executive.

7 SCRUTINY WORKPLANS

The Scrutiny Leadership Board considered its workplan and the recently updated workplans of the Scrutiny Committees with the Chairs of each Committee invited to provide an update. It was noted that the reviews into Temporary Holiday Accommodation and the mental health of young men aged 16-25 years old had commenced.

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8 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The Scrutiny Leadership Board agreed the date and time of the next meeting as Wednesday 12 October 2022, commencing at 6pm.

Chairman

(The meeting ended at 7.51 pm)

Any queries regarding these minutes, please contact:

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