

POLICY AND CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11th October 2021.

Present- Councillor Harling, in the Chair, Councillors Bateson, Liddle, Floyd, Hussain, S, and Rawat.

Also Present- Councillor Mohammed Khan, Leader of the Council.
Councillor McGurk, Executive Member, Resources and Governance.
Denise Park, Chief Executive.
Dean Langton, Director of Finance.
Paul Conlon, Democratic Services.

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Chair welcomed those present to the meeting.

2. Minutes of the Meeting held on 26th July 2021.

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th July 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the chair. Attention was drawn to the item relating to the review of the call-in process and the resolution of the Committee that a politically balanced task group be established to look at the issue. Members were conscious that the lack of opposition members on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Standards Committee meant that this was not possible.

RESOLVED- 1. That the minutes of the meeting held on 26th July 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the chair subject to the inclusion of apologies for absence from Councillor Connor.

3. Declaration of interests

There were no declarations of interest made at the Committee.

4. Progress on Corporate Performance.

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive attended the meeting and updated the Committee on progress on the Council's corporate aims and objectives as agreed by the Policy Council at its meeting in December 2020. The Committee were informed that the Executive Board would continue to monitor the performance against targets and these would be reviewed and refreshed at the Policy Council in December.

RESOLVED- 1. That the progress on Corporate Performance as reported to the Executive Board and updated by the Leader be noted.

2. That the Committee revisit Corporate Performance on corporate objectives early in the next municipal year.

5. Revenue and Capital Budget 2021/22 and Covid.

The Committee received a presentation and report on the progress on the Councils revenue and capital expenditure and the effects of COVID on these. Members were aware of the grave concerns expressed earlier in the pandemic with regard to the significant increase in costs and losses of income that the Council was incurring in responding to the pandemic, i.e. through the first national lockdown, then coming out of the restrictions in June only to have further restrictions imposed in July. Given the lack of government funding at the time, it had been very apparent that unless further resources were forthcoming, the Council would not be able to contain these costs and losses within the existing budget for 2020/21, and due to the low level of reserves held, it was becoming more and more likely that the Director of Finance, as the Section 151 Officer, would need to issue a Section 114 notice, which would effectively declare that the Council would not be able to balance its budget for the year, and in essence would be insolvent. Further funding had been provided and the risk of issuing a Section 114 subsided as we closed the 2020/21 financial year. Following the final stage of easing COVID restrictions on 19th July 2021, we were now moving into the recovery stage of our pandemic work but there were still significant financial uncertainties that the Council faces going forward.

As reported to Finance Council our Medium Term Financial Strategy would normally extend for a period of 3 years beyond the end of the budget year, however given that the Government only provided a 1 year settlement, and had still not shared proposals for their intended approach for calculating any future local government finance settlements, the future funding arrangements beyond 2021/22 were impossible to plan for with any certainty. Therefore, in preparing the MTFs, the council had focused on the financial year 2021/22 and this would be revisited and updated as more clarity on our future funding is provided by Government over the coming months.

A commitment to implement a new Business Rates Retention model had been given for several years and at the Spending Review in September 2019 the Government confirmed that it would aim to implement a 75% BRR model in 2021/22 to provide further time to work with the sector on options for delivering the review of relative needs and resources, and in reforming and improving the business rates retention system, including addressing such issues as backdated appeals on local authority income. Due to the impact of Covid-19, this target date had slipped again and the council were still unsure as to what the model will look like, how it would operate and from what date it will be effective.

With regard to economic activity and the potential ongoing impact on our sales, fees and charges the government's own data indicates activity would not return to pre-Covid-19 levels until 2023. The impact of the pandemic led to a 10% fall in economic output over 2020 which was only expected to recover by 4% this year and 7% in 2022/23. The government had extended their Sales, Fees and Charges compensation scheme but only until the end of June 2021.

The Committee were informed that given the continuing prevalence of Covid-19, there remained significant challenges for businesses, residents and the Council. Despite that, the funding and other support that has been made available to deal with the impact of the Pandemic is gradually being withdrawn and on the basis of current plans, there is unlikely to be any funding support available from April 2023.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, ended on 30 September 2021. Data indicated that just over 5 million employees were on furlough leave as of January 2021, and approximately just under 2 million employees remained on furlough leave as of July 2021. The scheme was

intended to save jobs and livelihoods during the pandemic and allow employers enough time to financially bounce back and bring those employees back to work and pay wages in full. The impact of the closure of the scheme on the Borough's businesses will be tracked over the coming months

The Test and Trace Isolation Support Scheme which provides £500 payments to those residents on low income/benefits who are directed to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace due to having had a positive Covid test result or who have been in close contact with a positive Covid case, has now been extended until March 2022.

In addition, the Government has just announced £500m to support vulnerable households across the country with essentials over the coming months. Families will also continue to benefit from the energy price cap, recent rise in Local Housing Allowance and increases in the National Living Wage. The full details of the scheme and the allocation for Blackburn with Darwen BC are still to be announced.

In the initial response to the Covid-19 crisis in the March 2020 Budget, the Chancellor announced a temporary one-year uplift in entitlements to Universal Credit (UC) and Working Tax Credit (WTC), of £20 per week. In the following Budget – March 2021 – the UC increase was extended for another six months, and claimants of WTC were paid a one-off equivalent amount (£500). The UC expansion has expired at the end of September, alongside the Government's furlough scheme

The £20 uplift represented a significant share in entitlements for many of our residents – in particular for those who are single without children, are not liable for rent, or are not judged to have a work limiting disability. For many of these people UC is their only source of income

The Council must account to Department Housing Communities and Local Government for the additional expenditure and income losses incurred as a result of Covid-19 each month.

At this relatively early stage in the financial year i.e. budget monitoring completed until the end of August and given the fact that the final stage of easing COVID restrictions did not take place until 19th July it was difficult to predict the full year cost of pressures that would arise. These included Adult and Children's Social Care demand pressures as we continue through the recovery stage of the pandemic. Given the uncertainties seen throughout the pandemic which still continue, the Executive Board on 10th June had approved an allocation of £5.2m for the first phase of continuing response and recovery work, including the specific Covid response resources, addressing some of the capacity and backlog resourcing challenges, and planning for supporting recovery activity for residents, communities and our wider local economy.

The first phase funding of £5.2m is to be utilised as below and is being tracked on a monthly basis:

- £2.7m continuing Covid response resourcing
- £1m resource for supporting capacity, backlog and demand challenges across service departments
- £1.5m discretionary funds supporting recovery

The Sales, Fees and Charges compensation scheme whereby authorities absorb losses up to 5% of their planned sales, fees and charges income, with government compensating them for 75p in every pound of relevant loss thereafter, finished on 30th June. By introducing a 5% deductible government is accounting for an acceptable level of volatility, whilst shielding authorities from the worst losses. Councils are now actively levying Government to extend the scheme beyond the 30th June deadline.

As noted above the government's own data indicates activity will not return to pre-Covid-19 levels until 2023. Additionally the final stage of easing COVID restrictions was 19th July so there is only a month and a half's data to base forecasts for lost income over the remainder of this and into future financial years.

The Borough had 239 cases per 100,000 people in the week 20-26 September (the average in England had 355), 359 cases were identified in the same week, which was an increase of 15 compared with the previous week, amounting to 28,503 cases up to 30th September.

The Borough is therefore in a relatively good position when compared with the England average as we approach the winter months and the uncertainty re the potential rise of infections and their impact on our businesses, residents and employees. The Council however continue to operate in an environment of limited resources and whilst the Government has provided funding up front to support the pandemic there is considerable uncertainty of the length of the pandemic impact on the national and local economies and the Council's ability to finance the ongoing support.

Nevertheless, within the resources available, the Council continues to put significant additional resources into support and guidance for our businesses, residents and employees e.g. test and trace, vaccinations, targeted interventions for specific cohorts, support for those self-isolating, utilisation of volunteers, support for vulnerable groups including rough sleepers, guidance on compliance etc. The ability to continue doing will, though, be dependent on the availability of additional resources from Government.

RESOLVED That the progress of the Capital and Revenue Budgets be noted and the Committee revisit the issue later in the year when the position became clearer.

Progress of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

The Committee received a progress report on the work of the People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee that had taken place in the previous weeks.

Lancashire and South Cumbria Pathology Collaboration

The Committee looked at the planned formation of a single pathology service for Lancashire and South Cumbria by 2023. The benefits were outlined, together with the challenges that the delivery of the single service would face. The Committee were informed that the main thrust behind the proposals was to ensure that there was a consistency of service across the South Cumbria and Lancashire footprint and to ensure that the service was delivered as cost effectively as possible using the technology that was developing. The model would use a hub and spoke model with services delivered in hospital where results were needed as an emergency and more routine tests being done in the central hub. The central location was to be developed at Samlesbury, close to the motorway network and also closer to the main users of the service based in East Lancashire and Preston. The Committee looked at how the service would be provided and the demands of all service users would be met, from GPs to hospital trusts. The Committee also focused on the way that areas at the edge of the patch would be served by the service as opposed to at present. The importance of the samples being delivered within time scales was discussed and the ways that this would be addressed. The Committee were informed of the time line for the delivery of the proposed changes and the stages that needed to be completed including the building of the hub. Assurances were given to the Committee that the religious needs of sections of the community to bury bodies as soon as possible would continue to be met under the revised arrangements. The

Committee would be kept informed of the proposals and how they affect the residents of the borough.

Proposed Enhancements to Acute Stroke Care and Rehabilitation Services for Lancashire and South Cumbria

The Committee received a briefing on the proposals for the enhancements to the acute stroke care and rehabilitation services in the area. The Committee were informed that strokes were the fourth largest cause of deaths in the UK and remained the leading cause of disability. One third of stroke survivors were no longer able to live independently and across Lancashire and South Cumbria there were now over 3,500 strokes per year. The Committee were informed of the current arrangements for stroke care in Lancashire and South Cumbria and that these did not provide the highest quality of care required. The enhancements proposed would seek to ensure that the population of South Cumbria and Lancashire received the best care wherever they lived, all day, every day.

Members discussed the patient's views on the proposals and were informed that the patient wishes had been sought and were in favour of the proposals as they delivered better outcomes for stroke victims in exchange for close proximity. The Committee looked at the way that ambulance support was crucial to the delivery of the proposed service and members were informed that the North West Ambulance Service had been involved throughout the process and enhancements to services were to be made where necessary to deliver this. The Committee supported the proposed enhancements and improved outcomes for patients and would keep the proposals under review.

Blackburn with Darwen Health Watch.

The Committee had invited Blackburn with Darwen Healthwatch to the meeting to look at how both organisations could work better together and add value to each other's work. Sarah Johns, Chief Executive of Blackburn Healthwatch, set out the work being undertaken by Healthwatch and the consultations that they were carrying out. The work on patient experience, Long Covid and Care Homes visits were outlined and possible collaborative ways that the Committee could work with Healthwatch to the benefit of residents of the borough. Healthwatch would be invited to attend future meetings where it was felt that the input of Healthwatch would be beneficial and add value to the work of the Committee.

Additional Meeting of the Committee.

An additional meeting of the Committee had been arranged to take place on 6th October 2021 to look at issues relating to Children's Services and Schools. The Committee looked at the return to school in the autumn term and the work that had been carried out to ensure that this had been done safely, the Safeguarding Annual Review, SACRE annual report and the peer review of work on neglect. The Committee also received an update on the work of the Youth Forum and how they are progressing in their work programme.

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 13th September 2021.

The Committee looked at the way the Council can take action where private owners were failing with their duty to maintain the property and were having a detrimental effect on the whole of the community. The Committee were informed of the interventions that the Council had delivered through compulsory purchase and the properties that had been delivered back into the housing stock for use.

The Committee were informed of the powers that the Council had at their disposal and how these could be used to drive improvements. These were-

- Town and Country Planning Act 1990 – Section 215
- Building Act 1984
- Housing Act 1985, Section 17 – Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)
- Environmental Protection Act 1990 – Section 59, 80,
- Anti-Social Behaviour Crime & Policing Act 2014 – Section 43 – 58
- Public Health Act 1936 – Section 78
- Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949

The Committee looked at examples that had resulted in improvements in the borough and the way that the officers had worked with land owners to ensure that they fulfilled their legal duties and the steps that had to be taken under each power should negotiations not produce results. The Committee were informed of the limits of powers and the duty of the magistrate’s court to consider cases brought by the Council. The Committee discussed the level of fines that were imposed by courts and the way these differed from case to case and personal circumstances. The level of deterrent was discussed and the alternative wordings that could assist in delivering a tougher message that would make people think before they failed to take action.

The Committee discussed the issues that related to adopted highways and cleaning and especially back alleys. Members highlighted the issues that they faced from residents bringing issues to them which related to un-adopted areas and how many of them were unaware of their responsibilities and requirements as the land owners. That the officers be thanked for their informative and helpful presentation. The Committee agreed that the Strategic Director, Place be requested to draw up a list of the top ten hot spots for member’s information and the possible actions that we could use to make a difference in these areas. The Committee also asked that ways of helping communities in keeping areas clean such as assisting in monitoring known dumping hotspots be considered and reported back to the Committee. The Committee also requested that consideration be given to leaflets to be given to residents of areas adjoining non adopted highways informing them of the difficulties that the Council faced in cleaning non adopted back alleys and their responsibilities.

Work Programme for the Committee

The Committee agreed that the next meeting would look at the issues relating to trees in the borough. This would include looking at the issues of ash dieback.

- RESOLVED-** 1. That the work of the People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.
2. That a report be prepared for the consideration of the Leader of the Council seeking the establishment and revised terms of reference for a new additional Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Chair at the meeting where the minutes were signed.....

Date.....