

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 21 February 2018 at City Hall, Bradford

Commenced 5.30 pm
Concluded 8.00 pm

Present – Councillors

CONSERVATIVE	LABOUR	LIBERAL DEMOCRAT
BM Smith Cooke Riaz	Warburton Arshad Hussain Watson Duffy	J Sunderland

Councillor Arshad Hussain in the Chair

Observers: Councillors Hinchcliffe and V Slater

Apologies: Councillor Bacon

59. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

No disclosures of interest in matters under consideration were received.

60. MINUTES

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2018 be signed as a correct record.

61. INSPECTION OF REPORTS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

There were no appeals submitted by the public to review decisions to restrict documents.

62. REFERRALS TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were no referrals made to this Committee.

63. QUARTER 3 FINANCE POSITION STATEMENT FOR 2017-18

The Assistant Director of Finance and Procurement submitted a report (**Document “AC”**) which provided Members with an overview of the forecast financial position of the Council for 2017-18.

It examined the latest spend against revenue and capital budgets and forecasted the financial position at the year end. It stated the Council's current balances and reserves and forecasts school balances for the year.

This report was considered by the Executive at its meeting held on 6 February 2018.

During the discussion Members asked a number of questions, the questions together with the responses are detailed below:

A Member ascertained that under a number of the budget headings, anticipated savings had not been realised and the savings that had been made, what impact had this had on the unplanned savings. In response the Assistant Director Finance and Procurement explained that a number of actions had been taken to balance the budget, albeit some of this was one of monies such as the use of non-spend capital financing and the use of corporate contingencies. He urged caution in delivering the 2018/19 budget, as this would pose a number of challenges to implement and his concerns were outlined in the Section 151 officer's report being considered at the Budget Council meeting on 22 February 2018.

In relation to the Adult Social Care budget, officers from the department explained that the Service was making significant progress in demand management, and it was on track to deliver saving by reducing the number of placements in residential care and offering more care in peoples own homes. It was however acknowledged that in the area of learning disabilities savings had not been realised. The cost of providing certain types of care was alluded to and that key risks remained in a number areas.

The Health and Wellbeing Portfolio Holder in acknowledging the issues raised stressed that a number of projected changes were taking longer than anticipated but that efforts were on-going to ensure the budget was brought back on track.

In relation to a question regarding school balances the Strategic Director Children's Services explained that reserves have been reducing over a number of years, and that there was an imperative to maintain an adequate level of reserves to deal with the budgetary challenges facing schools and that the Schools Forum were fully aware of the issues.

In relation to Children's Social, the Strategic Director also stated that despite efforts to reduce the number of children in care, in hindsight this had been over ambitious as there had been a corresponding increase in demand, which mirrored the national picture.

In addition the projected savings in transport assistance had not been realised, in the context of growing demand and historical overreliance on assistance. He added that in conjunction with the Department of Place, a new tender would look at what efficiency savings can be made, however any savings would be modest compared to the original forecast. The Portfolio Holder added that this had been an area of frustration in terms of not being able to make the savings, however in other areas of the service, community centred approaches were paying dividend.

Resolved –

That officers be thanked for presenting the report and providing detailed responses to Members' questions.

ACTION: No Action

64. HOUSING BENEFIT APPEALS BUILD-UP

In 2017, a Housing Benefit claimant complained to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) because the Council had delayed referring their case to the First Tier Tribunal Social Entitlement Chamber.

Following its investigation, the LGO published a public interest report, which highlighted that a build-up of work prevented the complainant's case from being dealt with in a timely manner.

The Interim Director Corporate Resources submitted a report (**Document "AD"**) which sets out the role and functions of the Appeals team, the circumstances leading to the build-up of work, and the actions taken to reduce the build-up and to reduce the time taken to complete appeal cases.

The Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits explained that in the context of the investigation by the Ombudsman, the Service had now prioritised the housing benefits backlog, and he was confident that the remaining cases, which were mainly older complicated cases would be dealt with in due course.

Resolved –

That the report and the work undertaken to reduce the build-up of appeal cases be noted.

ACTION: No Action

65. DISCRETIONARY PAYMENTS

The Interim Director Corporate Resources submitted a report (**Document “AE”**) which provided an update on the support provided by the Council, to financially vulnerable residents, through the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) scheme and the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme during the period 1 April 2017 to 31 December 2017.

During the discussions Members made the following comments in relation to the different discretionary payments in place:

That the take up of Smarterbuys should be looked at, as a higher proportion were accessing used goods scheme, or seeking help from family and friends when purchasing white goods.

There had been an increase in the number of lump sum payments being made to landlords to clear rent arrears, and this was primarily to stop eviction proceedings.

That the Assisted Purchases Scheme needed to be better publicised, although it had been publicised extensively through the existing advice network.

That fuel poverty was a particular issue amongst the elderly and more work was needed to ensure any help was taken up by this group.

Resolved –

- (1) That the report and the work that has taken place on both Discretionary Housing Payments and Local Welfare Support be noted.**
- (2) That members views and comments be taken into account in developing the Discretionary Housing Payment and Local Welfare Support schemes.**

ACTION: Interim Director Corporate Resources

66. UNIVERSAL CREDIT

The Assistant Director Procurement and Finance submitted a report (**Document “AF”**) which set out progress of the roll out in Bradford, highlighting the key issues for the district and the actions taken, and planned, over the coming months and years to ensure it is implemented successfully.

This was an update of the reports that this committee received in September 2015 and December 2016 that detailed the introduction of Universal Credit in Bradford and highlighted some of the cultural, organisational and logistical challenges and concerns faced by residents, the Council and others, and the action taken to respond to these challenges.

The Assistant Director highlighted the number of changes and the delays to

Universal Credit system which were detailed in the report. He cited that the date to migrate Bradford residents to Universal Credit had been extended to 2022, adding that the policy marked a fundamental shift in welfare support. The Assistant Director stressed that online take up in Bradford was generally good and that amendments to the new benefit by the Government, should also make a difference.

During the discussion, the Chair stated that there were communities not IT literate and how did he envisage the new credit would impact on them. In response it was pointed out that the advice aspect of Universal Credit had been looked and it was felt that the advice network were equipped with the necessary skills to advise clients. In addition any language barriers would be addressed as per the normal process. It was also pointed out that advice services were working to capacity and a close eye was being kept on this situation.

Resolved–

- (1) That the progress made in the development of arrangements to support residents, and in responding to adverse impacts on Council service delivery be noted.**
- (2) That Members considered the issues raised in the report and the likely impacts on the district’s residents, the Council, and other providers and agencies.**
- (3) That a progress report on the roll out of Universal Credit be considered by this Committee in December 2018.**

ACTION: Interim Director Corporate Resources

67. DRAFT BRADFORD DISTRICT STRATEGIC APPROACH TO TACKLING POVERTY 2018-2020

The Strategic Director Place submitted a report (**Document “AG”**) which presented the draft Bradford District Strategic Approach to Tackling Poverty 2018-2020 along with data measures that will be used to evidence impact of activity at a District and lower levels.

It was explained that the multi-agency strategy group set up in February, would be addressing the actions arising from the Poverty Scrutiny Review undertaken by this Committee, and that the Strategy was work in progress incorporating the work done by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on poverty.

It was also envisaged that more work would be done at a ward level which would

tap into the expertise of the Area Committee.

During the discussion, the Chair expressed his concerns at the delays on implementing the Poverty Strategy that was undertaken by this Committee, which was some years old. In response it was explained that a lot of work had taken place since the review and that this will be documented going forward, and that pulling the Strategy together had taken longer than anticipated.

The Chair also highlighted the increase in the number of rough sleepers in Bradford and that the problem had now extended outside of the city centre.

A Member urged a word of action, and stated that although he empathised with the broad sentiments expressed around poverty, the key to tackling poverty in the district was to address the low skill base and the barriers which prevented women from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities from accessing education, training and job opportunities.

In response the Strategic Director Place stressed that education and skills were key priorities in the Council's economic strategy, as well as components to strengthen families and the community.

A Member stated that what the Strategy lacked was any involvement of the Area Committees, and that their expertise and knowledge of the ward was crucial in tackling poverty.

The Leader of Council of Council was also present at the meeting and stated that a lot of work the Council was undertaking was around tackling poverty via economic growth.

Resolved –

- (1) That the progress made to date against the recommendation of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the 2 February 2017 be accepted.**
- (2) That this Committee requests that the comments raised by Members be considered in the development of the Strategy.**
- (3) That the Poverty Strategy be presented to this Committee in June 2018.**

ACTION: Strategic Director Place

PROGRAMME 2017/18

The Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee submitted a report (**Document “AH”**) which set out the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for 2017/18.

Resolved –

That the work programme 2017-18 continues to be reviewed regularly during the remainder of this Municipal Year.

ACTION: Overview and Scrutiny Lead

Chair

Note: These minutes are subject to approval as a correct record at the next meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.