

## Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held Remotely on Thursday, 7 January 2021

Commenced 4.00 pm  
Concluded 6.10 pm

### Present – Councillors

| LABOUR  | CONSERVATIVE    | LIBERAL DEMOCRAT AND INDEPENDENT GROUP |
|---|-----------------|--|
| Azam<br>D Green<br>Kamran Hussain<br>Watson<br>Tait | Pollard<br>Riaz | Griffiths                              |

### Councillor Azam in the Chair

Observer: Councillor Goodall

#### 1. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

No disclosures of interest in matters under consideration were received.

#### 2. INSPECTION OF REPORTS AND BACKGROUND PAPERS

No requests were received to remove the restriction on a report or background paper.

#### 3. REFERRALS TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

No referrals were received.

#### 4. COUNCIL TAX COLLECTION

The Strategic Director Corporate Resources submitted a report (**Document “V”**) which examined performance in relation to Council Tax collection, the Council’s response to new challenges for collection arising from COVID 19, and how taxpayers, particularly the most financially vulnerable, were being supported.

The Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits stated that this had been an unprecedented year in the midst of the pandemic, however collection rates remained good despite this, and we were still on target to achieve a good Council Tax collection rate by the year end.

He alluded to the difficulties faced by those on low income and that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme had become less generous over the years, which had had a bearing on collection rates.

The Peer Review with Wakefield Council had also resulted in the Council updating a number of its practices, which was now yielding some positive results..

In the event of non payment, the Council had piloted a scheme, whereby reminders were sent via text and email to encourage people to get up to date with their payments or contact the service if they were experiencing difficulties, again this approach had yielded some good results and avoided action by way of issuing a summons.

During the discussion Members asked a number of questions to which the following responses were provided:

In response to a question on how Bradford compared with its constituent authorities in terms of its collection rates, it was stated that generally we were on par with other Councils in the West Yorkshire region. However in Bradford we did face some additional challenges, particularly with in year collection rates being lower.

That the gross liability figure quoted in the report also included the Fire/Policy Authority precept.

In relation to a question on Council Tax bandings, it was explained that the majority of the properties in the district were Band A properties, so therefore the additional hardship relief funding did not have any impact on the Band D equivalents, of which Bradford had a lower number in any case.

In response to a question regarding additional Government funding as a consequence of the pandemic, it was stated that the Government had recognised the reduction in Council Tax income as a consequence of a rise in unemployment, so the projected Council Tax base for 2021/22 would be lower and the Government had offset this projected reduction through additional funding.

In relation to a question on in year collection rates, it was explained that historically this had always been low, however this figure generally improved with

a 94% collection rate being achieved by the end of the financial year.

In relation to the pilot scheme to encourage payment, it was stressed that by prompting people who had fallen into arrears and bringing their accounts up to date, avoided enforcement action to be taken in a number of instances, and therefore the Service was looking at building on this approach going forward, and that this proactive approach was paying dividends.

It was stressed that some year end collections still posed a challenge and that some court action would be inevitable.

In terms of writing off a debt, it was explained that all options were explored where there was non – payment of Council Tax, however in some cases, there came a point where all avenues had been exhausted and the only sensible option would be to write off the debt, however this would only done as a last resort.

**Resolved –**

**This Committee thanks officers for the work that they have undertaken, with the extra pressures that have come with the COVID19 pandemic and look forward to future updates.**

***ACTION: Strategic Director, Corporate Resources***

## **5. BUSINESS RATE COLLECTION**

The Strategic Director Corporate Resources submitted a report (**Document “W”**) which set out the Council’s performance in, and the challenges for, the collection of Business Rates; the challenges and impact of Government’s response to COVID 19; and the Council’s response to these new challenges.

The Assistant Director Revenues and Benefits explained that compared to Council Tax, the pandemic had had a significant impact on the Council’s ability to collect business rates, with the focus changing to providing support to businesses in the form of Government grants. This had been rolled out successfully over the period of the pandemic and staff had worked extremely hard to ensure its successful delivery. Existing systems and processes had ensured that genuine claims were processed efficiently and this allowed for any fraudulent or erroneous claims to be dealt with accordingly.

In response to a question on how the service had dealt with erroneous claims, it was explained that the Service was already adept at spotting any such claims, as its existing processes were very resilient and they could be applied to any new claims. In some cases this had resulted in businesses now paying business rates which were not aware of.

In response to a question regarding the latest tranche of Government grant funding, it was explained that the Council was awaiting the finer details, however given the system was already set up, this should not prove too difficult to administer.

Members expressed their thanks and gratitude and the diligent manner in which

the Service had helped businesses during the pandemic, and the way in which it had administered and rolled out the Government's grant scheme.

**Resolved -**

**This Committee thanks officers for the work that they have undertaken, with the extra pressures that have come with the COVID19 pandemic and look forward to future updates.**

***ACTION: Strategic Director, Corporate Resources***

## **6. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee submitted a report (**Document "Y"**) which set out the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme for 2020/21.

The Overview and Scrutiny Lead stated that the Hate Crime Scrutiny draft report had now been circulated and he urged Members to let him have any feedback/comments. He also alluded to an additional meeting that will be held on 16 February on West Yorkshire Devolution, with representatives from WYCA and members of the Regeneration and Economy invited to attend that meeting.

A Member urged that notwithstanding the pressures on work that the Scrutiny Reviews on Fireworks and Gambling should be progressed as a matter of urgency, as a long time had passed since these review were initiated. In response the Overview and Scrutiny Lead assured Members that these Reviews would be commencing imminently, and that he will be liaising with Members accordingly.

**Resolved –**

**Members commented on the work programme and the detailed scrutiny reviews being undertaken by the Committee.**

***ACTION: Overview & Scrutiny Lead***

## **7. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

**Resolved –**

**That the public be excluded from the meeting during the discussion of the report relating to ISG (Not for Publication Document "X") on the grounds that it is likely, in view of the nature of the proceedings, that if they were present, exempt information within paragraph 3 (financial or business affairs) of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) would be disclosed and it is considered that, in all the circumstances, the public interest in allowing the public to remain is outweighed by the public interest in excluding public access to the relevant part of the proceedings for the following reasons:**

**It is in the public interest in maintaining these exemptions because it is in the overriding interest of proper administration that Members are made fully aware of the financial implications of any decision.**

**8. INDUSTRIAL SERVICES GROUP (ISG)**

The Strategic Director Corporate Resources submitted a report (**Not for Publication Document “X”**) which provided an update to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on ISG.

**Resolved –**

**That officers be thanked for their efforts in securing additional work and members keep an overview of this area, with updates to be presented at future meetings.**

***ACTION: Strategic Director, Corporate Resources***

Chair

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

THIS AGENDA AND ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS HAVE BEEN PRODUCED, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, ON RECYCLED PAPER