

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PERFORMANCE AND VALUE FOR MONEY

SELECT COMMITTEE

17/12/2020 at 6.00 pm



Present: Councillor Phythian (Vice-Chair, in the Chair)
Councillors Stretton, Salamat, Byrne, Harkness and Shuttleworth

Also in Attendance:

Anne Ryans	Director of Finance
Mark Stenson	Head of Corporate Governance
Andy Cooper	Senior Finance Manager
Elaine Devaney	Director of Children's Social Care
Gerard Jones	Managing Director Children and Young People
Sharon Moore	Interim Children's Improvement Consultant
Eddie Moores	Cabinet Member - Children and Young People
Hannah Roberts	Cabinet Member - Housing
Simon Rowberry	Interim Head of Planning
Gemma Gerrish	Assistant Director - Social Work Service
Sian Walter-Browne	Principal Constitutional Services Officer
Kaidy McCann	Constitutional Services

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Ahmad.

2 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3 **URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business received.

4 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions received.

5 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Performance and Value for Money Select Committee meeting held on 12th November 2020 be approved as a correct record.

6 **MINUTES OF THE GMCA CORPORATE ISSUES AND REFORM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the GMCA Corporate Issues and Reform Overview and Scrutiny meetings held on 6th October 2020 and 10th November 2020 be noted.

7 **MINUTES OF THE GMCA HOUSING, PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**



RESOLVED that the minutes of the GMCA Housing, Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny meeting held on 8th October 2020 be noted.

8

MINUTES OF THE GMCA ECONOMY, BUSINESS GROWTH AND SKILLS OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESOLVED that the minutes GMCA Economy, Business Growth and Skills Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings held on 9th October 2020 and 13th November 2020 be noted.

9

PLANNING PERFORMANCE: DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT OCTOBER 2019 - SEPTEMBER 2020

The Select Committee gave consideration to a report which provided an update on performance for the Planning Service in processing major and non-major/other applications against national and local performance targets over the 12 month period from 1st October 2019 to 30th September 2020.

The report also provided an overview of improvement being deployed to the Planning Service systems, processes and customer engagement which supported formal planning performance measures. The team had benefitted from new officers, new training programmes, and the introduction of new digital systems to help streamline the planning processes, the introduction of a self-service portal for enhanced customer awareness on applications and which helped embed efficiencies and innovation into better ways of working. The team had been lead by an Interim Head of Services whilst recruitment for a permanent postholder was undertaken. The Select Committee were also advised of challenges during the period and the additional pressure placed on staff.

Despite the transformation plans, challenges and workload, the Council's Planning performance had been maintained with regard to formal performance submissions needed to the Department for Communities and Local Government on a quarterly basis.

The Select Committee were also advised of staff adapting well to provide service from home under Covid-19 restrictions and the facilitation of meetings via Microsoft Teams. Additional duties continued through risk assessed CV19 safe site visits. Government legislation had permitted Planning Committee meetings which supported timely decisions. There had been an increase in electronic correspondence during lockdown/Tier period.

The Select Committee were informed of the introduction of a new planning application / new software platform which went live in October 2020. There had been a number of technical issues. However, significant benefits would result from the project.

The Council's Planning Performance was reported to the DCLG on a quarterly basis. The Total number of applications received was outlined in the report and performance against targets was

outlined in the report and showed that over the 12-month period, both national and local performance targets had been each quarter for major applications and 'other' planning applications.

When the challenges of CV19 declined and the new planning digital system was fully active, the Planning team were keen to work on further service delivery improvements. Members were also informed of Customer Service Standards, with automated responses set up to ensure immediate acknowledgement of the emails.

Members asked for and received clarification on the following:

- Impact on Communication due to Covid-19 – the service provided was not as high as compared to office working, however the service was being as flexible as possible. Having the dedicated officer post for Elected Member queries was working well in reducing the communication difficulties.
- Had the issues with the planning portal's disappearing documents been resolved and how improvements could be done in Enforcement. – Enforcement now carried out via drive by site visits. Each application is taken on a case by case basis with deadlines extended as and when needed, the new system should stop the issue.
- Hiccups with the new system – yes, primarily with remote working and troubleshooting difficulties. Previously there were 60 outstanding issues that has now been reduced to 10. It was hoped that the outstanding issues would be cleared in January 2021 and would provide an overall improved service.

RESOLVED that the performance of the Planning Service be noted especially with regard to performance levels pre/post Covid-19 restrictions being introduced and additional measures being introduced within the team to provide continued improvement.

10

FINANCE UPDATE - REVENUE MONITOR AND CAPITAL INVESTMENT PROGRAMME 2020/21 (MONTH 6 - SEPTEMBER 2020)

The Select Committee were provided an update on the Council's 2020/21 forecast revenue budget position and the financial position of the capital programme as at 30 September 2020 (Month 6) together with the Revised Capital Programme 2020/25. The report had been included on the Cabinet Agenda on 30 November 2020.

The report enabled the Select Committee to continue its review of the financial position of the Council. As well as the Forecast Revenue Position at Month 6, the report also presented the current forecast position for the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Collection Fund.

The COVID-19 related expenditure gap was shown as £4.250m and was a considerable reduction of £10.061m compared to the COVID-19 pressure of £14.311m reported at Month 5. The

reduction was largely as a result of additional funding of £8.928m received from the Government and now included the confirmed compensation for the lost income related to sales, fees and charges of £1.282m which was paid to the Authority on 27 November 2020. The basis of the COVID-19 costs is the Round 6 (September) return that was submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 6 October 2020, at which point the financial challenge was estimated to be £12.388m. This estimated financial position submitted to the MHCLG was prepared without the inclusion of any additional funding incorporated in the monitoring report. This was simply a timing issue.

Members were reminded that monthly returns were submitted to the MHCLG to assist the Government in assessing the financial pressures being faced by Local Government arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Round 7 Return was subsequently submitted on 6 November 2020. The report also provided an update on both ringfenced and un-ringfenced, mainstream and COVID specific grant funding.

Members asked for and received clarification on the following:

- Was the recent lockdown included and was it expected to decline – monitoring was being undertaken on a monthly basis and the position did initially get worse with the new lockdown but the position is constantly changing. This will be outlined in future reports. The significant issue would be the COVID legacy funding going forward. Government Grant Funding would be used to support for 2020/21 but the impact for 2021/22 is unclear.
- Were checks being made on business grant applications – a number of checks are undertaken (in line with Government guidance) before the payment of business grants to ensure that any instances of fraud are minimised. There had been a significant increase in the number of applications due to the current situation and the availability of new rounds of grant.
- Were the reserves used for specific initiatives – A range of reserves have been used in year to support specific initiatives that are deemed corporate priorities. The most significant reserve used relates to a Central Government grant to support the response to COVID-19. This was paid in advance in the previous financial year and carried forward, thus increasing the value of the use of reserves in year.
- Multiple payments to businesses in the same property - The grant payable is based on whether a business is registered for business rates and the rateable value of the business. Therefore, if businesses are registered and pay Business Rates separately then multiple businesses in the same property could apply for separate grants.

RESOLVED that:

1. The Finance Update – Revenue Monitor and Capital Investment Programme 2020/21 at Month 6 be noted.



2. A further updated be provided at the next meeting of the Select Committee.

11

UPDATE ON GENERAL MATTERS

The Select Committee were reminded of a report considered in December 2018 which summarised Local Authority financial failures and challenges. The report was presented to the Select Committee to assist in its scrutiny role. Following a recent similar financial failure in another local authority which resulted in the issuing of a public interest report by the External Auditor and subsequently two S114 notices by the Chief Finance Officer, the report highlighted matters which were of relevance to the Select Committee as they linked to the scrutiny role. The matters would also be brought to the attention of the Audit Committee.

The Select Committee were informed that External Auditors of another local authority had issued a public interest report which highlighted the following issues. It was felt appropriate to bring these matters to the attention of the Select Committee. These were:

- The local authority had experienced decreasing financial resilience for a few financial years without appropriate oversight or challenge from Members.
- The local authority in question had a low level of reserves for a number of financial years.
- There were significant overspends in Children and Adults Services within no appropriate challenge to these overspends.
- When the 2020/21 budget and previous years budgets were sent, there was insufficient challenge to inherent risks such as the likelihood of efficiency savings being achieved. This included savings envisaged from a programme of transformation.
- The requirement for improved oversight of the deficit of the Dedicated Schools Grant.
- The local authority had borrowed over £500m in the last three financial years to invest to generate an income stream and to invest in local authority companies. The scrutiny in both these areas had been poor and the aims of this investment were unlikely to be achieved.
- Members could have been more challenging of officers in several operational areas.

The report provided the Select Committee with the opportunity to consider how it could satisfy itself that similar challenges could be avoided and have regard to the response of the Authority in question which was now strengthening its own Scrutiny and Audit arrangements.

RESOLVED that:

1. The Update on General Matters be noted.
2. The Select Committee Work Programme be reviewed to incorporate increased scrutiny around financial resilience.

12 **KEY DECISION DOCUMENT**

The Select Committee gave consideration to the latest published Key Decision Document.

RESOLVED that the Key Decision Document be noted.

13 **PERFORMANCE AND VALUE FOR MONEY SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Select Committee gave consideration to the latest PVFM Select Committee Work Programme.

RESOLVED that the PVFM Select Committee Work Programme be noted.

14 **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

RESOLVED that the date and time of the next PVFM Select Committee to be held on Thursday, 28 January 2021 at 6.00 p.m. be noted.

15 **EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED that, in accordance with Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they contain exempt information under paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, and it would not, on balance, be in the public interest to disclose the reports.

16 **REPEAT REFERRALS IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**

Consideration was given to a report which provided an update on repeat referrals in Children's Social Care.

RESOLVED that the recommendations as contained within the sensitive report be noted.

17 **CHILDREN'S SERVICES - UPDATE ON FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

Consideration was given to a report which provided an update on the Financial Performance and Improvement Plan for Children's Services.

RESOLVED that the recommendations as contained within the sensitive report be noted.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.18 pm