



MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 3rd FEBRUARY 2021

PRESENT: Councillor Ben Price (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Councillors R Bilcliff, S Goodall, Dr S Peale, P Standen, M Summers and P Thurgood

CABINET Councillor Daniel Cook

The following officers were present: Stefan Garner (Executive Director Finance), John Day (Knowledge, Performance and Insight Co-ordinator), Tracey Pointon (Legal Admin & Democratic Services Manager) and Jo Hutchison (Democratic Services, Scrutiny and Elections Officer)

59 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor T Jay and Councillor M Oates.

60 MINUTES OF A PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 18th January 2021 were approved as a correct record.

(Moved by Councillor Dr S Peale and seconded by Councillor S Goodall)

61 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

62 CHAIR'S UPDATE

There was no update.

63 CONSIDERATION OF MATTERS REFERRED TO THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FROM CABINET / COUNCIL

There were none to be considered at this meeting.

64 2020/21 FORWARD PLAN

There were no new items identified from the Forward plan for this Committee's consideration.

65 QUARTER THREE 2020/21 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Chair welcomed the Executive Director, Finance and the Knowledge, Performance and Insight Coordinator to the meeting for this item which was for the Committee to receive a performance update and financial health check for Quarter 3, prior to the Report of the Leader of the Council being presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 18th February 2021.

Councillor D Cook joined the meeting at 6.15pm.

The Committee sought clarifications in the following areas:

- Discretionary Housing Benefits – in particular, why the council believed lower levels of claims had been received in Q3 whilst the amounts claimed were higher, and what the effect had been of the Local Housing Allowance on Discretionary Housing Payments. The Executive Director Finance agreed to provide further detail to the Committee on why the levels were lower and on any effect of the Local Housing Allowance.
- In terms of the Financial Healthcheck section, questions were raised over the presentation of budget lines by Executive Director and Assistant Director areas.
- Collection rates and the council's confidence in these levels and how that is reflected in the MTFs. The Executive Director, Finance reported that the collection fund had been closely reviewed during January 2021 and all relevant preceptors updated. It was further reported that an updated version from that provided at the Joint Scrutiny (Budgets) meeting, would be reflected in the Budget report to be considered by full Council on 23 February 2021. It was expected that the council tax collection fund, on an estimated basis, would declare a surplus for the next financial year, as government rules allowed deficits to be spread over three years. In terms of business rates collection fund, this was significantly reduced, however, there was significant grant income which partly offset the deficit.
- The reasons for the burial rates being lower this year, which was understood to be as a result of choice.
- Clarification over some descriptors used in the report such as "small" for the housing hardship fund. The Executive Director reported that this was £20,000.
- Strategies to manage the risks ahead with the potential for the furlough scheme and government grants to be withdrawn and the impacts this could have on the council and local residents. The Leader of the Council responded that these risks were being monitored and that the council provided support to help residents manage debt. He agreed to provide further details to members as to the specific forms of support available.
- How the core spending power information captured council income streams. The Leader of the Council agreed to circulate the Government produced data to members.

- In terms of Treasury Management clarification was sought of the interest rate applied to the historic borrowings which were from the Treasury Public Management Loans Board at 4.05% interest, and whether it would be possible for other capital available to the council (potentially from the General Fund) to be utilised. The Executive Director, Finance responded that whilst possible, there would be a premium to be paid in the event of any repayment of the historic loan which would mean that it would be unlikely to be beneficial until interest rates in the market were at least the same or higher than the 4.05% rate applied.
- Further information was requested on how in the Housing Revenue Account for Period 9 there was a £741k favourable variance whilst the expected full year variance was £49k adverse. The Executive Director, Finance reported that this difference was largely expected to be due to further payments around housing repairs, where there was work in progress which at year end would be either paid or accrued for the following year. The Executive Director agreed that the presentation of the data, whilst accurate, would be reviewed to consider whether it would be possible to provide further clarity in the report.
- Clarification was sought on the consultation workstream on the Organisational Development Strategy, which was marked at amber, and why given that amber status, the overall project was marked as green.
- An update was provided on the land acquisition aspect at Tinkers Green and Kerria which related to the retail aspect where the legal process continued.
- In terms of the Leisure Strategy further clarity over the milestones was sought, which were either absent or without dates, whilst the overall project was reported to be on track. The Leader agreed to request the provision of further information to members.
- It was noted that the Town Centre Programme was marked as amber and that one of the workstreams, Market re-tender was also amber and an update on progress in this regard, and in light of the potential activities flowing from the successful Future High Street Fund work was requested. The Leader of the Council agreed to provide that.
- Clarification was sought on the reasons for the General Fund Main Variances where less was being spent on software maintenance but more in terms of software licenses.
- In terms of the implementation of the Customer Portal further information was sought over the red status of the testing process. The Executive Director, Finance reported that some testing had been suspended in the Revenue & Benefits teams to support the prioritisation of the increased activity within those teams as a result of COVID-19.

The Committee thanked the Leader of the Council and the Officers in attendance for presenting the report and responding to the Committee's questions.

RESOLVED THAT

1. Cabinet be advised of the areas where additional information had been sought by the Committee, in the form of an additional page being added to the report following the meeting; and

2. The Committee endorsed the report.

(Moved by Councillor Dr S Peale and seconded by Councillor R Bilcliff)

66 CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN

The Committee Work Plan was updated as follows:

Corporate Scrutiny Work Plan

Work Plan 2020 – 2021		
TARGET MEETING DATE	SUBJECT	MEETING WHEN ITEM ADDED TO WORK PLAN
11 th March 2021	Update on Potential Legal Actions	October 2020
11 th March 2021	Solway trading company update	
11 th March 2021	Review of Legal Services (post implementation)	November 2019
March / June 2021	Review of Cabinet decisions over previous 12 month period	December 2020
Quarter 4 2020/21	Asset Management update	December 2019
June 2021 (tbc)	Review of Write Offs (full update)	July 2020
Dates to be agreed		
TBC	Update on corporate prioritisation	August 2020
TBC	Market tender progress Update	August 2019
TBC	Parking Toolkit review	October 2019
TBC	Housing Repairs & Investment Contract Review	November 2019
TBC	Solway Trading Company Update (2x per year)	December 2019
TBC	Gungate Masterplan	January 2020
TBC	Customer Portal - post implementation review	November 2020

Upcoming Corporate Scrutiny Committee Meetings

11 March 2021

Chair