



MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 16th NOVEMBER 2023

PRESENT: Councillor D Cook (Chair), Councillors M Bailey, C Bain, R Claymore, G Coates, S Doyle, B Price and L Smith

CABINET Councillor Samuel Smith

The following officers were present: Andrew Barratt (Chief Executive), Rebecca Smeathers (Executive Director Finance (S151)), Tina Mustafa (Assistant Director Neighbourhoods), Pardeep Kataria and Leanne Costello (Senior Scrutiny and Democratic Services Officer)

47 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Coates and D Maycock.

Apologies were received from Councillor L Clarke and Councillor L Smith attended as a substitute.

48 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 4th October 2023 were approved as a correct record.

(Moved by Councillor B Price and seconded by Councillor C Bain)

49 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

50 CHAIR'S UPDATE

The chair confirmed that a Housing Repairs working group meeting had taken place and that the committee would be updated later in the meeting.

51 RESPONSES TO REPORTS OF THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The chair confirmed that recommendations had recently gone to Cabinet recently regarding lobbying Government and he would be chasing that up.

The chair also confirmed that he had met with the new MP who has offered to work on the councils behalf on this matter.

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

There we no items to be considered.

53 QUARTER TWO 2023/24 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The chair noted that apologies had been received from the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council and handed over to the Chief Executive to introduce the report of the Leader of the Council to provide the Committee with an overview of Council performance for the second quarter of the 2023-24 financial year (July to September 2023). It reports the position in relation to progress with strategic projects and updates on the financial position, corporate risk, audit, information governance and complaints. Cabinet will consider the report on 30th November 2023.

The Chief Executive introduced the new Executive Director for Finance, and Section 151 Officer, Rebecca Smeathers and thanked Pardeep Kateria for the work on producing the new format of the report before highlighting the following information from the reported –

- Section 2 – The Future High Street Fund is showing as Amber due to extreme cost pressures on the programme and will be address via a report going to Full Council in December to look at the project.
- Section 3 – looks at the general spend in quarter 2.
- Section 3.2 – looks at a Universal Credit summary at a point in time and shows a small increase in trends.
- Section 3.3 – looks at the impact of welfare benefit reform included at members request. This shows things are broadly the same.
NNDR figures are broadly similar to previous years however some distorted figures are shown due to a reduction in retail relief and the additional post-Covid grant.
Council Tax collection rates were slightly above target.
The Assistant Direct, neighbourhoods clarified the housing figures – the numbers on Universal credit had increased due to continued migration on to the new system. Collection rates on current arrears have improved from this time last year.
Write Offs – whilst amounts are written off, the Council will continue to try to recover these.
Live caseload of Universal Credit has remained stable.
- Section 3.4 – the Medium Term Financial Strategy was introduced by Rebecca Smeathers who highlighted that that the general fund monitoring position is showing a £1.4m underspend against the approved budget which is attributed to interest rates on balances.
Housing revenue account currently has an underspend however is predicted to be in line with budget by the end of the year. Capital expenditure is also showing an underspend.

- Section 4 - The Corporate Risk Management register remains largely unchanged however uncertainty over local Government finance has impacted.
- Section 5 – Audit update, it was highlighted that figures do not match with the Audit and Governance report that was shared at Committee in October, and that the Council has achieved 25% (not 0%) of the Audit plan which includes three audits deferred from 2022/2023, it is expected that we will achieve audit plan by year end.
- Section 6 – Information Governance data. This is the second quarter of the new processes, so it is difficult to read trends from this until there is twelve months of data.

The committee made the following comments/observations and asked the following questions:

1. Clarification around where target figures came from? Are they benchmarking of comparing with figures from previous years?
Officers confirmed that where areas are within the corporate plan then targets are based on milestones set within this, however benchmarking is used within finance and housing, however, it was highlighted by the Chair that previous Council experience has shown that benchmarking can be subjective.
2. Where the improvement in corporate risk has come from?
Officers confirmed that the current risk has remained as a 4, it is the risk likelihood that has improved from a 4 to a 3.
The monitoring in place would impact on the likelihood and the current underspend would impact on their position, however it was noted that whilst the risk is improved it is still in the red status and very much on the radar and being monitored and that there are still long term challenges.
The committee asked then how this improvement was sensitive to interest rate changes as there is still uncertainty over this?
Officers confirmed that this was based on interest rates already received on reserve balances. Interest rate projections and sensitivity will be considered when setting the upcoming budget.
The chair highlighted that the Council have a history of over performing on interest rates which is a credit to Council Officers.
3. Clarification over the 'General Fund Main Variances table' as the table is difficult to interpret the figures as red usually represents a negative figure and why, if red is a positive figure, do the catering sales appear to show a loss of £130k and what the position around the assembly rooms was.
Officers advised that this was being looked into and agreed to provide a briefing note to explain the table and understanding around these figure.
4. Clarification around the charts on tenants arrears as we seem to be showing an increasing level of arrears whilst evictions are low, but you would expect evictions to start increasing and what plan is in place?
Officer confirmed that the graph relates to current tenant arrears but the figure that is being referred to as increasing is across all areas including former tenant, garage, court costs and garages. However, although evictions remain low work is ongoing around tenancy sustainment.
5. Clarification around Council tax collection rates of 58%.

The chair confirmed that the collection rate is current collection for the year so far, officers added that the figure was the collection rate at the end of quarter two and a collection rate of over 50% is considered good at this stage.

6. Clarification around the medium term financial strategy central case which suggests that the Council would be 3.3 million pound short after 3 years. Officers confirmed that these shortfall figures are from when the budget was set in February however this has improved due to the underspend and that these would be revised.

7. Clarification around the enabling works at the Peel Café and why this historic building was demolished?

Officers confirmed that when the report was written enabling works were to remove the frontage and the rear extension. The original planning permission was to remove the rear elevation and the shop front, it also included the removal of the first floor to improve ceiling heights, and removal of the second, whilst removing the rotten windows at the front and back and removal of the staircase.

Once the building was surveyed it was identified that the roof sub structure was rotten and needed to be removed which led to an amendment of the planning permission which left a front and rear façade which was to be maintained by inserting steel across them.

The condition of the brickwork was very poor and the most feasible option was to remove and reinstate the front and rear elevations.

The Chief Executive clarified that a meeting took place in August to discuss the technical appraisal and the additional costs of propping the building it was agreed that a further planning amendment was necessary to remove the two façade walls.

The chair, whilst highlighting that he did not hold Officers responsible for this action, acknowledged that questions needs to be answered on the issue as this has upset residents, the Civic Society and Councillors over the lack of consultation on this matter.

Members of the committee confirmed that they would be happy to hold the political leadership to account on this matter.

The committee agreed not to endorse the item until the Leader or Deputy leader were able to attend to discuss this item.

The committee accepted that the deputy leader was not present as not invited to attend.

Resolved that Committee did not endorse the report

(Moved by Councillor D Cook and seconded by Councillor S Doyle)

54 UPDATE ON THE SOCIAL HOUSING REGULATORY PROGRAMME FOLLOWING CONSIDERATION BY CABINET

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning introduced the report which was presented to Cabinet on the 26th October to update them on the comprehensive

preparations for the council's compliance with the Social Housing (regulation) Act 2023. Specifically, the: Programme Launch and associated Project(s) management infrastructure, Terms of Reference and assurance sought via the Housing & Homelessness Advisory Board, Collection of required Tenant Satisfaction Measures in readiness for submission to the Regulator Social Housing by April 2024, Procurement of external resources to collate and prepare for submission by April 2024, required tenant perception measures and associated improvement planning. The report was now being present to Corporate Scrutiny to review.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted the following –

- This is a programme that includes eight projects that feed into the areas of the regulatory changes brought in by the Social Housing Regulation Act many of which are also being discussed through the Housing and Homelessness Advisory Board which includes the Tenant Consultative Group
- The Act and its changes are a good thing that will help strengthen the tenants voice, improve the standards of home and elevate complaint handling.
- Risks to be aware of that will increase pressure on the Council include burden of continuous regulatory oversight, increased financial risk (fines for non-compliance) and additional reputational risk (regulator can 'name and shame')
- Complaints is an area of focus which is important to ensure tenants voice will be continuously heard and there will be engagement with officers on this.
- Repairs and safety including monitoring of repairs and how they are undertaken will be monitored and presented back to members including the issue of damp and mould.

The Assistant Director, Neighbourhoods highlighted the following –

- The council could potentially be facing inspection from April 2024.
- The programme provides an infrastructure which is organisational wide falling under several directors.
- The pack includes the latest tenant satisfaction measures in 3 parts. The 10 management indicators that the government requires from next year. The second section around the tenant's satisfaction measure which will be supported by field work before it needs to be published next year and what tenants would like to see in terms of performance management which are to be discussed at the cross-party board meeting.
- Since Cabinet on 26th October, we have a new housing minister Lee Rowley who has confirmed commitment to the new regulatory framework, continuing Social Housing quality updates, regulators are doing spotlights on items such as complaints and damp and mould which could form the basis of a risk assessment around who is inspected first.
- Internal comms are being formed and we are looking at ensuring that the tenants consultative group have the skills to hold members and officer's to account.

The Committee made the following comments/observations and asked the following questions:

- Clarification around the why some of the documents were showing as restricted? And why the 'smiley faces' seem to be the wrong way around which doesn't appear to make sense.
Officers confirmed that this is because the report was initially published for the Housing and Homelessness Advisory Board which is not a public meeting but that the content does not need to be restricted.
The 'smiley faces' come from the tenant consultative workshop but that this has been changed for the board meeting next week.
- In the Engagement and accountability workstream the report only refers to complaints, but that engagement goes far wider than this and what else is happening?
The officer clarified that the work being done around engagement is much wider than complaints, including customer insight, how we tailor services through equality and diversity and inclusivity, and engaging tenants to influence and scrutinise activities.
- Clarification around the increase showing in ASB cases from April to August?
The officer highlighted that this could be attributed to new measures being applied due to new definitions and how those cases are treated, additionally the implementation of the new neighbourhood impact team had been working to openly encourage the reporting of anti-social behaviour.

Resolved that the committee

Endorsed the five recommendations that went to Cabinet

(Moved by Councillor D Cook and seconded by Councillor B Price)

55 WORKING GROUP UPDATES

The chair confirmed that a meeting of the housing repairs working group chaired by Vice-Chair D Maycock. had taken place on the 13th November and minutes have been circulated.

The Assistant Director, Assets attended to report on damp and mould.

Members had an opportunity to ask questions and clarifications such as, capital works and how the council record interventions and residents' willingness to respond to recommendations from inspections.

Actions for the officer following the meeting –

Further information has been requested for in a months' time.

It has been requested that Equans attend to talk to the group.

A request for the RAG rating report in relation to damp and mould.
Recommendations to Cabinet considered so far – to add additional resources to the repairs team.

56 FORWARD PLAN

There were no items identified from the Forward Plan.

57 CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PLAN & ACTION LOG

The committee agreed to request the quarterly performance report from the meeting return to the Committee at the next scheduled meeting on the 7th December.

The chair closed the meetings at 19:10.

Chair