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OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 DECEMBER 2021

Present: Councillors Battley (Chair), Patmore (Vice-Chair), Arthur, Bishop, Edwards, Fernado, Pragnell, Roark and Turner

89. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies received from Councillor Webb

90. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor	Item	Interest
Pragnell	3	Personal – Works at Department for Work and Pensions

91. PERFORMANCE MONITORING QUARTER 2 (2021/22) UPDATE

The Continuous Improvement and Democratic Services Manager reported to the committee the Quarter two 2021-2022 performance Monitoring. This covers July to September. Each of the service areas within the council has their own part on the dashboard with targets. All red or amber targets will have an explanation on their performance.

The Managing director highlighted capacity and issues moving to Plan B. Staff safety is paramount, and the council are working closely with NHS to help assist the vaccine roll out. The council will keep delivering its services as well as keeping staff and the town safe.

The Committee members asked questions with the Portfolio Holders and Managing Director available to answer.

Why have no Long term empty properties been returned to use in this quarter?

The housing portfolio holder updated the committee that after a very successful beginning to the empty homes strategy there are now a large number of single flats which are very complicated to free up with no national database. Cuts to funding and staff capacity have had an impact.

How is sickness informed, is sickness impacting on services?

The portfolio holder explained that many departments are at critical levels with staff capacity being reached. There are concerns regarding mental health issues. The HR department has support on offer for staff. The managing director informed the committee that the sickness within the council has improved on previous years. COVID 19 has impacted staff and their families.

How far past five days are Land searches being returned?

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The council leader agreed that it would be helpful to see how far the target is missed and this will be requested and updated. Unfortunately, staffing capacity issues remain within the planning department.

Has there been an overspend on agency staff in Planning and Housing?

The council leader confirmed some agency staff have been used in the planning department though there is still a recruitment drive to employ planners. Planning officers not working in the public sector is a large issue across the country. The council has been able to attract a planning policy officer back to the borough give scope to work from home.

Has the increase in Universal credit having any effect on housing options?

The housing portfolio officer reported it is too early to see the impact of the £20 reduction and additional tapers. Utility bill increases are having a large impact on residents and this could continue into next year. Affordable accommodation is very hard to find now within the borough with over 400 units of temporary accommodation being used at the moment. Figures will be brought to the next O&S meeting to look further into the impact. The Managing director informed the committee that household support fund has had to be closed as all the support had been claimed. There are discussions for the ESCC to expand the fund.

Can official and formal responses be sent to job applicants?

The managing director informed the committee she will speak with the HR department and see if any changes are needed. A later update was given after speaking with HR staff. Email notifications will be enabled for applicants, so they no longer need to sign in to see their application status.

Is the planning service overspending and over exceeding?

The council leader agreed this needs to be looked and she will be doing so the relevant managers.

The chair asked that staff be thanked for their hard work and achievements to date.

92. FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORTS FOR 2021/22- QUARTER 2

The Chief Accountant gave a summary of the revised outturn position for services at the end of September 2021 (excluding capital financing charges and recharges). The report is quarter two though this is in the middle of budget setting.

The figures in the report highlight any major variances.

Rough sleepers are an overspend. Are there any government grants upcoming?

The Chief Accountant answered that any grant the finance team are aware of has been built into the figures in the report. The finance portfolio holder answered that

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due to COVID rough sleeper shelters are not able to be used which has a large impact on costs. There have been government grants come in but it's rarely enough.

Syrian Resettlement programme is showing an underspend. What are the reasons?

The finance portfolio answered that the program payments are very complex, and some payments had not been previously reclaimed. The managing director informed the committee that some government money is paid in arrears.

Regarding Parking and leisure are there further Covid payments coming from government?

The Chief Accountant updated the committee that some losses in parking and leisure have been able to be claimed back but not all of the losses. The grants claimed are reflected in the report. The finance portfolio holder stated the government has made some compensation payments to the council for loss of council income. These were mainly due to lock downs.

93. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME UPDATES

93.1 Council Motions update

Councillor Battley conducted a review focussed on considering motions received by Council and associated next steps since the motions were tabled. Motions seem to have got a lot longer and some motions have been repeated. Recommendations put forward are:

Agreed motions requiring actions should name a relevant person who will be responsible for completing and reporting on the outcome. Where longer term-based motions are agreed, this may mean being made part of the day-to-day work of the council across multiple areas.

A motion tracker should be created and maintained by democratic services showing the progress of actions passed.

Public tracker should be viewable on the council's website. This will need developing and scoping for best format.

A report should be made to Full Council every 6 months to review the motions passed during that period and the actions undertaken. This will require a constitutional change that will first need to go to WAG for approval.

The Managing director informed the committee that all work must be assessed and be capacity checked.

94. SEA CHANGE UPDATE

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Councillor Patmore gave a verbal update. Unfortunately planning issues has stopped the planned meeting with Sea Change. It is hoped to put some questions to Sea Change that are not relevant to a live planning application in the new year.

Cllr Barnett gave an update that its hoped Sea Change will be making a public a statement about the Queensway gateway Road.

95. EQUALITIES AND WOMEN'S SAFETY

Councillor Arthur gave a verbal update. Work on equalities will begin in January with a meeting with Cllr Rogers. Work has been concentrated reviewing the application that has been made to The Safer Street Fund installation of lighting and CCTV in Alexandra Park. A few issues have been identified including the lack of consultation with Park users, individuals and groups, women's groups, residents of Saint Helens Rd on how they might be impacted by the additional lighting and removal of vegetation along that side of the park and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly people who we know are disproportionately targeted by police. The group was told that due to the time constraints on the funding, it has been deemed that there's no time for consultation with any of those groups and on the commitment in our corporate plan to ensure our decisions reflect best practice. A data driven transparent and take account of equality, diversity, and environmental impact. No evidence is available to demonstrate that that lighting will reduce violence against women and girls. And we're told that it's very difficult to find evidence to prove this. But it's believed that there will be an impact when it's used alongside other safety measures. The government timeframes for funding releases often allow insufficient time for councils who have to implement it or to do due diligence.

The Managing Director and the Council Leader have been disappointed with the way the funding was offered from government and CCTV would not be installed without consultation with residents. The Managing Director will encourage the OPC in the Home Office to change their funding arrangement.

(The Chair declared the meeting closed at 19:26PM)