

Overview & Scrutiny Board Minutes

Tuesday 8 April 2014

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Alex Karmel (Chairman), Donald Johnson, Steve Hamilton, Harry Phibbs, PJ Murphy and Max Schmid

Other Councillors: Councillors Nicholas Botterill and Mark Loveday

Officers: Craig Bowdery (Scrutiny Manager), Jackie Hudson (Director for Procurement & IT) and Jane West (Executive Director for Finance & Corporate Governance)

120. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4th March 2014 be approved and signed as a correct record.

The Chairman reported that following the Board's January meeting and the discussion of consultation on National Non Domestic Rates, he had spoken to Brandon Lewis MP about the issue, who explained that repealing the requirement was unlikely.

121. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Jones, Ivimy and Ford.

122. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

123. UPDATE ON THE TRI-BOROUGH ICT PROGRAMME

The Board received a report from the Tri-Borough Chief Information Officer updating on the progress implementing a tri-borough programme of ICT provision.

Members noted previous reports that tri-borough teams had experienced difficulties aligning systems with some teams using multiple systems for the same tasks, and asked whether this had been resolved. Officers explained that significant progress had been made with many systems now shared. Adults Services, Children's Services and the Library Service would soon be converging systems, with Transport & Technical Services and Environment, Leisure & Resident Services still in discussions regarding which system to converge upon. The Board also discussed the provision of telephony and remote working, and were informed that there had been a recent telephony study. An approach used by Westminster was recommended to be rolled-out across the tri-borough, where all employees had a 'mobile' number that could be accessed wherever they were working from. An alternative approach was to use Openscape to allow officers' phone numbers to move with them.

The Board also discussed the use of external IT experts alongside existing staff to support the programme, and asked how much the external support had cost and from where the existing staff had been drawn. Officers undertook to investigate and provide the costs of the external support. It was also explained that the resources had been required for project management of the programme following the need to replace a key member of staff from Westminster and the lack of continuity. The internal support was put in place following advertisements for secondments across the tri-borough and with external partners. There were four Strategic Relationship Manager positions, two of which had been filled by officers working for the Bridge Partnership, one from RBKC and one remained vacant. There was also a Programme Manager who had been recruited from Bridge. The secondments did not mean that other work was now not being delivered as the Council had agreed a different arrangement with Bridge, whereby a post had been back-filled. The vacant post, whilst not ideal, was not currently having an adverse impact as it was being covered by the Director for Procurement & IT while efforts were made to recruit to it.

Action: Director for Procurement & IT

The Board sought confirmation of officers' confidence that the programme would be delivered on time and in budget. Officers explained that given the quality of experienced providers involved and budgetary projections, they had high confidence that the project would be finished both on time and in budget.

RESOLVED –

That the Board note the progress made delivering a tri-borough IT programme.

124. HIGH LEVEL REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING QUARTER 3 REPORT 2013-14

The Board received a report from the Executive Director of Finance & Corporate Governance presenting the revenue monitoring position at the end of January 2014.

The Board welcomed the news that the General Fund was over £7million underspent and expressed its congratulations to officers involved, and asked whether this was likely to continue. Officers explained that the underspend was to help prepare for the coming year, when budgets would be lower. It was however expected that the Council would continue to underspend each year, albeit on a lesser scale.

Members noted a £400,000 income shortfall for the Careline budget as part of the Community Independence Service. Officers explained that this was a budget that had been challenging for a number of years and that whilst it was improving, they did not think the current operating model was correct. Officers were working on ways to further improve the service and to establish a more sustainable income, details of which would be circulated to all members. Members welcomed the efforts to improve the service and described their experience that Careline was an excellent service offering value for money for customers, while also helping them to stay in their own homes, which had the additional bonus of saving the Council money.

Action: Executive Director for Finance & Corporate Services

The Board also asked about underspend in staff costs for the Mental Health service and whether there had been a negative impact on service provision caused by fewer staff. Officers reported that this saving was part of a re-shaping of the service and so the staff would not be replaced. The details of the restructure were given in the Annual Budget agreed in January 2014, when the Equalities Impact Assessment had not indicated that there would be any negative impact caused.

RESOLVED –

That the Board note the forecast General Fund underspend of £7.66m and the forecast HRA underspend of £0.373m.

**125. HIGH LEVEL CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT, 2013/14
QUARTER 3**

The Board received a report from the Executive Director for Finance & Corporate Governance presenting the capital budget monitoring at the end of January 2014.

The Board noted the slippage in the Schools Organisation Strategy and asked whether this could make the Council's VAT position worse. Officers explained that the slippage had been as a result of the schools programme allocations being received late from Government and confirmed that the delay would have no impact on the Council's VAT position.

Members also sought clarification on the last time the Council's debt was below the current level. Officers explained that they had been investigating the issue but it was difficult to get a precise date. It was however definitely during the 1980s.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

126. THE BUSINESS RATES SCRUTINY TASK GROUP: FINAL REPORT

The Board received a report from the Bi-Borough Director of Law presenting the final report of the Business Rates Scrutiny Task Group.

Noting the high number of overdue appeals in the Borough described in the report, members asked if the situation had shown any signs of improvement. Officers explained that the appeals process was still going slowly, but the cost impact was being mitigated by claiming back through the 'safety net' level set by Government. It was however unclear whether councils would continue to be allowed to do so.

The Board also welcomed the recommendations to allow increased vinyl-wrapping of vacant shop fronts. Members asked whether a planning condition could be placed on premises when they applied for change of use to a shop that required owners to permit vinyl-wrapping should the shop become vacant. It was however not clear whether such a condition could be applied, and officers undertook to investigate.

Action: Scrutiny Manager

Members sought clarification regarding recommendation xi in the report that would allow properties to convert from commercial to residential in shopping areas by contracting from the edges of the shopping area to protect the continuity of shopping parades. It was agreed that the wording of the recommendation should be revised to replace 'town centres' with 'shopping areas'.

RESOLVED –

- i) That subject to the amendment to recommendation xi detailed above, the Business Rates Scrutiny Task Group Final Report be noted and approved, and forwarded to the relevant decision-making bodies.
- ii) That the Board receive a report at the earliest opportunity outlining the decision-makers' responses to the recommendations, and then a further report six months later on the progress made implementing the recommendations.

127. SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS

Reports from the three Select Committee chairmen updating on recent meetings were tabled.

RESOLVED –

That the reports be noted.

128. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME AND THE KEY DECISION LIST

A report from the Scrutiny Manager on the Board's Work Programme and the list of forthcoming Key Decisions was received.

RESOLVED –

That the report be noted.

Meeting started: 7.00 pm

Meeting ended: 7.55 pm

Chairman

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