

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

MINUTES OF CORPORATE POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL MEETING

Tuesday, 17th September, 2024

Present:- **Councillors** Robin Moss, Lucy Hodge, Ian Halsall, Malcolm Treby, Duncan Hounsell and Shaun Hughes (in place of Colin Blackburn)

Apologies for absence: Councillors: Hal MacFie, Toby Simon and George Tomlin

91 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

92 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

93 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

Apologies were received from:

Councillor Colin Blackburn (substituted by Councillor Shaun Hughes)
Councillor Toby Simon
Councillor Hal MacFie
Councillor George Tomlin

94 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

95 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

96 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

There were none

97 MINUTES

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chair.

98 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Mark Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources, gave an update which covered the following:

- The current primary focus is on the areas that are predicted to be over budget (Corporate Estate, Waste Management and Children's Services). The Cabinet Member is having regular meetings with the relevant Heads of Service.
- Regarding Children's Services, the Cabinet Member stated that there is a commitment to providing the best care to vulnerable children and also to looking at ways to best support them. He reported that the top 10 cases represent 20% of the budget.
- Regarding the BOB (Being Our Best) Programme, he reported that this programme is aimed at making the Council organisational structure fit for purpose (Great jobs, smarter structures and cultural excellence). The Cabinet Member reported good progress and engagement with Trade Unions. He stated that this is a significant piece of work and that the lead officer could give a full update at a future meeting of the Panel.

Councillor Halsall asked if Corporate Estate and Waste Management departments are being realistic in setting their budgets. The Cabinet Member explained that it is an exercise in lifting the lid and seeing what departments need and to get better visibility on this. The Executive Director (Operations) explained that in Waste Services there are some underlying pressures (staff costs/sickness pay etc). Budgets are now very lean. It is a heavy staff-based service. There is now a better understanding of the cost base.

The Executive Director (Sustainable Communities) explained that the underlying issues regarding the Corporate Estate are also being explored. There are three main issues – the cost of empty assets (eg Culverhay); lost income/rent for assets and plans to make savings in the running of the Corporate Estate which has been more challenging than anticipated.

Councillor Treby asked if there were any themes regarding the Corporate Estate savings and empty buildings. The Executive Director explained that a big issue is the cost of maintaining buildings which can fall within different budgets. Also, some recruitment (eg surveyors) can be difficult.

Councillor Halsall asked if any short-term measures could help such as short-term lease of properties while they are empty. The Executive Director explained that this is done already – an example is the short-term lease shops currently in the Post Office building.

Councillor Hodge asked if we are getting anywhere with Commercial Estate contributions regarding maintenance. The Cabinet Member explained that this is being worked on but there have been recruitment issues in the maintenance area. He is pleased with the progress on the Commercial Estate.

Councillor Hughes asked if these events could have been predicted at the time the budget was set and are there any more surprises to come. The Cabinet Member explained that you can never know everything, especially with demand led services. The Executive Director added that she is reasonably secure that there are no further

surprises and Quarter 2 should show the pressure coming down (this will be reported to the Panel at the next meeting).

Councillor Moss asked about the BOB programme and how many appeals there had been regarding the role profiles. The Executive Director explained that around 1000 job descriptions had been replaced with 350 role profiles. It is a two-stage process, there have been less than 100 follow up enquiries. Discussions with Trade Unions are confidential. The next letter to staff will be sent towards the end of this year.

Councillor Moss asked about the Guildhall market roof window which fell in this afternoon. Stall holders had highlighted concerns and there are cracks in similar windows. The Executive Director stated that this will be swiftly repaired. Regular assessments are done to establish priorities on the Corporate and Commercial Estate as we cannot afford to do everything. The roof of the Victoria Art Gallery is currently being replaced.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and Executive Directors.

99 2025/26 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Councillor Mark Elliott, Cabinet Member for Resources, introduced the item, making the following points:

- This document is a holding pattern based on assumptions until the Chancellors statement in October when there may have to be readjustments.
- The financial position of the Council is sound.
- Children's Services continues to present extraordinary challenges.
- Adult Social Care – we have made the move to bring this back in house.
- Heritage and Parking Services are performing well.

Panel members made the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Halsall asked if we are going to ask the Government about a tourist tax. The Cabinet Member explained that this was an idea that is being floated.

Councillor Halsall asked if the Cabinet Member believed that the Government recognised that a World Heritage City is in a unique position. The Cabinet Member explained that, being a relatively small authority, we need to emphasise our particular issues.

Councillor Hounsell asked why highways showed an underspend when there is so much work to do. The Executive Director (Operations) explained that the Highways cost centre is a mix of income and expenditure. The figure showing an underspend is showing income rather than a reduced spend. She gave assurance that we are on track in terms of revenue and capital.

Following a question from Councillor Treby, the Cabinet Member explained that he would be surprised if there was an underspend on revenue. Regarding capital expenditure – there may be an underspend as we want to have a better understanding of the work to be delivered. The Executive Director (Sustainable Communities) explained that a more professional delivery function is being

developed regarding the capital programme and sometimes there is a proactive decision to delay a capital spend.

Councillor Treby asked if it would be better to budget slightly higher regarding revenue and slightly lower for capital. The Executive Director explained that an underspend is budgeted regarding capital.

Councillor Hughes stated that he was reassured that the issues in Children's Services are being tackled. He asked if the Heritage Business Plan had been updated to show the latest figures. The Executive Director stated that she would get back to the Panel to explain the discrepancy.

Councillor Hughes stated his concerns about supporting businesses especially in relation to North East Somerset parking charges. The Cabinet Member stated that economic development money is being invested in Midsomer Norton high street regeneration and he disagreed regarding parking charges. Councillor Hughes stated that the bulk of investment in the town is in the Market Square, this was a Heritage Issue. We would not have chosen that. He added that sometimes projects take away money from where it should have been spent. The Cabinet Member stated that he would not characterise this as a misspend. Decisions on where money is spent are not within his portfolio.

Councillor Moss stated that some of the investment in the Somer Valley is reliant on partnerships.

Councillor Hodge asked the following questions. *Cabinet Member and officer responses are in italics:*

- What proportion of the budget is transferred to reserves and how much is allocated to the BOB programme? *The officer explained that £3m is temporary allocation for potential corrective payments.*
- Is the budget based on the assumption that the Government will limit Council Tax increases to 2%? *The Cabinet Member explained that we do not know what the Government will decide.*
- Heritage income generation is in the table – is this year's budget predicated on this and how confident are we of another increase. *The figures have been agreed with Heritage Services. It is an ambitious business plan following the recovery from Covid. There are projections on the return of the Chinese market and more yield per visitor.*

Councillor Halsall asked about Children's Services and whether we are getting best value when using third parties. He asked if we would save money if we brought SEND services in house. The Cabinet member stated that this would save money as currently it depends on who can meet the needs of a particular child, and it is a market with limited competition by 'for profit' companies. The Executive Director explained that the cost drivers are demand and cost per placement. She added that it is a volatile market and the type of child and need it changing. She stated that work can be done around social care such as with fostering families. We can look at the best packages and spend money wisely.

In response to a question from Councillor Treby, The Cabinet Member explained that some assumptions are made in the budget planning around contract inflation (residential places). There is still more work to do.

Councillor Moss referred to the proposed cuts to voluntary sector organisations being spread over 2 years in response to pressure. He stated that help is only starting now rather than at the time the budget was set. He asked if there were any pressures likely to come up in February – he mentioned Housing Revenue Account and Safety Valve. The Cabinet Member explained that there are discussions around community contracts, but we are not aligned with those organisations on how much engagement they were expecting. The Executive Director explained that there was a meeting with the current providers in May. We are managing the savings this year and will make sure there is no cliff edge. There will be a further two engagement sessions over the next few weeks. We do recognise the message coming back from the sector and we hear it.

Regarding the Housing Revenue Account (point raised by Councillor Moss), the Cabinet Member explained that external advice had been sought. The cost is already being built into the budget for the development of housing. Regarding the Safety Valve – this is an issue for central government to sort out.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members and Executive Directors.

100 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the future workplan with the following:

November 2024 likely items:

- Quarter 2 Monitoring Report
- ADL Annual Report
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme Update

Other possible future items:

- BOB (Being Our Best) Programme
- New Performance Indicators (when available for Scrutiny)

The meeting ended at 5.15 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services