

Meeting	Corporate Services, Climate Change and Scrutiny Management Committee
Date	7 October 2024
Present	Councillors Fenton (Chair), Merrett (Vice-Chair), Ayre (until 7.30 pm), B Burton, Coles, Crawshaw, Healey, Melly, Rose, Waller, Whitcroft, Steward (Substitute for Cllr Rowley, from 5.35 pm) and Mason (Substitute for Cllr Widdowson, until 7.31pm)
Apologies	Councillors Rowley and Widdowson
In attendance	Cllr Lomas, Executive Member for Finance and Major Projects
Officers Present	Debbie Mitchell, Director of Finance, Sec 151 Officer Ian Cunningham, Head of Business Intelligence Hub Lindsay Tomlinson, Head of Democratic Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer

19. Declarations of Interest (5.33 pm)

Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interest, or other registerable interest, they might have in respect of business on the agenda, if they have not already done so in advance on the Register of Interests.

None were declared.

20. Minutes (5.33pm)

Resolved: That the minutes of the last meeting held on 09 September 2024 were approved as a correct record.

21. Public Participation (5.33pm)

It was reported that there had been no registrations to speak at the meeting under the Council's Public Participation Scheme.

22. Finance and Performance Monitor 1 2024/25 (5.33 pm)

The Director of Finance (DoF) introduced the outturn report for 2023/24, noting that whilst the outturn had improved considerably, an overspend remained.

The DoF and the Head of Business Intelligence Hub answered questions from Members covering the underspend in HR, national or regional comparators for EHC benchmarking, current data for carbon emissions, analysis of the impact of holding vacancies, average sick days, the social and demographic profile of the Talkabout panel, the number of 'difficult' calls to the call centre, the underspend in the Corporate, Customer and Communities Directorate and the loss of external payroll contracts.

Officers reported that the Corporate Management Team (CMT) had not received concerns from managers relating to the holding of vacancies. The Medigold scheme was assisting in the management of staff sickness and long-term sickness remained at a steady level. The Talkabout panel was geographically balanced, and efforts were ongoing through comms, social media and the Youth Council to engage u18's. Call centre recruitment and retention had improved, and information provided on the website was also better at meeting resident needs. The loss of external payroll contracts was largely due to multi academy trusts using their own payroll systems, external payroll contracts were not actively sought as it was difficult to be competitive.

The officers went on to introduce the Finance and Performance Q1 report for 2024/25. The DoF explained that there was a forecast overspend of £3m, reduced from £11m, and that cost control measures would continue.

Members asked a number of questions covering the data in the report, the number of complaint closures and how these were measured, the renting out of West Offices, full time or full time equivalent staff numbers, meeting strategic priorities, the processing of housing benefit claims and the data provided relating to information and governance.

Officers reported that:

- They were investigating why complaints, although completed in service areas, had not been closed down on IT systems as had happened previously.
- The DoF would review the figures for the rental of West Offices to ensure they were not over-estimated. The offices were nearly full, and the remaining space was more difficult to rent out.

- They were not aware of any difficulties with Housing Benefit claims, noting a commendation on the performance had been received from the Department of Work and Pensions.
- The data for the closure of Fols was a year-on-year comparison.

Resolved:

- i. That the finance and performance information be noted.
- ii. That the ongoing work to mitigate the overspend be noted.

Reason: To ensure that expenditure was kept within the approved budget.

23. Budget Setting Process (6.12 pm)

Members also received a report from the Director of Finance outlining the budget setting process. She highlighted the financial challenges facing all local authorities, stating that £30m must be saved over the next three years. She confirmed that once proposals were ready for consideration, a further report would be brought to scrutiny.

Questions from Members included the timescales of the budget consultation, council communications and the response from social media, the cost of consultation and HR support for cut service areas.

It was confirmed that:

- The proposals would be brought forward for consultation at November's scrutiny meeting of the Corporate Services, Climate Change and Scrutiny Management Committee. The proposals would be published in October, these would be suggestions and therefore would not be fully costed.
- The council communications team and external facilitators would be used to articulate the difficult messages regarding the budget.

Cllr Lomas, Executive Member for Finance and Major Projects outlined phase one of the consultation and confirmed it had proved useful, especially the workshops which allowed for more detailed communication. Responses from social media were being collated and fed into the findings. She acknowledged the importance of clear messaging, noting that cuts were related to the revenue budget whereas direct funding was given for a specific purpose and would have to be returned if not spent.

Resolved: That the report be noted and to receive a budget proposal report in November.

Reason: To keep the committee informed of any financial issues.

24. Review of the Scrutiny Function (6.52 pm)

The Head of Democratic Governance introduced the latest update to the review of the scrutiny function and reported that the cost of an independent, evidence-based review, led by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) was £17k. Funding of £7k had been secured through the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Director of Finance had agreed funding for the balance, as the review was linked to the corporate improvement plan.

Members asked a number of questions concerning the structure of the review, timescales and outcomes. The following was reported:

- It was anticipated that the review would start in November and a draft report should be available by early 2025.
- Both Officers and Members would be included in the review process.
- A variety of methods would be used to secure feedback, including email, focus groups and one to ones. The choice would be led by Member preference.
- The review would not include external feedback due to the additional cost involved.
- Officer support for scrutiny would be considered alongside the review, the outcome of which would drive the resourcing of the scrutiny function.

Members were broadly in support of the proposal for the review of the scrutiny function and it was:

Resolved: That the report be noted.

Reason: To keep the committee updated.

25. Work Plan (7.30 pm)

Members considered the Scrutiny work plan for the four scrutiny committees.

Resolved: That the work plan be noted.

Reason: To ensure an overview of the scrutiny work programme.

Cllr S Fenton, Chair

[The meeting started at 5.32 pm and finished at 7.35 pm].