

Minutes of: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 10 December 2020

Present: Councillor R Caserta (in the Chair)
Councillors T Cummings, R Gold, J Harris, B Mortenson,
M Powell, S Smith, Susan Southworth, D.Vernon, R Walker
and C Walsh

Also in attendance: Councillor E O'Brien and T Tariq.

Public Attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Apologies for Absence: Councillor K Leach

OSC.392 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Karen Leach.

OSC.393 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Walsh declared a personal interest in item 7 as she was employed in the education sector within a local school.

OSC.394 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No members of the public were present virtually to ask questions and none had been pre submitted to the committee under this item.

OSC.395 MINUTES

That the Minutes of the last meeting held on the 16th September 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

That the Minutes of the call-in meeting held on the 2nd November 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the inclusion of three questions raised at the meeting by Councillor Harris being added into the minutes.

OSC.396 COVID 19 UPDATE

The Deputy Chief Executive, Lynne Ridsdale updated Members on the high risk situation Bury found itself in at this moment in time with high Covid infection figures. The first review of tiers would be announced next week by central government and a brief presentation was made on living with Covid and the key priorities to date.

A recap of the recovery programme was explained along with details of the Council's corporate plans for building back better which would be incorporated in the Bury 2030 strategy.

The Bury plan to manage Covid was by delivery of 4 work streams which would be underpinned by the finance.

Councillor Walker commented on Covid figures across GM and while other towns seemed to have reduced, the figures for Bury had increased. It was explained that the data for Bury was steady and whilst some towns had seen a reduction the level across GM was fluid.

The Chair commented on the number of volunteers available at the start of the outbreak and would a similar number be available again if required. It was reported that there was still enough capacity of people on call if required as some had returned to their places of employment. A volunteer strategy would be worked on and there was a need at present for marshals around the testing centres. The Chair added that rough sleepers had been temporarily placed in hotels back in March, would there be a repeat of this. It was reported that a different approach would be undertaken with a dispersal of them across accommodation in the area rather than all in one location.

Councillor Susan Southworth added that volunteers had been invaluable although parents with primary school aged children would be unable to help out if schools were to close again.

It was agreed:

That the contents of the presentation and report be noted.

OSC.397 INITIAL BUDGET UPDATE

Councillor Eamonn O'Brien, Leader and Cabinet Member for finance and growth presented a report about setting the 2021/22 Budget.

The context in which financial planning is being undertaken was perhaps the most complex and difficult of recent times. When the Council's 2020/21 budget was set uncertainties around Government policy and funding through the Comprehensive Spending Review, Local Government Finance Settlement, the Fairer Funding Review, the Business Rates Retention Review and potentially other major reforms existed. Whilst a challenging situation then, this was without the emergence and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which would continue to have a significant financial impact on finances and on the wider economic position of the borough and region, for some time to come.

The extent of how long this would last economy wise cannot be predicted but will bring additional pressures in demand for the services provided by the Council and partners. The significant financial impact of Covid-19 cannot be underestimated and as the economic impact of Wave 1 is still unfolding the potential for an even greater impact of Wave 2 and beyond is one which the Council needs to consider and plan for.

Members of the committee were provided with a summary of the report which included:-

- The revised financial position.
- Managing shortfalls via a combination of reserves, budget reductions and

- efficiencies through transformation.
- The overall financial position over a 4 year period.
- Levels of reserves.

Councillor Powell commented on the community climate funding and it was reported that partner would be used to deliver more tree planting for less costs.

Councillor Mortenson asked about funding for the regeneration of Radcliffe and it was stated that the finance earmarked for that project would be protected.

Councillor Harris expressed concerns on overspending and the use of reserves. She also enquired if the Council had applied to the Bellwin scheme, which provided discretionary funds to help councils who face an undue financial burden as a result of large-scale emergencies. It was reported that the Council would expect to apply soon and careful consideration would be undertaken in terms of what the claim would be for.

Councillor Harris asked about work undertaken to engage a partner to lead on design and discovery analysis and it was reported that this had been applied for but not awarded to date.

The impact of Covid had also meant an overspend in some departments which would affect the delivery of some services provided. A discussion took place about an external transformation partner and there was a worry from some Members about the high costs of external consultants.

Councillor Smith asked if reserves would be used to make up the income shortfall from the closure of civic venues and car parking. She also had concerns about the possible closure of nurseries in the borough and the regression of children since the first lockdown.

The Leader reported that making savings would be difficult but working more closely with the local community, new partnerships and public sector reforms could help matters.

Councillor Vernon enquired if a full break down of extra Covid related costs would be made available. It was reported that a monthly breakdown was provided to central government

The Chair provided comments on Manchester airport and the loss of a dividend and loan interest repayment due to the impact of Covid on the travel industry which was detailed in the report.

The Chair also enquired about Council tax collection and it was reported that a mid-range scenario would be applied to the position of recovery.

Discussions also took place on the funding created to support transformation with the expectation that long term savings would be delivered via this scheme.

It was agreed:

That the contents of report be noted.

OSC.398 EDUCATION PERFORMANCE UPDATE

Councillor Tamoor Tariq, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Skills presented a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee about the impact of Covid 19 on education performance.

A summary on day to day running of schools was given along with how measures in place implemented by Head Teachers were working well.

The report focussed on the main areas where the pandemic and response had adversely impacted on the day to day experiences of children and young people across Bury on their educational outcomes and life chances. Despite the best efforts of parents, carers, teachers, professionals and help providers, the pandemic has created daily uncertainty and confusion about the future for young people.

The proposed strategies had been designed to manage and mitigate impact and recognise a need to keep a close watching brief. The effects of socio economic changes can trigger stress reactions and feelings of helplessness and despair which impact the abilities of adults to respond to the needs of children and young people.

The report also covered the following topics:-

- Well-being
- Educational Attainment
- Early Years
- Early Help
- Integrated Youth Service
- Safeguarding and Protection
- Life Chances
- Emerging Vulnerabilities and Strategies
- Funding

A range of issues and challenges had emerged as children and young people had returned to their setting/school in September. Concerns were raised with cohorts of newly identified vulnerable children and young people.

These new vulnerabilities have been attributed to a range of factors by Covid, including social isolation, lack of structure and certainty, bereavement, anxiety, loss of self-confidence and motivation.

Councillor Walsh added her thanks to teams of staff at all schools for their hard work and commented that a change of routine to a child who was classed as vulnerable could have huge implications.

Guidance and information had been provided to schools as well as outreach inclusion service. Working with local specialists and Salford Educational Psychology Service, Bury are implementing the national 'Wellbeing Return to Education' programme across the borough.

Councillor Susan Southworth requested confirmation within the safeguarding and protection part of the report around LAC sufficiency/foster carer availability.

The freedom & flexibilities in terms of changing foster carer approval categories and allowing carers to be able to call upon their own support networks to look after children ended in September. Was an update available as to whether the government would permit the reintroduction of these flexibilities.

Councillor Walker commented on early years and the closure of settings. The long term future was vital and a cause of concern was the impact on school readiness and levels of development measures. Members were happy to look at this item as a future scrutiny topic.

Councillor Stella Smith noted the safeguarding and protection of early years but would like to see data being provided at a future meeting in relation to domestic violence figures.

The Chair asked about educational attainment and the robust and continuing service re-set programme of the Lean Service review. He suggested that this be discussed a future committee and the Councillor Tariq was in agreement.

Julien Kramer, Interim Director of Education and Inclusion stated that over 850 extra laptops had been received for distance learning and would check to make sure these had all been distributed appropriately following some concerns they remained in schools.

A discussion took place on secondary school academies and only 4 remained under the local authority with the rest converted into an academy. The regeneration of Radcliffe included an academy and the Chair indicated that this topic could feature on the agenda for the final committee of the municipal year in March.

It was agreed:

That the contents of the report be noted.

OSC.399 AGILE WORKING

Lynne Ridsdale provided the meeting with a presentation on a flexible working model for both the Council and CCG.

An overview was provided on the Council estate and office space which included an update on the Town Hall building.

An internal transformation programme would provide an agile approach to delivery and flexible working was key to achieve space, reduce costs and provide opportunity for eco leadership via reduced staff travel and large scale facilities management.

Details were provided on why now was the correct timing to investigate agile working which would ease budget pressures and provide an immediate solution for the Town Hall.

An update was provided following the Cabinet meeting in mid-October about working from home unless by agree exception.

The proposed flexible model was detailed in the presentation and included information on a structured evaluation and the outlined pilot delivery plan from 2021 was explained.

A number of questions were raised by the committee and these included was the Town Hall a listed building. Whilst the building was not listed there was an understanding of the civic importance to the borough. It was noted that a number of other local authorities had worked this way for some time and Members had found the set up workable.

The Chair asked if the committee could be kept updated over the coming months.

It was agreed:

That the update be noted.

OSC.400 URGENT BUSINESS

No other business was reported.

COUNCILLOR R CASERTA
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.07pm)