

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 23rd March 2023

SUBJECT: Performance and Finance Sub-Group Update Report

REPORT FROM: Councillor D Vernon

CONTACT OFFICER: Chloe Ashworth, Senior Scrutiny Officer

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

To inform Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the work of the Performance and Finance Sub-Group over the last Municipal year.

2.0 BACKGROUND

As part of its work programme for 2022/23 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested that the Performance and Finance Sub-Group established in 2021 be continued to discuss the Councils Corporate Performance and Finance implications.

The Membership of the Group comprised of Councillor Dene Vernon (Chair), Councillors Bernstein and Birchmore.

Due to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee having themed meetings and full agenda's it was agreed that the sub-group be established to give time and space to have detailed briefings on aspects of Corporate Performance and budget queries. In September 2021 it was agreed that a formal sub committee of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be established. It was agreed that the Committee would meet at least four times a year.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The Group has met on the following occasions:-

05.07.2022
20.10.2022
15.12.2022
07.02.2023

Members were supported in their work by Lynne Ridsdale, Deputy Chief Executive, Kate Waterhouse, Chief Information Officer and Sam Evans, Chief Finance Officer Bart Popelier Strategic Lead Safeguarding, all of which work in the Corporate Core.

During this municipal year the Committee agreed that the focus for 2022/23 should include the following:

Corporate Performance – The Committee received regular updates from the Performance team and choose areas to do a deep-dive of the data.

The Council's Financial Position – The Committee has received reports on the Council's Financial Position.

Customer Service update – Members received an update on the Corporate Approach for how Bury Council deals with the public including casework, response times, timescales, complaints and Transformation work.

Sickness Level and Data – The Committee received in depth analysis on sickness levels and reasons across the departments.

Project Safety Valve– Scrutiny of Project Safety Valve has taken place at the Committee. Discussions took place regarding the emerging proposed new schools, the rising demand for in borough specialist provision and the demand pressures for Education, Health and Care Plans.

Performance Monitoring – Updates were received on the evolution of Corporate Performance monitoring.

Medium Term Financial Strategy- Updates were received on the Medium Term Financial Strategy refresh.

Members have continued to hold the Corporate Core and other Council Services to account by providing continued, effective, and constructive scrutiny of performance and finance within the Council.

4.0 WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE GROUP

4.1 Corporate Performance

Members considered this item at one meeting of the sub-committee. Representatives provided Members of the group with an update in respect of key delivery and performance outcomes that occurred aligned to the 3R priorities. The update focused on the data available to assess the cost-of-living position for Bury as this was a prevalent issue at the time of discussion.

Councillor Rafiq, Cabinet Member for Corporate Affairs and HR provided a summary of Quarter one two 2022-23. This focused on the data available to assess the cost-of-living position for Bury.

A discussion took place regarding the accessibility of the document and its timeliness. Members were informed that there are approximately 20 key items being reported on and the way forward may be using the format of a plan on a page per item each quarter. The usual report can be used as a highlight report with regular monthly updates.

These reports are being worked on and will be brought back to the group and an update on the proposal that has been submitted to the UKSPF fund to fund public space enhancements to be brought to a future meeting.

4.2 The Council's Financial Position

Members discussed the outline of the forecasted financial position of the Council at the end of the first quarter of the 2022/23 financial year based on information known on 30th June 2022. The report set out the position for both revenue and capital and provided an analysis of the variances, both under and overspending.

Discussions took place regarding utilities and the increase in costs. Members were informed the current three biggest pressures to meet the budget are the pay award, Children's Services pressure, and utility costs. Further discussions took place regarding offsetting loans, Bad debts and debt recovery.

4.3 Customer Service update

Members received an update on the Customer Contact Centre, Member and Casework Corporate Complaints. Karen Johnston, Head of Communications, Engagement and Marketing and Christine Seymour, Head of Customer Services provided the update to the group. The key areas that have been worked on for improving performance were highlighted as, customer contact, councillor casework and corporate complaints. Members were informed that 2,414 thousand enquiries received from 01st April 2022 to the end of November 2022 and the average response time has reduced from 10 working days to 7 working days.

Discussions took place regarding the different officers responding immediately or waiting until the latest time to respond. In response Karen Johnston advised responses should all be as soon as possible and investigations into responding patterns will be looked at. Members were informed that some issues can be logged and monitored on the website so residents can report the problem directly.

4.4 Sickness Level and Data

Members received an update from Sam McVaigh, Director of People and Inclusion and Simon Bagley, Head of HR on staff sickness absence and the work to promote positive attendance and decrease absence levels.

Discussions took place regarding the low prevalence of return-to-work compliance and suggested it is fundamental in reducing persistent avoidable sickness absences. In response Sam McVaigh did advise that there is a focus on this, and work is taking place to improve the figure.

Discussions took place regarding sickness levels being higher in frontline services due to the nature of the role and health rules in place for sickness in certain jobs. A member advised the RSPH conducted a survey from working at home and the increase in mental health and Musculo-skeletal issues as it can be isolating, and equipment may not be correct. In response Sam McVaigh outlined there is no noticeable link between this at Bury however there has been an increase in short 1 day sickness levels.

4.5 Project Safety Valve

Yusuf Erol, Children and Young People Business Partner provided an overview of the financial aspects of Project Safety Valve. Paul Cooke, Strategic Lead (Education Services) and Michael Kemp Strategic Lead - Inclusion & Special Educational Needs & Disabilities provided an overview of the aspects and projects detailed.

Discussions took place regarding three new schools and the planned funding. Members were informed the aim is to establish three schools by 2025.

Discussions took place regarding the rising demand Specialist School Provision; in response the group were advised that local authority teams are reporting that the impact following the Covid-19 pandemic is a core factor which is often the consequence from a lack of socialisation and the effect it has had on the development of children. Members sought assurances from officers that although we have not complied with our original agreement are we confident that the Department for Education will provide the necessary flexibility.

4.8 Medium Term Financial Strategy

Member received an update on Bury Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which runs to 2025/26. A mid-year review of the MTFS has been undertaken as a matter of good practice and in the context of the unprecedented inflationary and demand pressures being experienced so far this year.

Members sought further assurances on the importance of Bury retaining its ambition for regeneration and that strong strategic and political leadership is required to deliver.

Further discussions on officer recruitment and retention and material costings took place.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Members of the group supported by Strategic Leads within the Department have met on four occasions, interviewed 12 different Council Officers and two Cabinet Members.

Members have continued to hold Children's Services to account by providing continued, effective and constructive scrutiny of safeguarding within the Council.

Looking forward, it is hoped that the work to date can be built upon during the forthcoming Municipal Year.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS 2023/2024

1. That, in order to retain the expertise and knowledge developed throughout the meetings, the group continue into the new municipal year; meeting dates should be held quarterly in line with performance updates and scheduled in advance.
2. That regular updates be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the work of the Group.
3. Corporate Performance will be a standing agenda item
4. That group continue to monitor concerns raised in respect of savings delivery and corporate performance.

List of Background Papers:-

Scrutiny Annual Report

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