

**BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL**

**COORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING**

**1000 hours on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2023, Committee Rooms 3 and 4,**

**Council House, Victoria Square, B1 1BB**

**Minutes**

**Present:**

Councillor Albert Bore (Chair)

Councillors: Mick Brown (left at 11:30am), Jack Deakin, Mohammed Idrees, Kerry Jenkins, Shabrana Hussain, Chaman Lal, Ewan Mackey, Darius Sandhu, Alex Yip.

**Also Present:**

Councillor David Barker

Councillor Katherine Iroh

Janie Berry, City Solicitor and Monitoring Officer

Fiona Greenway, Interim Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer)

Timothy Bell, Consultant - Corporate Finance

Christian Scade, Head of Scrutiny and Committee Services

Richard Brooks, Director of Strategy, Equality & Partnerships (Online)

Wendy Griffiths, Assistant Director Customer Services and Business Support (Online)

Cheryl Doran, Assistant Director & CIO, Digital & Customer Services (Online)

Ekbal Hussain, Interim Business Cases Business Partner, Finance and Governance

**1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST**

The Chair advised the meeting to note that this meeting would be webcast for live and subsequent broadcast via the Council's Public-I microsite ([please click this link](#)) and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there were confidential or exempt items.

**2. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors Lee Marsham and Akhlaq Ahmed.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

During the consideration of the Scrutiny of Delivery of 2023/24 Budget Savings and Update on the Council's Response to the Section 114 Notice and Financial Recovery Plan item, Councillor Jenkins made a declaration that she was a member of a Trade Union.

#### **4. ACTION NOTES – 15 September 2023**

**RESOLVED:** That the action notes of the Co-ordinating OSC meeting held on 15 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

#### **5. CO-ORDINATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ACTION TRACKER**

**RESOLVED:** That the Co-ordinating OSC action tracker be noted

#### **6. SCRUTINY OF DELIVERY OF 2023/24 BUDGET SAVINGS AND UPDATE ON COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO SECTION 114 NOTICE AND FINANCIAL RECOVERY PLAN**

During the consideration of this item, Councillor Jenkins made a declaration that she was a member of a Trade Union.

The Chair explained that on 15 September 2023 the Committee had agreed that all Overview and Scrutiny Committees would continue to scrutinise the delivery of existing 2023/24 savings. It was noted that Appendix 1 set out the red, amber, green (RAG) rated savings for 2023/24 by Committee and Directorate at the end of Quarter 1, while Appendix 2 set out the progress on delivery of savings during Quarter 2 and 3.

In the ensuing discussion, the following issues were raised:

- The first two references to Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) in Appendix 1 were about capitalising salaries of Alexander Stadium build and revenue benefit from capitalising the indoor track at Arena. However, they did not appear in Appendix 2. This was because all of the savings items and some of the debit items were included in Quarter 1 (Q1), as such the items referred to were not specific savings for 2023/24 and were removed to allow the Committee to focus on the savings required.
- The reason that the IT&D Service Redesign was not included in Appendix 1 but was added to Appendix 2 was because savings were identified in the outturn process for 2022/23 and whilst this had been delivered in 2022/23 it needed to be delivered in 2023/24 on an ongoing basis and needed to be monitored in terms of deliverability.
- In addition to Red, Amber and Green, a Black category had been introduced for items that could not be delivered and as such were written off.

- Regarding the new ways of working fieldworker, an application was being developed for staff to work on handheld devices and improve efficiency, however the take-up had been difficult. Given the value of the savings and some of the other initiatives that services had in progress, it was difficult to hit the priority level as a cross-cutting saving. The team was aiming to review this with services to help them achieve savings.
- With regards to comments from the Commissioners about concerns about savings reported in the paper, a lot of the automation proposals impacted people and created a Human Resource issue which had resulted in some push-back. The severity of the Council's financial situation and the difficulty of addressing it was highlighted.

In response to questions from the Committee, it was clarified that:

- The medium risks flagged at Q1 mostly related to vacancy management and each directorate had a vacancy management target, similarly with fees and charges each directorate had a target. The majority of the £28m at risk was fees and charges and vacancy management and directorates were working to deliver these targets, however, it had not been possible to confirm how much of this had been delivered.
- Issues raised concerning Oracle would be raised at the Oracle Members' Oversight Board later that day.
- Regarding attendance at the Section 151 Spend Control Board, Cllrs Bore and Deakin were informed by the Interim Director Finance (Section 151 Officer) that they could regularly attend as observers.
- In terms of risk being built into investments to deliver savings, there would be a series of workshops in November with directors and the Corporate Leadership Team and members.
- In terms of the outturn for 2022/23, it was explained that this was expected to go to Cabinet in November in line with statutory recommendations. The figures were in the broad ballpark of what they were estimated to be.
- Central government would need to be asked permission to capitalise revenue spend to be able to put capital receipts against them.
- The sale of assets would be reviewed as part of the ongoing work on reviewing the assets list. Any impact of the loss of potential income would be taken as part of a value for money study.

- In terms of recuperating the savings that were now highlighted as black, it was explained that a financial recovery plan was expected to go to Full Council in late October and that work was being undertaken across all services to alleviate pressures and find replacement savings across the Council.
- In terms of the impact of the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS) and the spend controls, an officer from People Services would need to be asked to provide further information. The Section 151 Officer would enquire on this issue and the issue could be explored further by Finance and Resources OSC.
- With regard to the specific issue raised of the use of Robotic Process Automation Technology to automate manual processes, the project was in flight, resourced and there was engagement from service areas, however, with different priorities it had taken longer than anticipated to get the project running this financial year, although there was opportunity for future years. With regard to the specific issue raised of the use of voice automation, this saving was already part of a previous programme which had been scheduled in for 2025/26. As part of looking at accelerated savings as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), this had been asked to be brought forward to this financial year and scaled up to a £2m saving. There had been a number of issues in trying to get approval for piloting, however, savings could be made once the technology was in place and there had been approval from the Spend Control Boards to spend £250k to improve the concept, and once there was assurance on this it would be scaled up to the wider services across the Council. However, if this could not come through to Cabinet until December, it may not be possible to achieve any in-year savings. Following a request from the Committee, it was explained that the possibility of putting an urgent report through to Cabinet in November would be explored.
- The Chair had been engaged with the Section 151 Officer and the Commissioner regarding how scrutiny could add value to addressing the following questions:
  - How the Council would close the in-year budget gap during 2023/24?
  - How can scrutiny could best contribute to the development of budget proposals for 2024/25?
  - How and when comments / recommendations from scrutiny should be reported to Cabinet, ahead of budget proposals being considered by Full Council in February 2024?

During the discussion that followed, it was recognised that officers were stretched in terms of resource availability, and that this needed to be reflected in the way that scrutiny engaged with this work. The Chair informed that Committee that a Task and Finish approach had been considered and that draft terms of reference for this work were being developed. It was explained this work would be led by the Finance and Resources OSC, chaired by Cllr Jack Deakin, with membership widened to ensure suitable input from each Overview and Scrutiny Committees and from all political groups.

The importance of elected members having access to private papers was raised and the importance of papers being timely in the interest of openness and transparency was emphasised. Further to this, the importance of looking back at the history of an issue when considering the reasons for a decision or the potential need for a different decision was raised. It was added that Local Government Association (LGA) guidance stated that Scrutiny Committees were entitled to receive any information requested, in respect of matters under scrutiny by those members.

A range of other issues were also considered, including:

- The merits of cross-party Chairing in the interest of good governance and oversight were mentioned.
- The need for the scrutiny work programme to refocus on the Council's recovery, budget and improvement priorities to ensure the best use of Scrutiny resource and the time of officers across the council working with scrutiny.

**RESOLVED:-**

- That the Interim Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) and Assistant Director Customer Services and Business Support be asked to consider the possibility of taking a report to Cabinet in November concerning Voice Automation.
- That a cross-party/cross OSC Task and Finish Group led by Finance and Resources OSC be set up to discuss budgetary issues. This would be Chaired by the Chair of Finances and Resources OSC but involving the other Chairs of OSCs.

**7. BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL COST OF LIVING PROGRAMME**

The Chair and the Director of Strategy, Equality & Partnerships introduced the report, including the recommendations from the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group.

It was explained that the Council had set up the Cost of Living (CoL) programme in September 2022. The purpose of the Task and Finish Group was therefore to consider the performance of the programme over the first 12 months. The scrutiny process had involved three sessions, each focusing on a particular element of the programme. The first session on 28th July 2023, examined the internal processes involved in delivery. The second, on 22nd September, considered the performance of three of the core work streams: Warm Welcome, Food Provision, and Information, Advice and Guidance, as well as the potential synergies between these delivery strands. The third session, on 28th September, sought to draw together the findings and to formulate recommendations for the future development of the Cost of Living Programme.

In the ensuing discussion, the following issues were raised:

- There needed to be acknowledgement of how radical and far-reaching the project had been, and the project was found to be working well.
- The process had been constructive and there were a set of constructive and positive things to take forward from the recommendations and many were underway including extending the strategic group by sending out a letter to draw in new partners.
- The work of the Cost-of-Living Programme continued to evolve. A set of initiatives were signed off by the Strategic Group that were in line with the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.
- Concern was raised that the programme was not reaching the full scale of need in the city, which was a recognised challenge. However, needs were attempted to be met by innovative, agile and efficient ways that made the best use of the resources of the Council and of partners and communities.
- The value of hearing directly from people delivering work in partnership with the Council or recipients and collaborators in that support was stressed.
- It was suggested that the Committee be updated on actions in 3-6 months' time.
- There would be a Cost-of-living week in early November planned by the Council.
- The possibility of exploring ways to get national recognition for the programme was raised.

- The Council was required by the Government to produce an improvements plan, it was suggested that recommendations from scrutiny work could be brought into this.
- Lessons learned included the idea of the Council being a convening space. People giving evidence had said how useful the council was as a space doing the background work that helped them to do the frontline work.
- In terms of help for households struggling with utility bills, there was a strand of the programme which was targeted towards cash support for low-income households. As part of this, energy vouchers were administered. Additionally, cash support was issued through the Household Support Fund. This money was issued through the infrastructure of advice, guidance and direct contacts teams.
- On the issue of employment and avoiding generational poverty, much of what the Council did relating to the Cost-of-Living challenge was about creating a dynamic economy, creating a city which generated employment and helping young people to be ready for education to gain the skills, capabilities and qualifications whilst in primary and secondary school and then supporting their transition into further education and training and employment. The area focussed on in this second phase of the programme was employability and skills, however here had been a challenge shaping this in the environment of the Section 114 notice as a lot of this activity was not statutorily required by the Council and as such the financial resilience reserve monies could not be applied to the originally planned activities. However, it was aimed to access some Public Health grant money to support this activity.
- With regard to helping service users maintain dignity to help accessibility of services, in order to avoid stigma, the Warm Welcome Spaces were not called 'warm banks', additionally there was an emphasis on using trusted local organisations that could be accessed without stigma. Additionally, in the food programme, there had been a move away from 'food banks' towards other sustainable programmes such as community pantries or shared food projects, partly to make them feel more inclusive but also to make them more financially stable.

**RESOLVED:-**

- That the recommendations set out in the report presented be endorsed.
- That an item be added to the workplan for six months' time to feedback on where the recommendations had been taken to.

## **8. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair introduced the report.

In the ensuing discussion, the following issues were raised:

- All items for the Finances and Resources OSC had been underpinned by the issues around the Section 114 notice, achieving budget savings and focussing on going forward with the job evaluation. The Committee would explore how it could add value while working with the Commissioners.
- The November meeting of the Finances and Resources Scrutiny Committee would be re-arranged.
- With regard to the Homes OSC, Exempt Accommodation would be an item at the next meeting. This had been an issue for a lot of neighbourhoods in Birmingham. Additionally, Budget Savings would be considered as a standard item on the agenda. It was highlighted that there was some scope to deliver some savings with less use of temporary accommodation. The work programme would be reviewed as the situation changed.
- The Homes OSC had set up a Task and Finish Group on the Repairs Service, Chaired by Cllr Wood, a Conservative member.
- The Sustainability and Transport OSC had their final evidence-gathering meeting, concerning Active Travel, in two-weeks' time. It's next formal meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> November would wrap up the first Task and Finish. There would also be a formal meeting on the next Task and Finish on Road Safety, however, it would need to be looked at in the context of the overall issues surrounding revenue and cost saving. The committee was looking at what they could put in the workplan and move around in case there was a need to be more flexible. It was noted that the Committee looked mostly at external funds administered by Council staff rather than Council revenue.
- Neighbourhoods OSC would look at the budget line-by-line to discuss the impact.
- The Domestic Abuse Prevention Strategy would be considered by the Neighbourhoods OSC. It was noted that this was currently out for consultation.
- Neighbourhoods OSC would also be holding an informal meeting to discuss how Waste Services used the "the slab in the cab" tool.



- The November meeting of the Economy and Skills OSC would consider an item brought forward from the October meeting on the Local Skills Improvement Plan and the implications for Birmingham and the role of the Council in supporting skills in the city. It would also consider an item on Budget Savings.
- Issues raised in the press about home-to-school transport were being picked up by the Audit Committee.

In addition to the above the Chair highlighted that there would be a need for each of the scrutiny work programmes to refocus on the Council's recovery, budget and improvement priorities to ensure the best use of Scrutiny resource and the time of officers across the council working with scrutiny.

**RESOLVED:-**

- That the Work Programme for the Co-ordinating OSC be noted.
- That the Work Programmes for each of the other 7 Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.

**9. REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN/COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/PETITIONS RECEIVED (IF ANY)**

There were no requests for Call In for Co-ordinating OSC.

**10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of urgent business.

**11. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that next meeting of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be 17 November 2023.

The meeting ended at 11:50am