

## **Report of Scrutiny Committee**

1. This report summarises the business considered at the meetings of the Scrutiny Budget and Performance Panel held on 3 August and 14 September 2020

### **SCRUTINY BUDGET AND PERFORMANCE PANEL – 3 AUGUST**

#### **Budget Outturn 2019-20**

2. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Assets, Councillor Matthew Tomlinson, and the Section 151 Officer, James Thomson, presented a report on the performance of the budget outturn at the end of Quarter 4.
3. Reference was made to the impact of COVID-19 and business rates, which were difficult to predict, but there was confidence that the Council had healthy reserves to deal with future challenges.
4. We raised the following queries/comments, which the Cabinet Member and Deputy Director of Finance responded to:
  - With regards the overall budget surplus, it was felt that the variances were relatively small overall and that the bulk had come from business rate income, which was difficult to assess due to the complex formula involved.
  - In response to a question as to whether the council tax increase for this year was required, the position at the time identified that the budget was required and appropriate. There were now risks and challenges facing the Council with regards COVID-19 and business rate collection.
  - Reference was made to the surplus green waste income, which had generated more income than envisaged. However, based on experiences elsewhere it was not expected to continue to increase greatly.
  - Following a query about the Leisure Campus abortive project costs, clarification was provided that the costs were part of a long-term project by the previous administration. Following a review, it was felt that the costs of the Leisure Campus were not affordable to the Council. Some of the costs might be useful for future projects, but some of the preparatory costs would not be and therefore had to be written-off.
  - The reduction in relation to income from the Trade Waste Service was mentioned and we requested further information on the reasons for the reduction in trade waste income.
  - With regards the increase in the provision for bad debt, we were advised that there was a modest increase in provision, which is based on a formula that looked at age of debts etc.
  - We welcomed the inclusion of staffing vacancies within the report and the improvement in staff vacancy rates over the previous 12-months.
  - We were reassured about the staffing situation in the Gateway customer service centre and asked for an update on the recruitment to vacant posts in Gateway.

- Reference was made to whether the credit union reserve would need to be increased in the current climate. It was not envisaged that it would be increased at this stage as the Council's funding was 'pump prime' it's start-up with a view to the credit union being self-sustaining.
  - Further detail was requested on the capital programme in future reports and it was agreed that the Panel would identify the information required so that this could be included.
5. We noted the report and thanked the Cabinet Member and Section 151 Officer for their attendance.

### **Corporate Strategy Refresh**

6. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Paul Foster, and the Shared Services Lead – Partnerships and Transformation, Vicky Willett, presented a report updating on the Corporate Strategy refresh.
7. The COVID-19 crisis was fundamentally changing the lives of our residents and the context in which the Council operates and so, this was an appropriate time to review the current Corporate Strategy to ensure that it remains fit for purpose as we go forward.
8. We raised the following queries and comments which the Leader of the Council and Shared Services Lead – Transformation and Partnerships responded to:
- Following questions about the evidence-base for the refresh, many national and local sources of intelligence were being used from local food banks, Members and the community hub.
  - The key differences from the corporate strategy agreed earlier in the year was around capturing the learning and approach that had worked successfully in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic with the community hub model, engaging with communities and ensuring the services residents needed were provided.
  - Suggestions were made around making the refreshed community strategy plain English and user-friendly.
  - Following discussions about the next stage of the refresh which would be streamlined and include outcomes, we look forward to considering the draft refreshed Corporate Strategy and performance measures before they are agreed by Full Council.
9. We welcomed the refresh of the Corporate Strategy and thanked the Leader and Shared Services Lead for their report and answering the Panel's questions.

## **SCRUTINY BUDGET AND PERFORMANCE PANEL – 14 SEPTEMBER 2020**

### **Period 1 Quarterly Performance Monitoring Report 2020/21**

10. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Paul Foster, and the Interim Chief Executive, Gary Hall, presented a report on the performance of the Council's Corporate Plan at the end of period 1.

11. The report set out the performance between April and June 2020 against the delivery of the Corporate Plan projects and objectives.
12. We were pleased that 85% of projects either completed, succeeding or on-track.
13. We recognised that efforts had been largely focused on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic during Period 1 and commended the council's approach to supporting residents during the pandemic.
14. We raised the following queries and comments which the Leader of the Council and the Interim Chief Executive responded to:
  - In response to a question around additional efficiencies as a result of increases in online transactions due to the coronavirus pandemic, we were informed that a draft Benefits Realisation Plan would be available at the next meeting and we look forward to receiving this.
  - We sought clarification as to why the review of the Council's surplus assets was off-track and were advised that there had been some challenges in recruiting staff to the Council's property department. Assurances were provided that the appropriate resources were now in place and that stock condition surveys were underway.
  - With regards to the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Council's income, there had been a significant loss of revenue from the Business and Conference Centre as a result of restrictions and all capital investments into the Civic Centre had been paused. We were assured that the Council is not solely reliant on income generated by external bookings.
  - We were pleased to note that the 'Active Streets' project had received good feedback in Leyland and that several families had been engaged with. We requested that an evaluation of the success of the project and details of any further roll-out be provided to us.
  - We also requested information on progress with the Leyland Loop.
  - With regards to how the Youth Council project would target hard-to-reach youth, we were informed that planning for this was still underway, but it was suggested that debate clubs in schools would enable the scheme to be inclusive and accessible to all young people.
15. We noted the report, commended the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery plans and thanked the Leader and Interim Chief Executive for their attendance.

### **South Ribble Corporate Strategy**

16. The Leader of the Council, Councillor Paul Foster, and the Shared Services Lead – Partnerships and Transformation, Vicky Willett, presented a report updating on the Corporate Strategy refresh.
17. We raised the following queries and comments which the Leader of the Council and the Interim Chief Executive responded to:

- We were interested in what tangible difference residents would see from this document and were advised that focus would be placed on green spaces, homes for all and a fair council.
- We reiterated a point made at the previous meeting regarding the need for plain English within the Strategy and welcomed the commitment to reviewing all corporate jargon within the final document.
- We queried how confident the Leader and the Shared Services Lead were in the delivery of the new Corporate Strategy projects and were pleased to note that the process would be undertaken with the utmost transparency.
- We questioned if the projects and outcomes identified in the refreshed Corporate Strategy were SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound) and were pleased to note that this would be monitored on a regular basis.

18. We welcomed the new refreshed Corporate Strategy and thanked the Leader and the Shared Services Lead for their attendance.

### **Budget Monitoring 2020-21 Quarter 1**

19. The Cabinet Member for Finance, Property and Assets, Councillor Matthew Tomlinson, and the Section 151 Officer, James Thomson, presented a report on the performance of the budget outturn at the end of Quarter 1.

20. Discussion largely focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and we questioned the concern of this to the Cabinet Member and Section 151 Officer. In response, we were advised that concerns were minimal due to government support and the ability to spread any deficit over three years.

21. We raised the following queries and comments which the Cabinet Member and Section 151 Officer responded to:

- In response to queries about staff vacancies and the impact of this on service delivery, delays in recruitment were acknowledged but the Council was still delivering on its targets.
- We requested further clarity on how the Council's earmarked reserves these are assessed to ensure appropriacy and were informed that the reserves are assessed annually. We welcomed the Cabinet Member's commitment to review the level of earmarked reserves given the situation surrounding the pandemic.
- With regards to the Borough Investment Account, confirmation was provided that this money would be invested into South Ribble but work was still ongoing to identify opportunities for a sufficient return and tangible benefits for residents.
- We thanked the Cabinet Member and Section 151 Officer for including the additional narrative in the Capital Programme, as requested at the last meeting, and sought assurances that the newly-reprofiled Capital Programme was deliverable. The Cabinet Member and Section 151 confirmed their confidence in this.

22. We noted the report and thanked the Cabinet Member and the Section 151 Officer for their attendance.

**Recommendation(s)**

That Council note the report.

COUNCILLOR DAVID HOWARTH  
CHAIR OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
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