



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Performance Panel – Service Improvement & Finance**

Committee Room 5, Guildhall, Swansea

Monday, 2 March 2020 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor C A Holley (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

P Downing
L James
J W Jones

Councillor(s)

P R Hood-Williams
M H Jones
D W W Thomas

Councillor(s)

B J Rowlands
P K Jones
I E Mann

Other Attendees

David Hopkins
Clive Lloyd

Cabinet Member - Delivery & Performance
Cabinet Member - Resilience & Strategic Collaboration

Officer(s)

Steve King
Sarah Lackenby
Ben Smith
Brij Madahar

Information, Research & GIS Team Leader
Chief Digital & Transformation Officer
Chief Finance Officer / Section 151 Officer
Scrutiny Manager

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): None

1 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

None

2 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

None

3 Letters and Minutes

Letters and notes were received.

4 Public Questions

None

5 Budget Monitoring 3rd Quarter 2019/20

Cllr David Hopkins, Cabinet Member and the Chief Finance Officer Ben Smith attended the meeting to discuss the Budget Monitoring 3rd Quarter. The following was discussed:

- Directorate position - forecast variance of £434k for 2019/20 but still a very substantial improvement. 3 of 4 directorates showing underspend but some issues within Education Directorate. However, some offsetting opportunities exist,

as shown in the report, in order to balance budget. Confident that further inroads are being made to ensure service budgets are back in line for 2019/20.

- Use of Contingency Fund – on the whole contains a number of only small sums and the vast majority of fund remains available at year end.
- Capital Budget – showing spend of 49.3% of capital budget to end December 2019.
- Some concern that Place Directorate showing underspend when there is pressure on highways maintenance / difficulty in getting repairs done etc. Ben stated that this does not prevent the directorate / service from spending money on urgent matters e.g. recent flooding / impact on infrastructure. Also members queried the fact that increased electricity costs for street lighting is recurring, rather than appear as a one-off budget pressure. Ben however was not surprised at this. Also, noted reduced recycling prices in waste management are contributing to income shortfall. Ben confirmed that recycling market has become weaker, not just for plastics but metals also and there has been slow-down in other parts of the world.
- Noted that it is too early to provide accurate forecast as to potential outturn on corporate items such as Council Tax collection, which is potentially affected by the effects of welfare reform measures. Ben states welfare reform is in early stages but does represent a risk – in 2018/19 we posted a deficit on the collection fund which was unusual for the Council, and budget assumptions assume slight deficit.
- How much is in the Capital Equalisation Reserve? – Ben confirmed that it had been £15m however on his advice to Cabinet it was increased by £2.7m (from insurance reserves)
- Some discussion about ER/VR costs – currently not expected to exceed balance on Restructure Reserve of £3m. Ben commented that in the past it has been higher (e.g. £7m) where use of contingency fund became necessary. However noted that the Council will incur costs that will eat into the £3m so we will need funding to top it back up to £3m. . In-year costs thus charged to contingency were expected to be zero, so nothing over and above sums already set aside. Future pressures were set out in the Medium Term Financial Planning report to Council.

6 Corporate Complaints Annual Report 2018/19

Cllr David Hopkins, Cabinet Member and Sarah Lackenby, Chief Transformation Officer attended the meeting to present the report and answer questions. The main points discussed included:

- Overall feeling that this is a positive annual report with some good news. No significant issues / trends raising concern within. Council is doing very well in view of the number of complaints and resources we have to deal with them.
- Whilst complaints are increasing, it is also a sign of openness to complaints and ease in which people can make a complaint to the Council. Noted that 'requests for service' have come down significantly.
- Highlighted the compliments / positive feedback received by the Council reflected in the report, including from some of the most vulnerable people we are dealing with
- Some issues relating to Welsh Language / translation

- FOI requests are reported separately, as Panel suggested last year, but included in the collection of papers along with the Corporate Complaints Annual Report as per advice from Information Commissioner's Office, for completeness.
- Councillors queried the time taken to prepare annual report following completion of the year in question (i.e. end March 2019) – Sarah explained this was normal and reporting will always be a year behind, and because of the detailed work required in order to meet Ombudsman requirements.
- A query was raised around social services complaints, some about contact, and work done by Council to improve recruitment / retention of social workers.
- Endorsement of compliments about Local Area Coordinators, and West Cross Day Service
- Pleased to see that only 1 of 83 complaints to the Ombudsman were upheld. Query around what is meant by 9 being resolved by 'quick fix / voluntary settlement'. Sarah mentioned that this would vary depending on the nature of the complaint but undertook to provide more information on this in writing.
- Noted that number of Stage 1 and Stage 2 complaints have gone up. Query around the timescales for dealing with complaints. Sarah stated that it is in accordance with Council's Complaints Policy and would include information about timescales in future reports, for clarity. Though stressed that there is no issue around the council meeting agreed timescales for dealing with complaints.
- The FOI report shows that 103 of the 1403 FOI requests were completely refused. The Panel wanted to know the grounds upon which requests could be refused. The Convener also recommended that future reports should show the actual cost incurred by the Council through dealing with FOI, and their impact on the budget, as a matter of public interest.

7 Wales Audit Office Report on Local Government Use of Data

Cllr Clive Lloyd, Cabinet Member, Steve King, Information Research and GIS Team Leader and Sarah Lackenby, Chief Transformation Officer attended to present the report and answer questions. The main points noted include:

- Recognition of the importance for the Council to manage data effectively
- Key is to develop specific Data Strategy, as recommended by Wales Audit Office, which will help the Council to address the issues highlighted within the audit, and have a clear way forward across the four areas (Vision, Leadership and Culture; Data Protection; Skills and Capacity; Evidence-based Decision Making). Whilst there are existing strategies which encompass data and information it is agreed that an overall strategy and vision for the Council's use of data should be developed to provide a framework for considering subsequent actions.
- An Action Plan has been developed in response to the 11 WAO recommendations – Steve King took the Panel through each recommendation and proposed action.
- Council is in relatively early stages of thinking on this.
- A Digital Strategy is being prepared and pre-decision scrutiny on this is welcomed.
- A follow up on progress with the action plan will be reported to the Panel in due course
- The Wales Audit Office have their own process of monitoring progress.

- Query around the WAO recommendation that the Council sets data reporting standards to ensure minimum data standards underpin decision-making – exactly how we would identify minimum standards and what they would look like – was felt to be a difficult area to unpick. Also, some concern about resourcing to undertake all this work. Steve stated that the Council would work with the auditor and other Councils to identify good practice in data reporting etc. but the Council was at relatively early stages of thinking on this. Sarah stated that this was about a whole-Council approach to data, with everyone having responsibility and being involved, and the Council increasing its maturity around use of data.
- Query around what exactly is meant by 'data' – numerical or information. It was suggested that it should include information and evidence as a whole, although the data strategy would clarify this.
- Some discussion around WAO view that the Council should review the range and quality of information needed by decision-makers to support evidence-based decision making. Some concern that the Audit raised some questions about whether the Council uses data to inform decisions and whether it is thoroughly embedded within the culture of the Authority. Discussion had around whether evidence can be misleading or skewed and therefore may not lead to the best decision.
- It was felt the Action Plan could have more detail around implementation timescales e.g. not just when the Data Strategy will be prepared.
- Some interest in the 'Swansea Account' project – noted WAO's recommendation for Councils to create a central integrated customer account as a gateway to services. Panel noted this is largely reflected in the Council's existing proposals to provide a single digital identity for citizens to access online services. This will be done initially by developing a digital platform and upgrading the Council website. The 'Swansea Account' is the Council's proposed integrated secure online citizen/business account, where all information and services received can be viewed in one place (similar to dealing with any other organisation, e.g. utility companies, banks). Panel queried whether libraries would be part of that account. Sarah responded that it is an option that will be looked at, although a lot of research and development is still to be done on this project including what is possible from technology. Things are at a very early stage.
- Specific questions that the Convener wants a response to: whether the Council sells any data; who the Council shares data with; and what are our responsibilities around sharing? He stated that data mining is a massive issue and that the Council collects a huge amount of data including sensitive information such as medical information. Some discussion around whether the Council should sell data for income. Sarah referred to data sharing protocols in place.

8 Work Programme 2019/20

The Work Programme was noted.

The meeting ended at 11.00 am