

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

TUESDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2020

PRESENT: Councillors Phil Haseler, Lynne Jones, Julian Sharpe, Chris Targowski (Chair) and Simon Werner

Also in attendance: Councillors Christine Bateson, Gurpreet Bhangra, David Cannon, Gerry Clark, David Coppinger, Jon Davey, David Hilton, Andrew Johnson, Helen Price, Samantha Rayner, Donna Stimson and Helen Taylor

Officers: Mark Beeley, James Carpenter, Nikki Craig, Louise Freeth, Catherine Hickman, Russell O'Keefe, Ruth Watkins, Duncan Sharkey, Karen Shepherd, Angela Huisman and Peter Robinson

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Walters, Councillor Haseler attended as substitute.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairman declared a personal interest in the item 'Annual Trusts Report' as he worked for the Arms House Association.

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting on 18th November 2019 were confirmed as a true record, provided the following amendment was made:

- Councillor Werner asked that the minutes clarified that he expressed concern that Members had been disrupting the process and circumventing the framework.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; The Part I minutes of the meeting held on 15th January 2020 were approved as a true record.

ANNUAL TRUSTS REPORT

Karen Shepherd, Head of Governance, introduced the report and explained that a number of councillors were trustees of organisations across the borough. All current representatives had been contacted to confirm if they had any concerns, with no concerns being raised for any of the organisations, other than those detailed below.

Councillor Jones asked about the Working Boys Club and that the report listed it as making a loss. She wanted to know if there was an explanation for the valuation.

Karen Shepherd said that the decrease in valuation was due to a change in market value. The trust had been set up due to the sale of a property and the funds being invested. Investment return was subject to market performance.

Councillor Jones said that a loss of that amount was significant. The Chairman suggested that further information should be sought and provided to the trustees (Cabinet) for consideration.

Karen Shepherd informed Members that Berkshire Maestros had not been in contact originally with their representative, but this was now resolved. Porny's Charity was another issue as

Councillor Rayner, the representative, had not had any contact from the charity. This had been followed up but so far no response had been received. Schools that worked with the charity would be contacted in due course to confirm whether they were aware of any activity from the charity.

Councillor Jones suggested that the remit of the flood relief fund which was mentioned in the report should be widened to include the south of the borough, along with Windsor and Maidenhead. She also asked when the last time money was paid out. Karen Shepherd confirmed that it was after the last floods in the borough, which happened in 2014.

The Panel noted the report.

BUDGET 2020/21

Councillor Hilton, Lead Member for Finance, informed the Panel that they had been given the proposed savings, fees and charges and capital schemes in the Budget for 2020/21. The Panel was asked for its comments on the Budget, which would be passed on to Cabinet for consideration.

The Chairman said that the Panel would look at four key savings that had been picked out in advance of the meeting for scrutiny. With regard to parking, the Chairman said that it was fair to have a paid residential parking scheme to tackle the problem of commuters taking up parking. However, this charge could be dependent on the council tax band of individual residents, along with discounts for electric vehicles and key workers.

Councillor Werner asked how the saving figure for parking had come about and what would happen if a resident wanted to opt out of the parking scheme.

Councillor Haseler said that the parking scheme in poorer areas of the borough could hit some residents hard and that the council should find a way to give those who may struggle to pay the parking permit charge some sort of exemption or discount.

Councillor Jones said that increasing the price of visitor vouchers, which was higher than neighbouring councils, would hit residents hard. She said that this needed to be looked at. Councillor Price said that volunteers who would need to park would also be hit, for example those that volunteer to care and look after the elderly.

Councillor Rayner, Deputy Leader of the Council, Resident and Leisure Services, HR, IT, Legal, Performance Management and Windsor, said that RBWM not charging for parking permits was very unusual as the majority of other councils do charge their residents. It was planned to be £50 for the first permit and £70 for the second. They were currently considering how to link the permits to council tax bands to ensure that the system was fair.

Angela Huisman, Library and Resident Contact Lead, said that the £250,000 figure that was in the savings for parking took into account two thirds of residents adopting new paid parking permit scheme, with the other third deciding not to apply for one. There was an easy process in place to remove the permit if it was no longer wanted available to residents and there would be an increase in visitor vouchers. It was also confirmed that the borough received the funding from tickets given out, this applied to any area under the enforcement of RBWM.

Councillor Sharpe said that the schemes were currently in place where parking had been deemed a problem and that in his view residents felt that a parking permit was worthwhile paying for.

Councillor Werner said that the process to apply for a permit was not clear, so questioned how the process of opting out would be made clear for residents. The costs versus the income gained from enforcing parking permits was meant to be cost neutral.

Councillor Johnson, Leader of the Council, confirmed to the Panel that residents with an electric vehicle would receive an exemption from having to pay for a parking permit. Other discounts would also be considered in due course. He compared figures from Reading, which had increased parking permits from £30 to £40 for the first car, while a second parking permit would cost £150.

Councillor Taylor asked if parking permit schemes that were issued by Housing Solutions but enforced by RWBM would also have a charge. Councillor Cannon, Lead Member for Public Protection and Parking, said that there were around 30 streets in the borough which had private schemes in place, where the permits were issued and managed externally but RBWM was responsible for enforcing. These schemes would remain running for another year before anything was to change.

Councillor Davey said that electric cars needed to be in a certain spot to allow them to be charged and therefore this would prove to be challenge when parking and issuing parking permits for certain areas. Councillor Clark, Lead Member for Transport and Infrastructure, said that it would be based on demand and that it was not an issue directly relating to the permits.

Councillor Werner asked for confirmation on whether the permits would be cost neutral. Councillor Cannon said that parking permits incurred costs to enforce them and for things like appeals, so therefore a charge was needed to cover this cost.

Moving to grant payments, Councillor Jones said that in the previous years budget, grants had been increased yet this year they had been decreased again. She asked why the amount of funding was decreasing, especially as community groups that benefit from the grants can help the council.

Councillor Rayner said that it had indeed increased a few years ago, but due to financial pressures they had taken the decision to reduce them again. Councillor Hilton suggested that there were other sources of funding available to groups and charities, and that they should not rely on the council's grants scheme.

The Chairman said that that had been a reduction in funding for Norden Farm to put into CAB grants.

The debate then moved to look at the council tax level being increased. Councillor Werner said that it would hit the most vulnerable in society and asked how many people would be affected.

The Leader of the Council said that RBWM had the lowest level of council tax outside of London and was less expensive when compared to other Berkshire authorities. He said that the rise was fair and affordable and for the 6,000 residents who received council tax benefits would only be paying a modest amount on their bill.

Councillor Price asked if residents had been informed of the increase. Louise Freeth said that they would consult with individuals about the rise and would raise awareness of this through social media, emails and leaflets.

Councillor Jones raised concerns for Norden Farm and asked if RBWM had been in communication with them regarding the cut in funding, especially as they did a lot of educational work. Councillor Rayner confirmed that there had been discussions with them to ensure that they would still be able to cope with a reduction in funding.

Councillor Werner asked about 'Around the Royal Borough', which was a newsletter about events in the borough, and whether this would be sent digitally or still have hard copies produced. The Leader of the Council said that they were looking to move fully digital but that residents could request a hard copy if they wished.

Councillor Jones asked if mobile phones that RBWM gave out to staff were being used effectively. Nikki Craig, Head of HR, ICT and Corporate Projects, said that they had been ensuring that all phones were being used and any that were not being used had the contract cancelled so as not to waste money.

Councillor Werner queried if posts in the council which would be made redundant had been identified. Duncan Sharkey said that there were no specific posts and that all but one were currently vacant.

The Chairman said that, in the capital programmes section of the Budget, that the library heating was a significant sum of £250,000, along with the cost of the cooling system in the Town Hall.

Angela Huisman said that the heating system was old but they were looking at ways to reduce the amount of time that the heating was on for. The Leader of the Council said that the Town Hall would need to be renovated to meet modern day standards and also to meet carbon targets.

Councillor Davey asked about the 24 hour pothole pledge scheme and why this investment was not listed as part of the budget. Duncan Sharkey said that the pothole pledge was not part of last year's budget because it was implemented in the middle of the year. Councillor Clark said that the commitment was not required anymore as targets had regularly reached 100% and it was felt that other things were more of a priority.

Looking at the fees and charges, Councillor Jones and Werner expressed concern that residents who lived in the areas surrounding Windsor and Maidenhead would be unable to easily access the town centre due to this increase in parking charges. It was suggested that this should be looked at, especially to continue to allow Windsor's shops and high streets to remain open and vibrant.

Councillor Werner suggested that the advantage card discount for parking could still be kept in Windsor. Councillor Taylor said that another option could be to give an advantage card discount for the first hour of parking for residents.

Councillor Jones reiterated that she would like Cabinet to consider the number of visitor vouchers, to ensure that there were no barriers to opting out of the scheme and that anything agreed in regard to Norden Farm went through the Communities O&S Panel for consideration.

The Panel agreed that the comments made by Members would be passed on to Cabinet for consideration.

Q2 PERFORMANCE UPDATE

Duncan Sharkey, Managing Director, explained to the Panel which areas were monitored as part of the performance report. There were no areas that currently had a red indicator, 2 had amber while 11 were on green.

The Chairman asked about the business rate collections and said that the percentages were very high. He asked what they might look like in March. Louise Freeth said that the January target was 92% and they were currently on 90.91%, so they were slightly off target. The aim was to try and get more revenue over the next quarter to reach the target.

The Chairman asked a further question about the number of calls answered and how long it takes for a query or case to be completed. Duncan Sharkey said that it was hard to say how many cases were closed in the first instance. Angela Huisman said that they aimed to have a first resolution of 96% but always aimed to go a certain distance in completing the case during the original call. It was an important measure of customer satisfaction too as people do not want to be rushed just so that the call can be completed in the first instance.

Councillor Jones asked if residents were using libraries for its services or its customer service. Angela Huisman said that there were different reasons why residents would use the library and that they would help with any query as far as possible.

Councillor Jones commented on the 61% target for satisfaction and believed that this was a very low target. Duncan Sharkey confirmed that this was a national average and therefore RBWM had chosen this as an appropriate target.

2019/20 AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION INTERIM REPORT

Catherine Hickman, Lead Specialist Audit and Investigation, introduced the 2019/20 Audit and Investigation Interim Report and explained to the Panel that it covered the first 9 months of the year. The Auditors rated different audits on a scale with 1 being the highest category of audit opinion and 4 being the lowest. Management were able to see the draft report and were given a month to improve the opinion before the report was published. In two instances, management had taken the opportunity to improve their audit opinion.

For audits falling into the category 3 opinion, there was one new audit falling into this category since the last report to this Panel in July 2019, in respect of Debtors follow up. Further follow up work had recently commenced. An update was also provided on the position in respect of previously reported category 3 opinion audits.

For Corporate investigations, results were contained within the report. The Q3 results for proactive work on Business Rates Exemption Relied were still pending.

The Highways audit, which was requested by the Panel, was coming to the end of its fieldwork and a report would be ready to be presented at the next meeting.

The Chairman asked about the one month period that managers were given to improve their performance. He was told that things could be changed quickly when it was brought to the fore that improvement was needed. However, not all improvements can be made in such a short timescale.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed to note the progress in achieving the 2019/20 Audit and Investigation Plan as at 31st December 2019.

2020/21 DRAFT INTERNAL AUDIT AND INVESTIGATION PLAN

Catherine Hickman informed the Panel of the 2020/21 Draft Internal Audit and Investigation Plan. She explained that it highlighted the key risks to RBWM and would allow them to come up with a plan for how to deal and mitigate these risks. The Audit Charter was the terms of reference for the audit and would reflect best practise. There were two copies of the Charter attached to the report, the original with tracked changes and a clean version. The Panel was asked for approval of the draft 2020/21 audit and investigation plan and revised internal audit charter.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel agreed to approval the 2020/21 Draft Internal Audit and Investigation Plan and Internal Audit Charter.

WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Jones requested that the Task and Finish group on Highways contract outsourcing take place before the Panel's next meeting. The details and scope of the group would be circulated in due course.

Councillor Jones also suggested combining the Annual Governance Statement updates into one, rather than having separate agenda items for each update.

The Panel agreed that the Annual Scrutiny Report would be drafted by the Chairman and Democratic Services and then sent round to Panel members for their comments. The draft would then be brought back to the Panel's next meeting for approval.

The resident scrutiny topic on shopping trolleys in car parks around Maidenhead was discussed and the recommendations were noted. The Panel decided to send the report to Maidenhead Town Forum for consideration at their next meeting.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting whilst discussion takes place on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1-7 of part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

The meeting, which began at 6.30 pm, finished at 8.40 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....