

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2021

PRESENT: Councillors Phil Haseler (Chairman), Gary Muir (Vice-Chairman), Julian Sharpe, Lynne Jones and Simon Werner

Also in attendance: Councillor David Hilton, Councillor Samantha Rayner, Councillor John Baldwin, Councillor Christine Bateson, Councillor David Cannon and Councillor Ewan Larcombe

Officers: Mark Beeley, Adele Taylor, Andrew Vallance and Daniel Brookman

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence received.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meetings held on 4th October 2021 and 11th October 2021 were approved as a true and accurate record.

CORPORATE TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

Daniel Brookman, Head of Transformation, highlighted what had happened to the strategy since it had been signed off. Transformation was everyone's role, the pandemic had a significant impact but changes at RBWM had been made. An update would be going to the Cabinet Transformation Sub Committee the following evening, on 30th November 2021. A huge amount of transformation had been delivered at speed and was done in a number of ways. Individual actions were things that people knew how to do themselves to make their work more efficient. Service actions involved working with communities on what they needed and ensuring that the council was able to deliver this support. Toolkits had been created which could assist and there would be support from the transformation team. Finally, there were council wide programmes and projects that covered a number of service areas.

There were a number of key focuses over the next 12 months. Engagement HQ was a new platform which had been recently set up and was called RBWM Together. This platform allowed for collaboration between teams, particularly when working remotely. It provided a space for staff to air views and new ideas, for example through surveys and quick polls. Considering adult social care transformation, MySense was a predictive system which allowed staff to react to any health issues before they happened. 'Brain in Hand' was a programme that had been developed to allow people to live independent lives by creating schedules for their day. As an organisation, RBWM had collected a significant amount of data and it was important that it was ethically stored. There were plans for a Corporate Data Strategy to be developed to further utilise and safeguard the use of this data.

The system used by staff in adult social care, Paris, was becoming outdated and the transformation team had undertaken work on a new system. The system would allow data to be shared, promoting multi agency working and providing long term financial viability. The website had been upgraded too and was now powered by Drupal, which was an open source software and had gone live in July 2020. There had been around 1,600 web pages and 300

forms which had been transferred to the new site. The number of daily visits to the RBWM website had been around 5,000, this had dropped to around 1,500 but this was due to the change in cookies settings which meant that residents could choose not to be tracked and therefore they would not show up in the figures. Accessibility requirements had also now come in, which meant that all documents on the website needed to be accessible. The website was audited by the government in August 2021 and was found to be partially compliant, the issues which had come out of the audit had now been actioned. A number of PDFs would be revisited, with about 250 still outstanding. The new search function was live and was an improvement on the original search function. A feedback loop had also now been completed.

Daniel Brookman moved on to discuss community working, in particular the work with volunteers who helped those residents that had been shielding during the course of the pandemic. The Embedding Community Response Project had also been a recent ongoing success and Daniel Brookman outlined some examples of the work that the project had been involved in.

Councillor Werner said that the budget was about managing cuts and he believed that cuts were leading the transformation programme. He felt that the budget showed where services would be cut and then the transformation team would then work to cover it.

Daniel Brookman said that language was key, he did not believe that cuts were leading the transformation. Transformation was about doing things differently and was not about making cuts or removing staff.

Adele Taylor, Executive Director of Resources, explained that if there was a budget saving which had come from the work of the transformation team, then this would be included within the budget. It was focused on the transformation of services, rather than seeing where cuts could be made.

Councillor Hilton, Cabinet Member for Finance and Ascot, said that if the council reduced resources in some areas this could then be used in other areas. Its priority was to make the lives of residents better, RBWM needed to consider how services could be provided that improved the experience of residents.

Councillor L Jones commented on the savings tracker which outlined in 2021/22 there would be £1.2 million worth of savings. The transformation had not yet been delivered but there was already a target on savings from the transformation programme. Councillor L Jones felt that savings should not be part of the budget and they should be made in year, she could see where Councillor Werner was coming from.

The Chairman asked for clarification on what the concern about the savings was.

Councillor Werner said that there should not be a savings target in the budget. He argued that the transformation projects should be delivered and then any savings could then be realised. Transforming services was supposed to be for the benefit of residents, but Councillor Werner said that cuts were leading the transformation. He wanted to send a message to the Cabinet Transformation Sub Committee that the savings proposals and transformation programme were being carried out incorrectly.

Councillor Sharpe said that it was important that RBWM did not 'put the cart before the horse'. Advances in technology had given the council new ways of working and doing things, whilst providing the same service to residents. Money was not the key driver and RBWM should be able to provide better services to residents through its transformation programme.

Adele Taylor said that if there was a reduction included in the budget, then officers believed that it would be delivered. Not all of the action plan would be delivered on day one, if a service was being cut it would be clear. The purpose of transformation was to deliver things in different way which would save money.

Councillor L Jones said that it was a leap to estimate transformation savings when the transformation had not been completed and therefore officers did not know for sure what would work. She pointed to a previous example where it was estimated that the transformation of a service would lead to cost benefits but it did not. RBWM should therefore be careful about estimating savings whilst the transformation was taking place.

Councillor Sharpe noted the comments on the financial side of transformation but wanted to speak about the transformation plan. The transformation of some council services was crucial and Councillor Sharpe felt that RBWM was going down the right path.

Councillor L Jones picked up on digital access and responsiveness to residents to improve access to services. She asked if RBWM had the capability to allow residents to use smart phones to access services. On volunteering, Councillor L Jones had noted that there had been volunteer fatigue in her community. She asked how that could affect the transformation of some services.

Councillor Werner said that there needed to be a motivator for the transformation programme, he wanted to see savings being realised at the end of the process.

Adele Taylor explained that everything included in the budget was targets that officers believed could be achieved. She had not given any team a savings target, teams would make proposals which would be included in the budget. The transformation team had put together a business case, with proposals coming forward from a strong evidence base.

Daniel Brookman, responding to Councillor L Jones questions, said that smart phone access was now possible through the Drupal platform. On volunteering, Daniel Brookman understood the point being made. There had been a huge number of volunteers at the start of the pandemic but this had reduced over the past year. The transformation team continued to work with various volunteer groups, there were 150 community champions delivering key messages, for example. Engagement HQ showed where residents were working with RBWM on projects that could be delivered.

Councillor Hilton said that business cases were put forward and RBWM needed to consider how staff resource could be used effectively. The council helped residents and he thought that they would expect investment to be made in services in the budget.

Councillor Baldwin believed that opportunity cost was the next best use of resources. It was focused on savings and therefore the transformation team could only be about savings and how to achieve them. Capital receipts could only be used when savings had been made. Councillor Baldwin felt that it was a dead end, the council had to use transformation to gain traction and deliver service improvements because there was no room in the revenue budget.

In response, Adele Taylor confirmed that capital receipts were only one method of funding transformation. In terms of revenue savings, all it meant was that the budget required was reduced. A lot of transformation did not cost anything, it was looking at the best way of delivering services and projects differently.

Councillor Baldwin asked when additional money had been spent, had anything other than capital receipts been used to fund this expense.

Daniel Brookman used the example of the new case management system which had been built by the team. This project did come out of a small budget for transformation but the team had received funding from a grant from Local Digital which would allow the team to enhance the system over the coming months. The team always looked externally to fund some projects before investigating whether there was the budget internally.

Councillor Baldwin had an additional question, he was advised by the Chairman to discuss this after the meeting with officers if required.

Councillor Werner said that the 'MySense' system was like a 'spy in the home'. A lot of people would have access to the data which would be collected by the device and Councillor Werner was concerned about the privacy of this data, was the data anonymised and how easy was it to access and see the data.

Daniel Brookman said that the device was not spying on residents who were using the service. It was about health data and those that were part of the service had given their consent to who could access the data. The data could be shared with family and adult social care if required, the data was very secure and did not go anywhere without the participants consent.

Councillor Werner asked what happened to those participants that refused to consent and would they therefore not receive the same support as those that had consented. He also asked if the privacy security and data were independently reviewed.

Daniel Brookman said that the solution was not fit for purpose for all, some people did not want the device. Those that were not part of the programme still received the same service, it was just delivered in different ways. The privacy of the data was reviewed internally, by a third party and was signed off by the Information Commissioner's Office.

Councillor Sharpe asked which residents were part of this programme.

Daniel Brookman responded that there was a set criteria that potential participants would be assessed against, predominantly it was usually those living alone. It could assess the health conditions of the participant and help the team flag up any issues before they happened. The data could be sent to family and the council so that they were alerted as soon as possible.

The Chairman commented on the vision of the Corporate Transformation Strategy, which had been titled 'building a community centric borough of opportunity and innovation'. After the Panel's work on the scrutiny of the Corporate Plan, they had recommended to Cabinet that the word 'sustainable' was included. The Chairman proposed that this was also added to the Corporate Transformation Strategy.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommended that the word 'sustainable' be added to the title of the vision of the strategy, to read: 'building a community centric sustainable borough of opportunity and innovation'.

Councillor Werner proposed that the Panel recommended that transformation should not be led by the savings and to ensure that this was the case. The Chairman said that officers had already given assurances at the meeting that this was not the case, this was therefore recorded as a minority comment.

Councillor L Jones requested that her comment on volunteer fatigue was noted, she felt that any transformation involving volunteers could be difficult to achieve. She said that volunteer transformation needed to be sustainable.

The Chairman agreed and said that it was incredibly hard to get right.

Councillor Werner said it was easy to monitor volunteering wellbeing, things like retention rates, volunteer surveys and speaking to volunteers could help organisations understand what staff wellbeing was like.

RESIDENT SCRUTINY SUGGESTION - RBWM APP

Daniel Brookman said that the suggestion had come into the council from a resident using the scrutiny topic suggestion form on the website. The suggestion had been considered by officers and a report had been produced on the scope and potential of the topic for the Panel to consider. Daniel Brookman said the suggestion, for an RBWM App, was a good one and the report was suggesting a recommendation for officers to complete a discovery session to capture interested parties and allow the application to be costed. The findings of the session would be reported back to the Panel in June 2022.

Andrew Ingram informed the Panel that he had submitted the suggestion to the council for consideration. Around 87% of adults used smart phones and most organisations had an app which could often function better than a website. RBWM had a communication gap and by developing an app, the gap could be closed as the council could offer its services to more people. Notifications could also be sent to residents through the app. Andrew Ingram said that other local authorities already had an app, so RBWM could learn from their experiences. He thanked officers for considering his suggestion and for taking the idea forward.

The Chairman said that he taken a look at other local authorities who currently had their own app. He noted that on one example, the app had been released in 2017 and therefore it would be worth discussing the idea with this local authority to see how their app was working.

Councillor Werner thought it was a great idea, the app could be used for reporting issues as well as providing access to a number of other council services. He agreed that RBWM should see what other councils were doing before bringing their own app to the table.

Councillor Sharpe said it was a good idea and wanted to see an RBWM app produced.

Councillor L Jones said that she regularly used apps and that it was a good suggestion. She raised some concern on whether the council had the capacity and capability to produce and run its own app. The project would need investment but it was a good way of communicating with residents. The financial information on a potential app needed to be considered too.

The Chairman commented that the report mentioned a full costing would be looked at over the next few months.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and:

- i) Welcomed the suggestion made for such an app which could form part of the council's suite of communication tools.**
- ii) Noted that a 'discovery' session within the next six months to capture user stories from both residents and other interested parties to enable a full specification to be costed, with the outcome of the session reported back to the Panel in June 2022.**

CIPFA ACTION PLAN UPDATE

Andrew Vallance, Head of Finance, explained that this was the final CIPFA update that the Panel would be receiving. All actions in the action plan had now been undertaken, the last action still to be completed was on the recruitment of new staff. They would be starting in January 2022 when this action would be completed. In November 2021, Cabinet had approved the new internal audit arrangements which would come into effect from April 2022. Cabinet had also seen the 31Ten action plan report into the RBWM Property Company. Two Cabinet Transformation Sub Committees were taking place to consider the Corporate Transformation Strategy. A final report on the CIPFA action plan would be considered by Cabinet in December 2021.

The Chairman asked if now that all actions had been completed, were officers confident that there was now a system in place.

Andrew Vallance said that officers were confident and it was now business as usual for all service departments.

Councillor Sharpe considered the transformation of the finance team over the past few years and said that it was now in a good place.

Councillor L Jones asked about the management of partnership arrangements. Internal audit and the Property Company had been completed but other partnerships had not.

Andrew Vallance confirmed that reviews on Optalis and Achieving for Children had been completed, along with the review on the pension fund.

Councillor L Jones asked what other partnership arrangements did RBWM have.

Adele Taylor said that the shared legal service and Building Control were also part of this review. All partnership arrangements had appropriate reviews.

Councillor L Jones proposed that this section of the action plan was amended, so that it showed all reviews for partnership arrangements had been completed, not including partnerships which were subject to procurement.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommended the completed section of the CIPFA action plan was amended to show that all partnerships, which were not subject to procurement, had been completed.

Councillor Werner said that now the CIPFA action plan had been completed, there was a big danger as this was when things could start to slide. He asked if there was a review process in place, for example could CIPFA be brought back in to see how RBWM was performing.

Adele Taylor explained that internal audit would ensure that RBWM was still performing as expected and the Audit and Governance Committee would be involved in the action plan of internal audit. Services would look to keep planning and make use of best practise, it was important that RBWM had a good internal audit function which also worked in conjunction with the external auditors.

Councillor Werner said that previous external and internal audits had failed, CIPFA then had to be brought in and therefore Councillor Werner felt that RBWM should have an open mind. He suggested that CIPFA was brought back in two years.

Adele Taylor said that there was an option around peer reviews, this was something that the Audit and Governance Committee could pick up on their work programme.

Councillor Werner said that RBWM needed to stay on top of this.

Councillor L Jones said that she was happy with the process and the reporting which was now much more transparent. A review should be considered in a couple of years which could be conducted through the peer review process. One aspect of the CIPFA report mentioned 'poor officer culture with dominant Members', Councillor L Jones felt that the culture of Members was not yet at the right level and was an area that still required some work. She felt that challenge was welcome in environments like the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel meetings but for other Panels this was not the case.

The Chairman noted that under Member Oversight, there was narrative reminding Members of their roles and responsibilities.

Councillor Sharpe said that the council was transforming the way that it operated. Overview and Scrutiny had improved, it was more collaborative and cooperative than it had been in the past.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel reviewed the report and:

- i) Noted the actions taken in respect of the objectives set out, and that the Action Plan had now been completed.**
- ii) Reported any comments on the final completion of the Action Plan to Cabinet.**

FINANCIAL UPDATE

Andrew Vallance updated the Panel on the latest financial position of RBWM. At month 6, there was a small underspend of £46,000, which was a £700,000 improvement over month 4. The reasons for this were contained in the Outbreak Management Fund and extra money from the CCG had been received. There had been a severe overspend reduction in children's services, down to £684,000 which was mainly around placements. For adult's services, there was around a £500,000 overspend which was similar to other Berkshire local authorities. There was £1 million underspend in property.

Councillor L Jones said that the outturn position overall was roughly £50,000 above what was expected. £400,000 had been received from CCG, £1 million from property but there were still 6 months to go. She was unsure about bringing in the £1 million when there was still a lot of uncertainty. On the savings tracker, there were 'potentially unachievable' savings listed of £2.2 million, Councillor L Jones asked how achievable these savings were.

Andrew Vallance said that the £1 million had come from the property team, some of the savings would turn to green from amber. Those that did not, alternative savings would be found.

Adele Taylor added that one of the amber savings had recently turned to green after a Cabinet decision.

Councillor Werner said that the update was showing a different picture to the last update that the Panel had received. He asked what work had gone in to change the overspend to an underspend. How would this be embedded into the system so that this did not happen again.

Andrew Vallance explained that the main reason for the £700,000 change was the CCG money being confirmed. There were further reserves which could be used if needed to balance the budget. The provisional figure for month 7 was a £9,000 underspend.

Adele Taylor said that RBWM spent over £100 million in total, so small amounts of movement like this were common. Budget managers were going through the data in detail which led to greater transparency and it was shown to the Panel where things were being changed where needed. The start of the financial year was less certain than mid-year and therefore it was based on estimations and assumptions. Government had supported the council with grant funding which had an impact on the budget and it was difficult for officers to predict how much support RBWM would receive going forward. Any movement was explained in the report but officers were happy to explain any further detail.

Councillor Werner asked for clarification that the Head of Finance had suggested that if there was any further overspend, there were other sources of income which could be used.

Andrew Vallance said that there was money in reserves available which could be used if required.

Councillor Sharpe said that there were a number of pressures, he asked if officers were sure that all the pressures had been outlined.

Andrew Vallance responded by saying that officers were aware of many pressures, but some were unknown for example the impact of any additional Covid restrictions on income.

Adele Taylor said that there were demand led budgets, for example children placements were expensive and one or two additional children could be an added additional cost. Reserves were one off spending, there were no plans to use reserves and they would only be used as a last resort.

Councillor L Jones asked for an explanation on the gross borrowing forecast and risks associated with it. She had noted from the recommendations in the report and was concerned about the purchase of waste vehicles, she could not find any reference to this in any other report. Councillor L Jones said that this was a significant amount of capital being spent and Members should have been given an overview of this decision.

Andrew Vallance said that mixed borrowing was always under review. Interest rates did not go up in November 2021, the next likely time they could increase was February 2022. Two waste vehicles needed to be approved this financial year, with Cabinet being asked to confirm this spending as part of the report. The other four additional waste vehicles would be part of the draft capital budget. The two purchased this year would be funded by money receiving from Community Infrastructure Levy, the four additional waste vehicles next financial year would be funded by borrowing. The new vehicles needed to be purchased to cover new routes which had recently been agreed.

Councillor L Jones requested that the Service Lead was invited to a future meeting of the Panel to explain the reasoning behind the decision, this was agreed by the Panel.

ACTION – The Service Lead for Waste to be invited to a future meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman said that there was an item on the customer journey which had been suggested, a scoping document needed to be completed to add this item to the work programme.

Councillor L Jones suggested an item on communication and that she was considering a scoping document on this. This work could then lead into the potential development of an RBWM app, as had been discussed during the meeting.

Mark Beeley, Democratic Services Officer, said that the Panel would potentially have an additional meeting towards the end of December 2021 to consider and scrutinise the budget.

Councillor L Jones expressed concern that the budget could be scrutinised properly in December as not all of the numbers would be available on the finance settlement, she believed that there should be another scrutiny session after Christmas.

Adele Taylor said that numbers on the finance settlement were expected mid-December but these would still be provisional. She would be looking to brief Members as soon as possible.

Councillor L Jones suggested that she would prefer to scrutinise the budget after the finance settlement figure had been confirmed.

Councillor Sharpe said that the Panel should give as much time as possible to allow the figures on the finance settlement to be confirmed. Therefore, scrutinising the budget in December might not be the best course of action.

Adele Taylor clarified that the only figure the Panel did not have was the finance settlement figure. All other aspects of the budget still needed to be scrutinised, there was no guarantee that the final finance settlement figure would be received before RBWM was legally required to set the budget.

Councillor Sharpe asked if the finance settlement figure was essential in setting in the budget.

Adele Taylor explained that it was not, it was not the function of scrutiny to consider the finance settlement number. It was not unusual for local authorities to not have a final confirmed figure for the finance settlement when setting the budget.

Councillor L Jones asked if it meant that the figures in the budget would therefore not change.

Adele Taylor responded by saying that the budget proposals would not change, the estimated finance settlement number was £3 million.

Councillor L Jones commented that it would be useful to have as much information as possible at the time the budget was scrutinised by the Panel.

Councillor Werner said that the budget was based on assumptions but the budget could need to change if the £3 million finance settlement was not received from the government. Councillor Werner argued that if the figure was confirmed, the December meeting should go ahead, if the figure was not confirmed then the Panel should delay the meeting until the new year.

Adele Taylor said that any changes would be proposed in the final budget. This was an opportunity for the Panel to see the budget early and feed into the process. Officers had to make estimations on government funding before final figures were confirmed.

Councillor Werner asked what would happen if RBWM only received £2 million, for example, but the budget was set on the assumption that the figure would be £3 million. He felt that the process did not make sense, it was important to discuss things like additional savings.

The Chairman said that the budget was not going to be reissued and he would close off the discussion on this topic. Officers would review the situation and bring the budget to the Panel when it was ready.

Councillor Larcombe said that he was pleased to see in the budget that £200,000 would be going towards the Barrel Arch. He suggested that Wraysbury drain should be looked at and should be added to the work programme for the Panel to consider.

The Chairman said that Councillor Larcombe should liaise with Members on the Panel to produce a scoping document, if appropriate. The Panel could then decide if they wanted to add the item to the work programme.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 9.10 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....