

## CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday 5 June 2023

Present: Councillors Chris Moriarty (Chair), Mark Howard (Vice-Chair), David Buckley, Maureen Hunt, Helen Price, Gary Reeves, Julian Sharpe, Julian Tisi and Mark Wilson

Also in attendance: Councillor Joshua Reynolds

Also in attendance virtually: Councillor Lynne Jones and Councillor Helen Taylor

Officers: Mark Beeley, Nikki Craig, Andrew Vallance, Louise Freeth and Jesal Dhokia

Officers in attendance virtually: Rebecca Hatch, Ollie Cassells and Jennifer Hardy

### Election of Chair

Councillor Howard proposed that Councillor Moriarty be elected Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the 2023/24 municipal year. This was seconded by Councillor Wilson.

As no other nominations were received, a named vote was not required.

**AGREED: That Councillor Moriarty be elected Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the 2023/24 municipal year.**

### Election of Vice Chair

Councillor Wilson proposed that Councillor Howard be elected as Vice Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the 2023/24 municipal year. This was seconded by Councillor Moriarty.

As no other nominations were received, a named vote was not required.

**AGREED: That Councillor Howard be elected as Vice Chair of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the 2023/24 municipal year.**

### Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence received.

### Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

### Minutes

Councillor Howard commented on the actions which were part of the previous meeting.

Mark Beeley, Principal Democratic Services Officer – Overview and Scrutiny, explained that after each meeting, an actions table would be produced. This would list all of the actions from the meeting and confirm the answers or outcomes from those actions. The actions from the previous meeting and any from the meeting tonight would be circulated to the Panel in due course.

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.**

Cost of Living: a review of RBWM's response

Rebecca Hatch, Head of Strategy and Communications, said that the report was structured around four main aspects of the council's response. Here to Help was the initial response to the increase in cost of living and brought together help and advice from a number of different sources in to one centralised place. The campaign had initially been launched in May 2022 and was refreshed in October 2022 to reflect the winter pressures that many vulnerable residents had faced. The second focus was on central government schemes, for example council tax support and energy rebates. The revenues and benefits team had worked on administering this support to residents. The design and delivery of the Household Support Fund had also been considered, this was a national scheme and RBWM had been allocated a grant sum of funding to spend. The fund had initially been targeted at children who were on free school meals but more recent tranches of funding allowed the council to be more flexible with who they supported. The council had also facilitated a network of warm spaces across the borough, which included community organisations and libraries coming together to offer safe spaces for the community.

Councillor Price thanked officers for the clear and detailed report. She had initially suggested the topic as she wanted to see the effective work which had taken place and whether there were any groups of vulnerable residents which were not being reached. Leaflets had been distributed but this had not provided an uplift in applications for support. Another area to consider was residents who had mortgages but had seen the mortgage rate increase rapidly. It was important for the council to look forward at what it could do to help residents.

David Adam, from Citizens Advice Bureau East Berkshire, explained that Citizens Advice was one the delivery partners for the Household Support Fund. The fund had allowed the organisation to reach out to residents and also for residents to see what support can be provided. There was a national figure of £19 billion worth of benefits which went unclaimed each year and it was therefore important that residents were made aware of the support available. There was concern that more people could find themselves in financial difficulty.

Councillor Howard asked how much of the funding provided by the council had been spent and how much had gone unclaimed.

Rebecca Hatch confirmed that for the Household Support Fund, this had all been spent. A number of residents received funding automatically in the form of vouchers for free school meals. Vulnerable residents were identified by one of the 14 partner organisations which were working with the council, with a range of different organisations being part of the scheme. A big communications push had been launched earlier this year as there had been concern that not enough residents were aware of the additional support which could be provided.

Councillor J Tisi understood that the reason why there were no financial implications in the report was because the council was receiving money and deciding how it should be spent. He asked of the latest tranche funding of £1.175 million, how much of this had been taken up and whether this would be spent in a similar way to previous tranches.

Jesal Dhokia, Partnerships and Community Service Lead, explained that the same model would be used for tranche 4. The council would be using partner engagements to understand which cohorts needed targeting but it would follow a similar pattern to previous tranches. The older age cohort had been difficult to reach and this would be targeted. The partner organisations remained the same.

Councillor Price asked if partner organisations would give holistic support to residents, for example they could signpost vulnerable residents to the relevant support if it was not something that they could provide directly.

Jesal Dhokia said that services would be wrapped around individuals, a wide range of organisations were used to provide support. The community hub information portal was also being revised which would allow residents to understand the range of support available. This was a key theme which had come out of the world cafes, these had been run in wards across the borough.

Councillor Price said that in Dedworth, there was a community champion at Tesco who ensured that the noticeboard displayed different services and support available in an accessible place. Age Concern had also displayed leaflets on things like lampposts, these methods allowed organisations to reach older age groups who may not have access to the internet.

The Chair noted that ward issues had been picked up and that some wards needed to be targeted individually. He asked if Councillors would be contacted to see what they could do to help.

Jesal Dhokia said that last year, the team had reached out to all Councillors. There were plans for the second stage of this project to continue from October onwards.

Councillor Reeves noted that Councillors would be reached out to on an ongoing basis about the project, he asked when the next update would be as there were a number of new Councillors. At a recent world café, Councillor Reeves had suggested that he could print out handouts and put them in places like local shops where they could be easily seen. Leaflets could be given to Councillors at future world cafes to encourage them to help spread information in their wards. Councillor Reeves asked if officers would be monitoring new methods of distributing information and whether they had an effect.

Jesal Dhokia explained that the first year of the world café programme had now been completed. All Councillors would be engaged with as part of the programme going forward. The project was open and transparent on RBWM Together. Leaflets had not been prioritised as feedback from recent world cafes was that the leaflets did not work. The Household Support Fund was reviewed at regular intervals and Jesal Dhokia was happy to speak to any Councillors about the fund at any time.

Rebecca Hatch added that the Household Support Fund application system had been set up so that it captured key information like age, this allowed the council to keep track on which cohorts were being reached. Optalis had been brought in as a partner as they provided an opportunity to reach older people. There was a reluctance amongst older age groups to put themselves forward for support.

Louise Freeth, Head of Revenues, Benefits, Library and Residents Services, said that the requirements of the Household Support Fund had changed. In tranche 2, there had been a requirement for the council to spend up to a third of the funding assisting older individuals. The council had decided that any pensioner who was in receipt of Council Tax support would automatically receive £100 from the fund. This was either directly into their bank account or used as council tax credit. £207,000 had been allocated in tranche 2 using this method.

Councillor Hunt complimented officers and David Adam for their work on supporting vulnerable residents. The world cafes had been very successful, feedback on vouchers had been taken on board.

Councillor Price said that the voluntary organisations needed to be considered as they were having their own cost of living issues, for example a rise in utility bills. This then increased the pressure on organisations who were trying to support residents.

Councillor Wilson asked if the council tax system could be used as proof of residency. He suggested that 'word of mouth' could be a useful source of spreading information amongst different communities.

Jennifer Hardy, National Management Trainee in Transformation and Community Service, said that there was a Community Champions magazine which had been recently launched. This was a form of community engagement which was targeting word of mouth and the individual networks that community champions were part of.

Louise Freeth said that linking applications with the council tax database was discussed at the time but it was discounted because not everyone was registered for council tax under their own name, families living together was an example. There was also the issue of individuals needing to know their council tax reference number so that this could be linked on the system. It was more likely individuals would have their driving license or a bank statement proving their address than their council tax number. Louise Freeth would need to explore with the system software provider whether residents could prove their address using their council tax details or other means, as the system was not currently configured in this way.

Councillor Sharpe was interested to see how other local authorities were helping to support residents.

David Adam said that RBWM had a consistent scheme as it had continued to run following the issue response to the cost of living crisis. There were a number of councils across the country where schemes of support had stopped. Some councils gave Citizens Advice the responsibility of administering payments but this took time and resource away from helping residents.

Councillor Reeves noticed that the project had been shortlisted for an award and this was testament to the work that officers had put in. He suggested that this should be promoted on the literature which was distributed about the scheme. Councillor Reeves asked if residents could volunteer to help as part of the scheme and be 'there to help'.

Jesal Dhokia responded by explaining that the skills voluntary programme would be launched shortly and Councillors would be sent details of how they could get involved. RBWM had an adult learning provider where gaps in skills and training could be identified through courses.

Councillor Price commented on the scoping document where it had been mentioned that the scrutiny review could be publicised to increase community involvement.

Jesal Dhokia said that she was happy to work with Councillor Price to see how much of the document could be shared on the website.

Councillor Wilson suggested that a 'quick read' version of the guidance and support could be provided for those residents who did not have time to read about the full support on offer.

The Chair highlighted social media engagement and that it was pleasing to see a good number of impressions and engagements, but it was not clear whether these translated into more applications. The Chair summarised some of the points raised by Panel Members. These included how Councillors could be updated on the progress of the Household Support Fund, widening the net to capture more vulnerable residents that needed support, the ease of application for residents and transparency around the process.

Councillor Reeves said that Age Concern Windsor was a partner organisation which covered the Windsor area, he asked if there were similar organisations which covered Maidenhead.

Jesal Dhokia said that there were organisations which covered other parts of the borough, for example Age Concern Berkshire East. Older residents groups had also been contacted to see how the council could support them.

Councillor Price asked if organisations were being supported by the council, who could then provide direct support to residents. She questioned if this was part of the project.

Jesal Dhokia explained that she was currently working on the voluntary sector engagement strategy. There were plans to have a summit with the voluntary sector in November which would explore capacity and resource building.

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

- i) **Looked to provide feedback and relevant recommendations for consideration.**

### Work Programme

Mark Beeley explained that the work programme contained information on topics which the Panel would consider over the course of the municipal year. Any topics which were requested by Panel Members needed to have a scoping document completed.

Councillor Hunt commented on the call in on Maidenhead United's proposed move to Braywick Park.

Mark Beeley explained the context of the call in and that the Place Overview and Scrutiny had referred the matter back to the decision maker. The Executive Director of Place, as the decision maker, had considered the recommendations made by the Panel and had decided to refer the matter back to Cabinet. As the decision had already been called in, the decision would not come back to overview and scrutiny.

**ACTION – Mark Beeley to share a link to the Officer Decision Notice which had been published following the call in.**

Councillor Wilson felt that there had been a number of changes amongst council officers over the past few years. He considered whether some roles had been vacant for some time and whether changes made to roles were appropriate.

Councillor Howard said that the Community Infrastructure Levy and S106 funding was an area of interest, particularly financial implications and how it could be revised for the future.

Councillor Price said that there were a number of items which were always considered by the Panel.

Mark Beeley confirmed that he would work with officers to schedule statutory items into the work programme.

Councillor Reeves understood that the council was engaged in a number of contracts, he was interested to scrutinise the contract management group and what the plans were to ensure that there was a robust contract management process.

Councillor Howard suggested that the Panel could look to understand the council's powers to improve the water pollution situation.

Councillor Tisi said that the corporate risk register was an important document, risks could change over time and this could be explored.

Mark Beeley said that the risk register was under the remit of the Audit and Governance Committee but if this could be explored to see if there was an area which could be scrutinised.

Councillor Howard said an understanding of the RBWM Property Company could be useful. He also suggested a review of parking enforcement in the borough and how it could be improved, particularly in rural areas.

Mark Beeley said that he would contact individual Councillors to discuss their proposals after the meeting and work on the scope of topic items.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 8.12 pm

Chair.....

Date.....