

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD
Havering Town Hall, Main Road, Romford
24 November 2021 (7.30 – 10.05 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group	Philippa Crowder, Judith Holt, Nisha Patel, Christine Smith, Maggie Themistocli, John Crowder, Timothy Ryan and Matt Sutton
Residents' Group	Ray Morgon
Upminster & Cranham Residents' Group'	Linda Hawthorn and Christopher Wilkins
Independent Residents' Group	Graham Williamson and Natasha Summers
Labour Group	Keith Darvill
North Havering Residents' Group	Darren Wise (Chairman)

Officers present:

Jane West, Chief Operating Officer
Sandy Hamberger, Assistant Director, Policy, Performance and Community
Ben Plant, Director of HR/Organisational Development
Anthony Clements, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Luke Phimister, Democratic Services Officer

All decisions were taken with no votes against.

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Councillors Michael White (Tim Ryan substituting) Ray Best (Matt Sutton substituting) Sally Miller (John Crowder substituting) and Barry Mugglestone.

25 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest.

26 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings of the Board held on 2 September and 18 October were agreed as a correct record.

27 UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY (MTFS) AND BUDGET FOR 2022/23

The Chief Operating Officer advised that it remained a challenge to bring down the Council's overspend. The pandemic had led to a gap of £3m in delivered savings. Central Government support had only been available until 30 June and there was a net overspend of £14m.

General reserves only amounted to £10.9m. The Council had budgeted for £3m extra and had also received £5m via the East London Waste Authority. Remaining reserves at the end of 2021/22 were therefore expected to be c. £4.8m. It was accepted that this was a lower figure than officers would have wished for.

The impact of Covid-19 has seen a £7m overspend in adult social care. It was wished to undertake more reablement work as it was more cost effective to get people back to living in their own homes. There had also been a rise in referrals and placements needed in Children's Services. The pandemic had also meant a number of restructures had not been completed and the associated savings not yet delivered.

Future risks included the three-year spending review with any additional funding only available in the first year. The impact of levelling up and losing funding from London to the north of England was a risk as was the impact of the 2021 census on the Council's financial settlement. Pressures on adult and children's social care continued with growing demand and a higher complexity of need combining with reduced NHS funding from the Clinical Commissioning Group. The need to maintain social distancing by using more buses and taxis to take children with special needs to and from school had also increased costs.

The budget gap for 2022/23 had been reduced from £19m to £11.8m. This had been achieved through lower concessionary travel costs and the receipt of more Government funding than had been expected. Cost pressures were expected to be less in 2024-26.

Proposed savings included £7m of staff reductions (around 400 posts across the Council) and £4m of savings via new modes of delivery such as the establishment of community hubs in place of the former Public Advice and Service Centre. Savings were also emerging from the Council's digital programme.

An All Member Briefing had been carried out on the proposals and the final budget proposals would be brought to the Board for scrutiny in late January. The budget consultation process had seen a higher level of response than previous years and focus groups were also due to be organised. It was hoped that the forthcoming settlement announcement from Central Government would reduce the level of savings required.

Officers would give further details of the reasons for the higher number of children with complex needs that required support although it was agreed that the lockdown had caused increased problems for families. The reference in the report to 'activities not benefitting residents' referred to excessive levels of bureaucracy within the Council such as dealing with Freedom of Information requests and requiring an annual sign up by residents to the green waste collection. The Rainham and Beam Park joint venture would need a revised business case due to the turning down of the proposed railway station in the area.

Some Members felt that more details was needed on the level of savings and how quickly they would be made. There was also the impact of staff reductions to be considered. Taking the green waste service as an example, officers responded that the new CRM system would remove a lot of queries currently received from the public and hence free up officer time for other duties.

The establishment of the Fusion system would allow for the planned reduction in staff by mid-2022. It was accepted that the impact on services of having less staff would need to be managed effectively but the Council's people had made staff more versatile as was seen in the response to the pandemic.

A Member suggested that it would be useful to add to the Board's work programme scrutiny of areas such as the renewal of the waste contract and income from electric vehicle charging points. Detail was also requested on what services provisions needed to be modified as a result of covid cost pressures. Officers could supply a matrix of what would be covered in the January report to the Board.

Officers advised that the budget presented did not anticipate the impact of the second lockdown. The impact of this on social care had been worse than anticipated and there were also instances of lost Council revenue from e.g. the leisure contract. The pressure on adult social care meant it was difficult to reduce the £14m overspend although officers added that a reduction in reserves of £4-5m was a worst case scenario.

Members felt that a breakdown of costs for children in care should be taken to the children and learning overview and scrutiny sub-committee with a view to seeing how costs could be reduced. It was clarified that most funding given to local companies during the pandemic was in the form of grants from Central Government and did not have to be paid back.

Collection of business rates had held up well during the pandemic. Mental health support was included in cost pressures but this was mainly NHS funded.

The Board noted the update.

28 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION (LGA) INDEPENDENT RACE, EQUALITY, ACCESSIBILITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (READI) COMMISSIONED REVIEW MAY 2021: APPROVAL OF ACTION PLAN

The Board was advised that the report on the READI review agreed at Cabinet and Council had included a recommended six-month scrutiny of progress against the report's action plan. Full Council had approved the 15 priority recommendations made in the report. It was emphasised that the review was not an investigation and did not make any judgements. The review was in conjunction with the Leader's wish to make sure the Council's own policies supported zero tolerance to racism and discrimination. The review had been commissioned by the Council from the Local Government Association.

The review included a confidential self-assessment and had been delayed due to the impact of the pandemic. The Council Chief Executive was able to make only factual comments on the report. The self-assessment had been shared with service and staff forum leads. The report lead officer was interviewed by Council representatives in order to ensure the integrity and honesty of the report.

A more detailed plan of actions in response to the report would be designed by the READI programme manager. £250k funding had been committed to recruit the READI programme team. A Member felt that the Board should look at each Council policy to check it confirmed with the overall action plan. Other suggestions by the Member included an enhanced equalities and diversity page on the Council's website, and giving examples to Members of the experiences of staff referred to in the report. Other Members also felt that redacted examples of the incidents referred to should be given.

Officers responded that it was correct that policies should be scrutinised at the Board in light of the READI review. Some examples had in fact been given at feedback sessions with the Cabinet and Group Leaders. Officers would check with the Monitoring Officer if the self-assessment document could be released to the Board. Work on an equalities and diversity page of the website would be covered in the detailed action plan and the Board was welcome to scrutinise this. Indeed, it was part of the scrutiny role to look at the detail of work in the areas covered by the READI report.

Some Members felt they had not been involved in the review and that Councillors should be kept better informed as to progress. An All Member

Briefing on the report had taken place. Members continued to feel though that they would like more details of the experiences covered in the report. Officers suggested one option was to see if the internal equalities and diversity group would speak confidentially to the Board.

It was AGREED that the Board consider progress against the READI review action plan on a six monthly basis in line with the scrutiny function. This would include updates on the following areas:

- Ensuring existing Council policies conformed with the review action plan.
- Establishing an enhanced Equalities and Diversity page on the Council's website.
- Drawing on external expertise in Equalities and Diversity available from organisations such as the Local Government Association.
- Giving examples and more detail to Members of the shared experiences referred to in the READI review.

29 HR DATA: EMPLOYEES WHO LEAVE THE COUNCIL; EMPLOYEE COMPLAINTS

Officers advised that staff turnover at Havering was below the London average. Numbers of employee complaints were stable and there was a strong focus on resolving complaints. It was accepted that there was a need to improve the reporting of informal complaints. Key themes for staff leaving were considered in more detail in the exit interview process. It was an option for staff to undertake an exit interview without speaking to their line manager or to be interviewed by a manager from another team.

It was accepted that more qualitative data was needed on staff reasons for leaving and that this needed to be analysed more. Data on areas such as the timescale for responding to grievances was reported to the oneSource Joint Committee.

It was challenging to retain staff in London and officers added that salary was not a commonly given reason for leaving. More details of staff reductions and the areas affected would be given to Members in the budget process. Some redundancies would be needed.

Data re dealing with staff complaints was tracked weekly and escalated to the relevant department where targets were not being met.

It was uncertain at this stage what the impact of working from home had been on the workforce. Councillors were also concerned about the impact of restructures on staff morale.

The Board noted the report.

Chairman