

BUSINESS AND FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 20 June 2023 at 6.00 pm in The Telford Room, Addenbrooke House, Ironmasters Way, Telford, TF3 4NT

Present: Councillors C R Turley (Chair), A J Burford, F Doran and S Syrda.

Also Present: Councillor N A M England (Cabinet Member: Finance, Customer Services and Governance)

In Attendance: L Higgins (Service Delivery Manager: Customer Relationships & Welfare Services),
A Lowe (Director: Policy & Governance),
F Mercer (Director: Communities, Customer & Commercial Services), and
K Robinson (Democracy Officer (Scrutiny))

Apologies: Councillors Z Hannington, G Luter and P Thomas

BFSC1 Declarations of Interest

None.

BFSC2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting 12 January 2023 and the notes of the meeting 26 January 2023 be noted by the Committee.

BFSC3 Terms of Reference 2023 / 2024

The Director: Policy & Governance presented the draft Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee Terms of Reference.

RESOLVED - that the Terms of Reference set out in Appendix A of the report be approved.

BFSC4 Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Director: Policy & Governance presented the draft Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.

RESOLVED – that the work programme for 2023/2025 be approved.

BFSC5 Cost of Living Update

Members received an update on the cost of living crisis from the Director: Communities, Customer & Commercial Services and the Service Delivery Manager: Customer Relationships & Welfare Services.

The Cost of Living Strategy was published in October 2022 and sought to address the issue with a whole-council approach. An update report to Cabinet followed in March 2023.

Officers gave an overview of the general impact of the cost of living crisis nationally before presenting headline figures of the impact locally. The crisis had been felt across the Borough, but there were specific areas where the impact was more acute.

The Committee heard a summary of the work the Council had undertaken in various key areas such as commercial and residential energy costs, council tax and business rates, food, warm spaces, and assisting older residents to access support.

Looking ahead, Members were informed that the government funding which had supported a number of pieces of work was threatened. Funding used for supermarket vouchers and Discretionary Housing Payments could not be guaranteed beyond March 2024. While the Council offered a good level of continuing support, there were concerns about financial sustainability.

A discussion followed the presentation, with Members posing a number of questions.

What work was being done to plan beyond March 2024?

The Council started with a good level of core support and so was not in as bad a position as some authorities. The existing emergency welfare budget was strong but there would still be a step backwards without external funding. The Council had always looked at creative ways of applying for grants and had a strong relationship with the voluntary sector that it was able to mobilise rapidly. Funding had been set aside for warm rooms in the winter and Pride funding could be used to supplement this if needed.

Were there pressures on staff capacity?

There was a financial welfare team and this had been in place for a number of years. Many of the schemes discussed had been run for some time but all had seen an increase in demand. Expertise was needed to work on the welfare and benefits system, staff were specialised. The cost of living crisis had been challenging but the team had worked hard to make sure things were processed on the day they came in, working for a 24-hour turnaround.

Was there any support for those struggling with mortgage payments?

No direct support was available. Those on Universal Credit could get help on interest payments.

Had there been an impact on social housing demand and homelessness?

Homelessness was increasing. People were also approaching the Council for housing advice, seeking cheaper housing or approaching the crisis point of homelessness. More staff had been put onto the help lines for these issues due to the increased demand.

With demand likely to continue to rise, were there any services that would have to stop at a certain point to create capacity?

In terms of the contact centre, staff were already redistributed to areas of highest priority. It was possible to be flexible with how resources were deployed.

Following the discussion, it was:

RESOLVED – that:

- a) **the Business & Finance Scrutiny Committee request that Cabinet write to the Government regarding the retention of discretionary funding;**
- b) **the presentation be noted.**

BFSC6 Chair's Update

The next meeting of the Committee was scheduled for 27 September 2023.

The meeting ended at 6.52 pm

Chairman:

Date: Wednesday 27 September 2023