



Minutes

FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE FINANCE, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY 26 MARCH 2019, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 1, COUNTY HALL,
AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.04 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.05 PM.**

This meeting was webcast. To review the detailed discussions that took place please see the webcast which can be found at: <http://www.buckscc.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>
The webcasts are retained on this website for 6 months. Recordings of any previous meetings beyond this can be requested (contact: democracy@buckscc.gov.uk)

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr T Butcher, Mr A Christensen, Mr D Martin, Mr D Shakespeare OBE, Ms J Ward and Mr D Watson (Chairman)

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

Ms T Eaton, Mrs K Page, Mr A Rush, Mr M Strevens and Mrs K Sutherland

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Bendyshe-Brown and Mr Clare.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 13th November 2018 were agreed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were none.

5 CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

The Chairman updated the Committee on the following:

- The Leader and the Director of Finance and Procurement had agreed to meet with the Chairman to discuss improvements to the presentation of the Budget information, to improve visibility and transparency for Members and Bucks residents.
- A draft report on the key findings and recommendations from the Effective Leadership inquiry meeting which took place in the Autumn, should be available for the next meeting.

Children's Services Select Committee had agreed to undertake an inquiry into Placements, which was a key driver of costs in the service. The Chairman wished to invite two members of the FPR Select Committee to join the Inquiry Group – the Chairman and Mr David Martin volunteered to take part.

6 CUSTOMER UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed Mr John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Resources, Miss Kelly Page, Customer Experience Head of Service and Miss Tracy Eaton, Customer Experience Manager to the meeting. The Cabinet Member highlighted a number of key achievements including: better and faster resolution of customer contacts in the Customer Service Centre (CSC), introduction of webchat and aesthetic improvements to the website and increased usage of the Customer Relationship Management system, Firmstep.

Kelly Page took Members through the report. During the presentation and in answer to Member's subsequent questions the following main points were noted:

- The Customer Experience team had been seeking feedback from customers through webchat and customer effort scores on the website, by attending the County Show and various Local Area Forum meetings and by liaising with the Bucks Older Action Group, to understand how older people like to use the website.
- More web pages had been improved for accessibility with an overall score of 92% recently achieved. Fix my Street had also been redesigned to be more user friendly.
- Online Customer Service training course had been launched and completed by 550 members of staff. Members suggested that it could be a mandatory requirement for new starters at the Council.
- A Member expressed frustration with the Council's website, particularly the inaccuracy of the search facility. Miss Page advised that the website was being improved constantly but the Council did not have the same budget as big retailers such as Amazon. Many changes to the website were in direct response to user feedback and by tidying old content off the site, the search accuracy should improve.
- It was noted that the CSC now had a dedicated phone line for town and parish councils but it had not been particularly well used. Members suggested that this should be more widely promoted.
- In response to a question about the officer working group on Customer, Kelly Page explained that she and the Service Director, Customer were meeting weekly with counterparts in all four district councils to discuss what good looks like for customers and focussing on how to deliver robust customer service from the vesting day of the new authority in April 2020.
- The Chairman asked about the alignment of IT systems and how planning for IT was progressing, as this would ultimately underpin effective service delivery and communications with residents. The Cabinet Member confirmed that there was a separate IT workstream.
- A Member commented that it was vital for the preparation for the May 2020 elections to the new authority, that residents would be able to request a postal vote online, so this needed to be considered by the IT and Customer workstreams.

- It was noted that it was important to ensure that all Community Hubs would be able to offer consistent, high quality information to customers, wherever they were in the County.
- Members also stressed that the needs of customers who would not contact the Council via online channels must also be considered.

The Chairman thanked Miss Page and Miss Eaton for their update.

7 BUSINESS RATES RETENTION - CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

The Chairman welcomed Mr John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Resources, Mr Alistair Rush, Interim Deputy Director of Finance and Mr Matthew Strevens, Head of Finance – Corporate to the meeting.

Mr Strevens presented an overview of the report included in the agenda pack. During the presentation and the subsequent discussion the following main points were noted:

- Buckinghamshire had been successful in becoming part of a pilot for 75% business rates retention (BRR) in 2019-20. It was anticipated that this would deliver a financial benefit of approximately £7million, shared across all five authorities.
- The diagram on page 21 of the agenda pack illustrated the difference between a ‘tariff authority’ and a ‘top-up authority’. Currently all four district councils in Bucks were tariff authorities whilst the County Council was a top-up authority. Top-up authorities retained 50% of their business rates growth, whilst tariff authorities were subject to a levy.
- The new BRR scheme was due to come into effect on 1st April 2020 and it was likely that there would still be a system of safety nets through tariffs and top-up arrangements. Further information was expected to be included in the 2019 Autumn Statement, but unfortunately this was quite late for financial planning purposes for the new unitary authority.
- In addition to the lack of detail about the changes, there were other risks to business rates growth such as the impact of Brexit, changes to the way that businesses operate etc.
- The Council had been actively engaged in discussions on the development of new methodologies associated with the BRR scheme
- Whilst the new unitary authority would simplify the system locally, it would not particularly increase the financial benefit for the County because this had been maximised through pooling arrangements between County and districts anyway.
- It was noted that learning from earlier BRR pilots across the country was limited for Bucks, as many of these had been in London boroughs, combined authorities or areas with metro mayors which were very different to a rural county.
- Members raised concerns about the suggestion that the Public Health(PH) grant was to be removed and replaced by funding from BRR. Arrangements were still to be confirmed, but it was suggested that unlike the PH grant, funding through BRR might not have to be ringfenced.
- Whilst there remained uncertainty about BRR, there were wider issues of local government funding that could prove to be more significant, e.g. the impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review, Fair Funding Review and the future funding for Social Care, which had still not been addressed due to continuing delays with the Green Paper on Social Care.
- It was noted that Unitary presented an opportunity to maximise the opportunity of BRR and that collaboration with the Local Enterprise Partnership was vital to encourage new business development, particularly in the three Enterprise Zones. Mr Strevens reported that he had been meeting with district council colleagues and commented that a commonality of purpose was growing.

The Chairman thanked Mr Chilver, Mr Rush and Mr Strevens for attending the meeting. It was recognised that this was a complicated area and Members hoped that learning would be shared through the Unitary.

8 BUDGET SCRUTINY 2018 - 12 MONTH PROGRESS REPORT

The Chairman welcomed Mr John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Resources and Mr Alistair Rush, Interim Deputy Director of Finance. The Committee asked questions on the 12 month progress report on the recommendations of Budget Scrutiny 2018 and the following main points were noted:

- **Recommendation 1** – An independent review had confirmed that the Council's current approach to financial management was sound and on par with local government peers. Whilst the Council was not adopting accruals accounting, monthly reporting in advance of the financial year was presented to Corporate Management Team (CMT) on a forecast basis, reflecting that services are demand led. Mr. Rush advised that there had been a concerted push to make financial reporting more timely, relevant, reliable and transparent, so that decision makers could focus on making the right decision rather than querying if the financial information was accurate.
- The Chairman commented that he welcomed the review and whilst he understood that no other County Council did accruals accounting, he would be surprised if the new Unitary Council did not adopt this approach. The Cabinet Member advised that he believed that the effectiveness of the Council's overall financial monitoring had improved.
- **Recommendation 2** – It was noted that the Chairman was meeting with the Leader and the Section 151 Officer to discuss how to improve visibility of the budget information to ensure that the public and Members could understand the Council's spending. Members still supported the idea of a Budget Book for the public.
- **Recommendation 4** – It was noted that 70% of leavers had completed an exit interview in the past 12 months. The Cabinet Member reminded the Committee that Viewpoint staff feedback surveys were also carried out quarterly. These were completed anonymously and provided CMT with regular feedback during this time of change.
- **Recommendation 5** – It was noted that the Smarter Bucks Strategy had been agreed by Cabinet and was being implemented, although some elements, for example, upgrades for SAP, had been put on hold in light of Unitary changes. Other areas of the strategy had to be implemented regardless due to risks around security and the robustness of IT systems.
- **Recommendation 8** – Mr Rush explained that an internal review of forecasting processes had taken place and improvements in areas of activity and demand data and timely recording of financial commitments had been identified. The introduction of the new iCares system should lead to further improvements in data quality and the automatic collation of data was also being explored.
- A Member asked if unpleasant budget surprises would now be unlikely as a result of this work and Mr Rush commented that this was the desired outcome and many officers were working very diligently and with open minds to the way they should approach financial analysis.
- **Recommendation 9** – A Member asked if the Home to School transport savings identified for 2019/20 would be realised. In response, Mr Rush acknowledged that risks remained and all 2019/20 savings needed to be monitored closely.
- **Recommendation 11** – A Member commented that he hoped that a fully gully survey had been undertaken and that a proper scheduled maintenance programme would be introduced as a result.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the Interim Deputy Director of Finance for attending the meeting. It was agreed that the Chairman and the Committee and Governance Manager would compile RAG ratings for each recommendation based on Members' comments and this would then be circulated to the Committee via email for comment.

ACTION: Chairman/Committee & Governance Manager

9 WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

Members noted the Work Programme Update.

A Member suggested that it would be helpful to have an update on the work of the Bucks Learning Trust which had now been brought back in-house. The Committee and Governance Manager agreed to investigate this suggestion further, although it was noted that it might be more appropriate for such an update to be presented to the Regulatory and Audit Committee.

ACTION: Committee & Governance Manager

10 DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

18th June 2019 at 10am in Mezzanine Room 1, County Hall, Aylesbury

11 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded for the following item which is exempt by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972 because it contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

12 CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 13th November 2018 were agreed as a correct record.

CHAIRMAN