

BUDGET AND CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

THURSDAY, 17TH OCTOBER, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor Headley (Chair)
Councillors Atiq, Masud, Foley, Frost, Gambold, and McHugh

There were no apologies for absence received.

Officers in attendance were Laura Church, Chief Executive; Margaret Birtles, Manager for Asset and Estate Management; Julie McCabe, Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) and Chief Finance Officer; Jashpal Mann, Manager for Performance, Analytics and Data Protection; and Natalie Gandy, Senior Democratic Services Officer.

45 Questions from Members of the Council and Members of the Public

There were no questions from Members of the Council or members of the public.

46 Minutes and Actions

In relation to the Committee's Actions Tracker, the following updates and comments were provided:

- SEPT24(2) – no response had yet been received and was to be followed up.
- SEPT24(4) and SEPT24(5) - no response had yet been received and was to be followed up.
- SEPT24(8) – the reference was taken to the 16 October 2024 Executive meeting and the Committee's concerns were expressed in relation to the Corporate Plan Outturn report. The feedback received from the Executive was that no further action on this matter was to be undertaken. However, the Executive were looking at Key Performance Indicators for the new Corporate Plan.

The Chair additionally raised the feedback received from the 11 September 2024 Executive meeting, specifically in relation to a number of recommendations this Committee had made. These recommendations had included the shared travel plan, which was to be actioned once resources were in place; use of reserves whereby this Committee's concerns were acknowledged but no further action had appeared to be taking place; the risk register; and the Local Welfare Provision with the response being that some funds had been directed through the homelessness service but this did not address this Committee's concerns.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 September 2024, be approved.
- ii) That the Committee's Actions Tracker be noted.
- iii) That the Senior Democratic Services Officer be requested to chase up any outstanding actions on the Committee's Actions Tracker.

- iv) That the Manager for Democratic Services and Electoral Registration be requested to provide an explanation on why an increase on the absolute number of the electorate would result in a proportion of people not responding.

47 Disclosure of Local and/or Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

Item and Minute Nos.	Member Disclosing an Interest	Nature of Interest	Present or Absent During Discussion of Item
Item No. 5 Minute No. 48	Councillor McHugh	Local interest – husband on the Citizens Advice Bedford Board	Present
Item No. 7 Minute No. 50	Councillor Atiq	Local interest – Member of the Management Board for the Cauldwell Community Centre	Present
Item No. 7 Minute No. 50	Councillor Masud	Local interest – Member of the Queens Park Community Centre Committee	Present

48 Major Review - Financial Support for Residents

Citizens Advice Bureau:

A presentation was received from Francesca Marritt, Chief Executive at Citizens Advice Bedford.

In response to questions received from Members of the Committee, and based on the presentation received, Francesca Marritt provided the following information:

- The Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) would assist people with completing application forms for white goods. This also included those that English was not their first language. In addition, it was advised that the criteria for white goods was poverty and being unable to afford an essential item. Application forms for white goods could also be sent out to an applicant or someone who was supporting the applicant to complete the form;
- Digital exclusion was seen regularly, particularly amongst the older generation. An example of this was elderly people struggling with medical services and prescriptions as they were mainly going online. Often these people just wanted to speak to someone over the phone that could help or complete a paper-based form. It was believed that even in this digital age there needed to be a way, as well as an acceptance, to access some of the Council services via phone and paper application form;
- For those people who wanted to engage digitally but could not afford to, it was advised that the CAB were part of the Databank Foundation whereby electronic devices could be handed out. One aspect the CAB would like to pursue further was training people to use digital devices, including budgeting tools and online

banking, via a selection of workshops. Funding for this was being looked into as additional capacity to run these workshops was needed;

- In relation to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), it was believed that if an individual's debt could be written off and there was a robust budgeting programme in place with them, this could enable the person to start afresh and move forward. However, the discretionary element of the DHP sometimes meant that certain people were not eligible. The CAB would have liked to have seen more people given the option of obtaining DHP;
- The CAB would have liked to have seen a more compassionate approach to awarding DHP; and
- Direct referrals were taken from the Housing and Homelessness Team, as well as a number of Adult Services Teams. The CAB usually had the name of the social worker or advisor that was making the referral. However, it was advised that sometimes the individual which the CAB needed to speak to was often in another team at the Council (for example, Revenue and Benefits). Therefore, it was believed that having named contacts for these teams, and single telephone line or email address, would make organisations' lives easier, as they needed to get through to the appropriate Council Officer as soon as possible.

IMPAKT:

A presentation was received from Laura Plava, Head of Domestic Abuse Services; Parmjit Chana, Head of Housing; and Robert Hull, Resettlement Coordinator at IMPAKT Bedford.

In response to questions received from Members of the Committee, and based on the presentation received, Laura Plava, Parmjit Chana, and Robert Hull jointly provided the following information:

- IMPAKT Preloved had previously worked with the Local Welfare Provision (LWP) to provide white and brown goods. If someone was looking to access these types of goods, IMPAKT would look at the funding pots that were available. For example, IMPAKT could potentially access its flexi-fund to purchase the white goods;
- Support was provided to domestic abuse victims. It was highlighted that should an individual access the IMPAKT service, support would be provided to help with immediate need, including making sure that they were physically as well as emotionally safe. In addition, part of the work undertaken with victims of domestic abuse was helping them to access local services, so that more long-term support could be provided;
- For people with English as an additional language, it was advised that IMPAKT accessed Language Line and the Queens Park Neighbourhood Centre was utilised as they had a number of translators;
- There was no limit on the number of times an individual could seek support from IMPAKT;
- Previously a voucher was issued to eligible individuals for white goods. However, now that the LWP was closed, IMPAKT was able to access a different funding pot to provide the white goods. Nevertheless, it was highlighted that the funding pot had not originally been designed for this and therefore IMPAKT was mindful that they would not be able to continue to fill the gap that had opened up due to the closure of LWP; and
- There had been significant improvements in the Bedford Housing Team; however, IMPAKT was still experiencing issues in relation to Personal Housing Plans across the three areas it covered. Plans were not always being put into place; however, it was considered to be vital that individuals knew what options

were available to them as early as possible and how best they could be supported.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the presentations from Citizen Advice Bureau Bedford and IMPAKT, be received.
- ii) That the following recommendations be added to the final recommendations report for this major review:
 - To strengthen partnership working and communication with organisations.
 - Address the gap in Adult Social Care, specifically in relation to the needs assessment and the financial assessment (it was to be noted that work on this had commenced but should be completed).
 - There was a need for named contacts across the relevant Council departments.
 - A need to digitalise processes, whilst recognising that digital exclusion needed to be tackled. This included the need for paper and phone options for residents.
 - To try and bridge the gap for those people who were not eligible for Discretionary Housing Payments but still had housing arrears. This would be via the development of an improved Discretionary Housing Payments process.
 - To review the Discretionary Housing Payments and Local Welfare Provision forms and processes, with input from stakeholders.
 - To protect the Local Welfare Provision Service and reinstate this Service as soon as possible.
 - Personal Housing Plans should be rolled out further and more comprehensively.

49 RAAC Progress Update

The Manager for Asset and Estate Management introduced the RAAC Surveys on Council Buildings update report and confirmed that there was no update on the report since it had been published.

The Chair requested that the timelines and an explanation of these be included in the next update report.

RESOLVED:

That the RAAC Surveys on Council Buildings update report, be received.

50 Council Owned Properties and Assets

The Manager for Asset and Estate Management introduced the Council Owned Properties and Assets report and confirmed that there was no update on the report since it had been published.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee, the Manager for Asset and Estate Management and Chief Executive provided the following information:

- The maintenance programme was currently under review. Therefore, no commitments could be provided in relation to the Queens Park Community Centre and establishing what works were needed. However, it could be looked into further outside of this Committee meeting;
- The direction of travel and preferred model for Community Centres was currently under review;
- The arrangements with the management company were mainly caretaker arrangements. The management company was to ensure that the Community Centres were kept open; and
- It was advised that there were no plans to close Community Centres in Bedford Borough. However, it was recognised that the Council needed to review how it was to best support the community organisations that were running the Community Centres. It was highlighted that each Community Centre had different requirements, and the community organisations had different needs. This was an area that was being looked at.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Council Owned Properties and Assets report, be received.
- ii) That the Manager for Asset and Estate Management be requested to discuss possible priority works on the Queens Park Community Centre with Councillor Masud.
- iii) That the Manager for Asset and Estate Management be requested to ensure that contact details for hiring the Faraday Community Centre be listed on the Council's website.
- iv) That the Budget and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee wished to make the following recommendations to the Executive and Portfolio Holder in relation to the Council's Community Centres:
 1. It was deemed important that the Community Centres be retained by the Council.
 2. The Budget and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed support for Community Centres and the management of these Centres.
 3. That the local community needs be reflected in any current or future operational arrangements for the Community Centres.

51 Equality Impact Assessments

The Chief Executive introduced the Equality Impact Assessments report and confirmed that there was no update on the report since it had been published.

In response to questions from Members of the Committee, the Chief Executive provided the following information:

- The Equality Impact Champions were currently being trained. It was also highlighted that training was taking place in two parts, and this had included the training of the Champions so that they were able to become single points of contact as well as have the expertise required, and the general training had also been improved on the Council's training portal (BBOLT);
- The review function of the equality impact assessments was to be implemented following the successful completion of training for all Equality Impact Champions; and
- The Chief Executive had taken overall responsibility of equality impact assessments; however, it was believed that the corporate leadership team collectively had to look at this. This was to ensure that equality impact assessments were completed as effectively as possible when decision making was taking place.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Equality Impact Assessments report, be received.
- ii) That the Chief Executive be requested to confirm when the training for the Equality Impact Champions was to be completed and whether these Champions were to receive extra pay for this role.
- iii) That the Chief Executive be requested to confirm which Executive Portfolio Holder was responsible for equality impact assessments.
- iv) That the Chief Executive be requested to confirm the timescales for putting in place the risk process for reviewing completed equality impact assessments after six months of implementation.

52 Quarterly Performance Indicator Reports

The Manager for Performance, Analytics and Data Protection introduced the Quarterly Performance Indicator report and confirmed that this report provided the position as at quarter one of 2024/2025. He additionally referred to CPC12 of the report and explained that there was an error, as the consultation figure should have read six and not five. In relation to the customer service indicators, it was advised that the collection of the data was impacted by the roll out of the new system (Netcall); nevertheless, high-level data had been provided.

Members of the Committee made the following comments:

- Concerns were expressed in relation to the average waiting time of 10 minutes 43 seconds when residents called into the Council. It was felt that this was an incredibly long average waiting time and had appeared to be longer than last years figures. It was recognised that the performance data for this was collated

differently between 2023/2024 and 2024/2025; however, this was an additional concern as it meant performance could not be effectively measured or compared

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Quarterly Performance Indicator report, be received.
- ii) That the Manager for Performance, Analytics and Data Protection be requested to provide a written response detailing what was meant by “calls offered” in the customer services performance indicators.
- iii) That the Manager for Performance, Analytics and Data Protection be requested to provide a briefing note with the comparable data on customer service average waiting times from 2023/2024 as well as an update on why the current average waiting times were so high when residents called into the Council, at the next meeting of this Committee.
- iv) That information in relation to the delays in Freedom of Information Requests be combined with the Subject Access Requests report scheduled to be received at the next meeting of this Committee.

53 Council Tax Reduction Scheme

RESOLVED:

That the Council Tax Reduction Scheme report, be deferred to the next meeting of this Committee.

54 Risk Register

The Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) and Chief Finance Officer introduced the Risk Register update report and confirmed that Risk 2, which was in relation to financial risk, had now been actioned. In addition, the risk labelled as SR71 in the report and related to operating as a minority administration, had been updated to be a medium-high controlled risk.

In response to a question from a Member of the Committee, the Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) and Chief Finance Officer explained that officers would prepare the Risk Register, and specifically the risk around the financial sustainability of the Council. These risks would be taken to the Executive for its view however the Section 151 Officer had a responsibility to ensure the report presented an accurate and fair reflection of the real risk.

Members of the Committee made the following comments:

- The report stated that the Council was not complacent about risks and there was reassurance that professional staff of the Council were not complacent. However, there was concern that the Executive had not spotted the risk issues raised by this Committee and therefore it was felt that they may have been complacent; and
- When the recommendation was made by this Committee to change a selection of the risks in the Risk Register, the Executive did not undertake their own due diligence and just agreed to the changes.

RESOLVED:

That the Risk Register update report, be received.

55 To consider any "call-ins"

There were no call-ins to be considered.

56 Record of Decisions of the Executive

RESOLVED:

- i) That the Executive decisions taken at its meeting held on the 11 September 2024, which fall within the remit of this Committee, be considered at the next meeting of this Committee.
- ii) That the decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on the 16 October 2024, which fall within the remit of this Committee, be considered at the next meeting of this Committee.

57 References to the Executive

RESOLVED:

- i) That the update on the references referred to the Executive on 11 September 2024, be received.
- ii) That the references referred to the Executive on 16 October 2024 by this Committee, be considered at the next meeting of this Committee.

58 Summary of Relevant Individual Executive Decisions

The Committee received a summary of the individual Executive decisions made since the Committee's last meeting which fell within the remit of this Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the summary of the individual Executive decisions made since the Committee's last meeting which fell within the Committee's remit be noted.

59 Notice of Forthcoming Decisions to be taken by the Executive

The Committee received a summary of the items included in the Notice of Forthcoming Decisions for the period 01 November 2024 to 28 February 2025 which came within its remit.

RESOLVED:

That the Notice of Forthcoming Decisions for the period 01 November 2024 to 28 February 2025 be received.

60 Work Programme

RESOLVED:

That the Committee's Work Programme, be received.

The meeting ended at 8.03pm

