

Executive Scrutiny Committee

A meeting of Executive Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday, 28th July, 2015.

Present: Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Paul Baker, Cllr Derrick Brown, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Michael Clark, Cllr Chris Clough, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Philip Dennis, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell, Cllr Maurice Perry, Cllr Tracey Stott, Cllr Laura Tunney, Cllr Lynn Hall (vice Cllr Matthew Vickers), Cllr David Wilburn

Officers: Daniel Childs (DSU), Peter Mennear (Scrutiny), Graham Birtle (Scrutiny), Paul Diggins (DNS), Kate Fulton (Policy, Improvement and Engagement), Simon Willson (CESC), Gary Cummings (Resources), Tony Montague (Resources)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr David Harrington (Chairman), Cllr Matthew Vickers

EXC 5/15 Evacuation Procedure

The Evacuation Procedure was NOTED.

EXC 6/15 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Phil Dennis disclosed a personal non-prejudicial interest in relation to item 5, paragraph 118, as he was a member of the committee of the Friends of Preston Park.

EXC 7/15 Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Scrutiny Committee – Tuesday, 16th June, 2015

Cllr Lynn Hall noted that she was not listed as being in attendance at the meeting despite attending the meeting.

AGREED that the minutes be approved for signature, subject to amendments to reflect the discussion that had taken place.

EXC 8/15 Performance Outturn Report – Year End 2014/15

Members were provided with details of the Council's performance in 2014/15, highlighting key achievements, areas for improvement and proposed actions; as well as information relating to Freedom of Information requests and complaints and commendations.

In addition to providing a perspective on the overall performance of the Council, the report focused on the achievement of the basket of measures and associated targets agreed as part of the Council Plan 2014-17.

Council Plan performance was reported by theme against a basket of performance indicators, agreed as part of the Council Plan 2014-17. At year end, 60.7% of the indicators had achieved the targets set. This figure related to the indicators for which year-end data was available. There were 11 of the measures where data was not yet available (these were indicated in the thematic summaries). This compared to 66.7% last year. Once the full data set was available this overall performance figure could change. Performance within each theme was highlighted in the full report.

Members noted that the levels of performance had been achieved within a context of ambitious targets being set in order to help drive our aspirations for the borough and its people. During the period of this plan the authority had continued to see a significant reduction in both financial and staffing resources. There were a wide range of achievements and progress against the key council plan themes that were not captured within the basket of key performance indicators but were reported throughout the year in various reports to Cabinet, captured through press releases, Stockton News articles and various accolades awarded to the Council throughout the year. Further detail of this activity was included in thematic summary reports which were available via e-genda.

Members held discussion on the report and raised the following questions/queries:-

- Members enquired as to what advice Officers sought when setting targets. Did Officers seek advice from external sources in addition to internal sources. Members were informed that the setting of targets was informed via consultation with internal stakeholders and local, regional and national external comparisons and use of benchmarking.

- Members noted that the Council had missed targets for net additional homes provided (EH200) and additional affordable homes provided (gross) (EH201). However, Members were pleased to note that the 125 long term empty homes had been brought back into use (EH202) against a target of 58, and that the work of the previous Scrutiny Review of Empty Homes was bearing fruit.

- Members were pleased to note that satisfaction measures for residents who had been in contact with the Council had shown an increase of 7 percentage points.

- Referring to crime targets, Members suggested that the target on domestic violence should be to increase the number of reported incidents rather than to reduce. Officers stated that targets, such as those relating to incidents of domestic violence, were set at levels that balanced the need to encourage victims to report these crimes, whilst working with Police and other partners to decrease the actual number of incidents.

- Members queried the fact that 11 indicators were not available for the meeting when the information was due to be reported at the end of July. Members were informed that some of the information was now available but had not been available at the time the report was written, but would now be circulated. Other information remained unavailable at the time of the meeting.

AGREED that:-

The levels of performance and proposed actions be noted.

**EXC
9/15**

MTFP Outturn report

Members were provided with an update report that focused on the financial

performance and position at the end of the 2014/15 financial year and updated the Medium Term Financial Plan as at 31 March 2015.

Members noted the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the current level of General Fund balances, the revised Capital Programme, and the position regarding the Business Rates (NNDR) and Council Tax Collection Funds, as well as the position on Business Rates appeals.

Members held discussion on the report and raised the following questions/queries:-

- Members asked whether there was any indication that further companies operating in the Borough would seek to move to the Central Rating List from the Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR). Members were informed that the criteria for companies that could do so was narrowly defined.

- Members asked whether the Treasury would possibly refund the NNDR if companies successfully applied to the Central Rating List. Officers would be lobbying for such action. There was already in place a central Government safety net, but, for Stockton, this only came into effect with a loss of greater than £5m and would serve only to limit the loss at £5m, anything below that amount would not be covered.

- Referring to the income from the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme, Members asked whether any further backdated payments were expected and asked if there was any way to feed them into balance processes and projections. Officers stated that they did feed available information into projections, but that such one-off and back-dated payments were difficult to predict with certainty.

AGREED that:-

1. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and the current level of General Fund balances be noted.
2. The revised Capital Programme be noted.
3. The Business Rates (NNDR) and Council Tax Collection Funds and the position on Business Rates appeals be noted.

**EXC
10/15**

Scope - "Reporting In" Review - Debt Write Offs

Members considered the scope for the "Reporting In" Review of Debt Write Offs.

There were a number of areas of our business where processes were in place to allow in year debt write offs.

It was suggested that as good practice, criteria/ process and permissions were reviewed in the areas of sundry type/ one off debts, to ensure procedures remain fit for purpose and write off values were monitored and process/debt recovery issues were understood.

Areas such as Council Tax and Business Rates would be excluded from the scope as benchmarking showed that the Council's write-offs and long term collection rates compared well with others.

It was suggested that the scope of this review focus on sundry type/one-off debts i.e. the process and how much effort would go into recovering such debts before they were submitted for write-off, and explore opportunities of where it could be more appropriate to insist on up-front payment before a service was provided or other precautions that could be put in place to reduce write - off levels.

Members were asked to consider what information was needed and how such information would be gathered.

AGREED that the scope be approved.

**EXC
11/15** **Forward Plan**

Members were provided with the Statutory Forward Plan 01 July 2015 - 31 October 2015.

AGREED that the Forward Plan be noted.

**EXC
12/15** **Chairs' Updates**

The Committee was provided with updates on Select Committee reviews.

AGREED that the updates be noted.

**EXC
13/15** **Chair of the Executive Scrutiny Committee's Updates**

The Committee was provided with an update by the Chair of the Executive Scrutiny Committee.

It was noted that the report due for Council in September outlining proposals to make savings would have an impact on the scrutiny work programme.

It was queried as to whether the Chair of Audit Committee should attend Executive Scrutiny. It was noted that Audit was currently treated as being separate from the Overview and Scrutiny structure at Stockton.

AGREED that the update be noted and information would be provided on liaison with Audit Committee.

**EXC
14/15** **Work Programme**

Consideration was given to the project plan and it was noted that the following items would be presented at future meetings:

15th September - Scope "Reporting In" Review – FOI Requests

15th September - Scope "Reporting In" Review – Consultation

15th September - Debt Write Offs – Baseline Report

27th October - Debt Write Offs - Options and Recommendations