

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
31 AUGUST 2023
7.01 - 8.39 PM**



Present:

Councillors Pickering (Chair), Welch (Vice-Chair), Barnard, C Eberle, Egglestone, M Forster, Haffegge, C Thompson, Watts and Webb

Present online:

Councillor McLean and Victoria Hill (Parent Governor Representative)

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors McKenzie-Boyle

Also Present:

Councillor Mrs Hayes MBE

Officers Present:

Stuart McKellar, Deputy Chief Executive

Kevin Gibbs, Executive Director: Delivery

Ann Moore, Assistant Director: Democratic & Registration Services

17. Minutes of previous meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Commission held on 16 August 2023 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

Responses to all of the queries and requests for information raised in the meeting had been received or formed part of the agenda.

18. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Christoph Eberle declared a personal interest in Thames Water as the company he worked for meant he carried out projects for Thames Water occasionally.

There were no indications that members would be participating while under the party whip.

19. Urgent Items of Business

There were no items of urgent business.

20. Public Participation

No submissions had been made by members of the public under the Council's Public Participation Scheme for Overview and Scrutiny.

21. Council Plan Overview Report (CPOR)

Stuart McKellar, Deputy Chief Executive, explained he was attending in place of the Chief Executive to present the Council Plan Overview Report (CPOR) which was a

summary of the first financial quarter. It was noted this was the quickest turnaround of CPOR data to be received at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission (O&S Commission) and would give members of the Commission an opportunity to scrutinise a rough draft of the CPOR prior to it being received at Executive. It was noted a number of senior officers were also online and would be supporting regarding specific responses, as required.

As part of his presentation the Deputy Chief Executive explained that the CPOR contained a vast amount of information, drawn from Quarterly Service Reports (QSRs), which were prepared by each directorate. It reflected the Council Plan agreed by the previous administration prior to the elections in May and would continue to do so until the next financial year.

It was noted the biggest event in Quarter 1 was the Bracknell Forest Council election. The Chief Executive and Electoral Services Team were commended for a great job administering the election. The election had resulted in a very different Council make up and everyone was learning how to adapt to new arrangements. Nationally, this quarter King Charles III Coronation had also taken place and it was believed to have been well managed in Bracknell Forest. Other highlights included an increase in the number of flats now receiving food waste collection and the Council receiving a 'good' Ofsted rating for the Adult Community Learning Service.

It was acknowledged O&S Commission members had been given the opportunity to ask questions in advance of the meeting but not all had received a response due to timescales. These questions and answers would be published as a supplementary if not discussed during the meeting.

A technical question was asked regarding the application of RAG markers in the CPOR. It was explained RAG rating was a standard way of highlighting if an area was working but it was agreed some descriptions required more detail and there could be a more consistent approach to the use of RAG rating in the document.

A debate of the recommendations took place. The following points were raised:

- The most important emerging issue for the Council was its finances and the projected overspend. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the Council was facing a projected overspend of between £2 -£4 million pounds. This was an unusual and challenging position for Bracknell Forest which was due to a range of factors, including a huge demand on Children' Social Care and housing services, and specifically an increase in the number of homelessness people requesting accommodation. This was combined with an increase in loss of income, for example reduction in planning income and development control income. The Central Management Team (CMT) were monitoring the Council's finances closely and directorate budget reviews were taking place weekly to discuss mitigations. However, not all issues could be remedied in the short term. It was noted it was a similar picture financially across all six Berkshire local authorities and a number of local authorities nationally were approaching a Section 114 notice (bankruptcy notification) but Councillors received assurances Bracknell Forest was not in that situation at the moment.
- It was queried if the emerging Council Plan ought to take account of the difficult financial position. Councillors were informed leaders recognised the need to link service and financial plans and this would be part of discussions for the draft Council Plan and budget in November.
- Councillors queried the number of agency staff; how long agency staff had been in their roles; what sort of agency migration had been attempted;

enhancement of 'enhanced' rates; and if roles currently filled by agency staff were still advertised? It was confirmed there were 133 agency workers currently employed by Bracknell Forest Council, costing beyond £7 million over the course of the year. Most agency staff were obtained through Matrix and the Council would look to transfer agency staff, if possible. The Council had managed to transfer seven agency staff this year to permanent posts. It was typically hard to recruit to social work posts in Adult's and Children's Social Care, but also Planning Officers, Education Psychologists, Procurement Officers, Surveyors and Lawyers, etc. Recruitment and retention formed part of the new Business Change Plan and other strategies were being deployed including pushing harder on recruiting apprentices, with four in Resources Directorate currently, a 'grow your own scheme', career graded posts, market supplements, retention payments and attendance at career events.

- It was queried how the new Council Plan would take account of the financial pressures in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and preventing children going into care. The Executive Director: People informed Councillors that additional investment in the Early Intervention Team meant they were fully staffed. Staff had access to additional training to help them manage complex situations and give an additional focus on welfare support and hardship. There was also a children's review nationally, which the Government would be providing a response to soon, to look at what a blended offer would look like in terms of comprehensive wraparound for children at the earliest point, then bring in social care. The design of that service would start soon.
- Additional background on Page 16 of the agenda relating to the waste PFI contract, was requested. The Assistant Director: Contract Services informed Councillors Reading, Wokingham and Bracknell had bought into joint service through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI), run by FCC Environment, since 2006 which ran until 2031. This included disposing of waste collected at curbside by SUEZ, Bracknell's waste collection contractor, and waste disposal sites at Longshot Lane and Smallmead. Councillors were offered a briefing session specifically on the waste PFI which was agreed.
- It was queried why procurement had stalled in Action 5610, page 29. It was noted there had been issues in the Procurement Team recently, but these issues were being addressed.
- Councillors sought assurances officers would be following a Cabinet Office recommendation on social value and sustainability in relation to procurement and were informed the new Head of Procurement had already identified different approaches which would build on the national framework but be tailored to Bracknell Forest's specific needs.
- Councillors queried the planning delay for Strongs Heath which involved the six Berkshire Unitary Authorities on 5.02.03, page 20 of the report. The Assistant Director: Contracts informed Councillors this was a long-standing development plan to site electric vehicles (EV) hub at a closed landfill site off London Road. The pre application had been to Planning twice and advice was currently being incorporated into a paper to CMT which would be ready in September.

RESOLVED - To note the performance of the council over the period from April-June 2023 highlighted in the Overview Report in Annex A, this includes any recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny in Annex B.

CHAIRMAN