

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 JUNE 2021

PRESENT

Councillor D. Acton (in the Chair).

Councillors R. Chilton (Vice-Chair), J.M. Axford, D. Butt, G. Carter, L. Dagnall, J.D. Newgrosh, K. Procter, R. Thompson, B.G. Winstanley and Dr. K. Barclay (ex-Officio)

In attendance

Adrian Fisher	Director of Growth and Regulatory Services
Graeme Bentley	Director of Finance
Graeme Scott	Executive Director for Trafford Housing Trust
John Addison	Statutory Scrutiny Officer
Sajal Lenahan	Principal Solicitor
Alexander Murray	Governance Officer

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M. Mirza and D. Western

Due to technical difficulties the Chair was unable to access the meeting and so the Vice Chair began the meeting in the Chair.

1. MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE INCLUDING THE APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

RESOLVED: That the Membership of the Committee be noted.

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE 2021/22

RESOLVED: That the Terms of Reference be noted.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held 17 March 2021 be noted.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were made.

5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No questions were received.

6. BUDGET UPDATE

The Director of Finance gave a brief overview of the presentation that had been circulated with the agenda. The presentation contained an update on how the council performed against the 2020/21 budget and the Council's reserve position.

The Committee were informed that the total impact of Covid on Trafford during 2020/21 was around £52M. This had been reduced through a combination of government grants and other tools, including the ability to cover some of the cost over three years. The net financial pressure of Covid 19 on the Council in 2020/21 was around £8M. Through the use of other funding made available for specific services, such as Public Health, the Council were able to achieve an overall underspend for 2020/21 of £2.8M.

The Director of Finance then moved onto the update on Trafford's reserve position. Trafford had started 2020/21 with a reserve balance of £91M and that had increased to just over £200M by year end. The Director of Finance explained that there were plans in place to use large swathes of those reserve funds to tackle the continued challenges of Covid 19. One example of the use of reserves was to address the expected reduction in revenue due to the Council not receiving a dividend from Manchester Airport. The Committee were directed to slide eight of the presentation which showed the expected depletion of the reserves from £200.92M to £56.26M by 2024.

The Director of Finance concluded their overview by informing the Committee that the Public Accounts Committee had sat in May 2021 to look at the impact of Covid 19 on Council budgets and they had asked MHCLG to feed into local governments' response. It was hoped that the outcome would be long term funding plans for local government which would in turn enable local authorities to plan further ahead.

Following the overview the Vice Chair asked about capital projects within schools and whether they were being paid by schools. The Director of Finance responded that works within schools were usually funded through capital grants. There were additional funding streams available to schools to complete works but schools should not need to use their own funds to pay for capital works required by the Council. The Director of Finance asked the Committee to provide him with any examples that they were aware of so that he could look into it further.

Councillor Procter asked whether any of the predicted impact of Brexit upon the Council's budget had started to be seen. The Director of Finance responded that Brexit had been a key focus prior to the pandemic and the finance team were continually tracking the impact. The Director of Finance explained that Trafford had a large reliance upon business rates and there had been a steady decline in them over the past two years although there were a number of factors attributing to this with Brexit being just one. It was very difficult to understand the position at the moment as the ongoing impact of Covid made it difficult to identify what was leading to changes in those rates.

Councillor Carter asked whether there were any plans for generating additional income either by upscaling existing practices or from new sources. The Director of Finance responded that the Council was continuing with the asset investment strategy. The Council received returns on investments of £7M which were used in the 2020/21 budget and part of the budget for 2021/22 would also be addressed through similar returns. The Council were looking to maintain the level of returns from investments going forward.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the update be noted.
- 2) That Committee Members are to contact the Director of Finance if they are aware of schools using their own funds for capital works required by the Council.

7. ACM CLADDING

The Executive Director from Trafford Housing Trust (THT) provided a verbal report to the Committee. Since 2019 THT had taken a fabric first approach to fire safety, which focused upon getting the materials and compartmentation right for all homes to ensure fires were stopped at the first opportunity. THT had invested in all areas of the high rise tower blocks to make sure that they were fire safe and this approach had spread to cover all of THT's housing stock. THT had also expanded this work to their shelter schemes and were in the process of replacing all fire alarms, with 50% expected to be replaced within the year. THT were taking the same compartmentation approach to walk up flats as had been taken in the high rises and that work was scheduled to be completed within the year. The final piece of fire safety work ongoing was a door replacement programme, which was 50% complete and would be finished over the next two to three years.

The Executive Director for THT assured the Committee that it was of great importance for THT to get the cladding right and they understood the concerns of their customers. The Executive Director for THT apologised for the amount of noise being caused by the re-cladding works and recognised that this was far from ideal, especially with more residents working from home during the pandemic. Following communications from residents THT had contacted their contractors to ensure that work was only conducted during core working hours and information had been provided at each tower block stating what works were to be carried out each week. All of the old cladding had been removed and each tower block was classed as safe. The recladding of Empress Court was due to be completed in July and the other tower blocks would all be completed by December 2021. THT recognised that it had taken a long time to complete and the Committee were assured that the customer's safety had always been of utmost importance.

The Executive Director for THT concluded by informing the Committee that a detailed piece of work was being conducted by THT's parent company L&Q looking at the installation of sprinklers across all their housing stock. That review was to be completed by the autumn and THT would be able to provide more information after that point.

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Following the Vice Chair noted that there had been reports of poor communication by THT with residents and he asked whether any improvements had been made to address this. The Executive Director of THT apologised for any problems residents had in contacting THT. The Committee were assured that was not the approach THT took and that they tried to be accessible to their customers as possible. Clear information on how to contact THT was available at every building they managed and it was important for residents to contact THT directly rather than speak to contractors to avoid communications from being lost. There had not been any changes to THT's approach but a central hub was in place for all calls and there were clear lines of contact within the organisation to ensure queries were dealt with as soon as possible. The vice chair suggested that THT consider working with contractors to ensure they had a basic level of information so they could respond to residents who approached them. The Executive Director responded that he would take that back and consider taking an approach like that with contractors.

Councillor Thompson asked how the work had been financed and whether any of the costs would be passed onto the residents. The Executive Director responded that the works had so far been paid for out of THT's funds and government grants and THT were not going to pass those costs onto residents.

Councillor Winstanley asked whether THT's communications had be relocated since they were taken over by L&Q and whether they were any plans to move them. The Executive Director of THT responded that they had not moved and he was not aware of any plans to relocate them.

Councillor Barclay asked whether THT worked with any other providers around fire safety. The Executive Director of THT responded that they did work with other providers in the area and the Council helped to facilitate that information sharing and collaborative work. THT had helped to set up and took part in a country wide fire safety group, which involved a wide range of housing providers big and small from across the country.

Councillor Chilton vacated the Chair and Councillor Acton took the Chair as he joined the meeting

Councillor Butt asked how THT were dealing with evacuation procedures. The Executive Director for THT responded that THT had specific plans in place for each of their complex buildings. Some of the plans involved a stay put policy and others had an evacuation policy. The type of policy employed was decided upon with support of an independent fire officer and in full consultation with the local fire brigade. The information was shared with each resident when they moved in, was available on a notice board in each building, and all residents were informed if any changes were made. The policies in the tower blocks had changed over the course of the re-cladding process and THT had been in contact with all residents each time a change had occurred.

The Vice Chair requested that a further written update be provided when the re-cladding work was closer to completion or if any issues arose which impacted the completion of those works.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the verbal report be noted.
- 2) That a further written report come to the Committee.

8. HOMELESSNESS IN TRAFFORD

The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services introduced the report and went over the key points. The Committee were informed that the housing service had been outsourced for a number of years but as of April 2021 the service had been brought back in house. The service supplied the Council's statutory duties around housing and the service was mainly administered at the reception in Sale Waterside. The pandemic had led to the hub closing but an additional remote service had been developed in response, which would continue to be delivered alongside the service at Sale Waterside. The service received around 65 applications from Trafford residents per week on average. The Council had three duties that the service provided; a duty to support residents to avoid becoming homeless, a relief duty to support those in immediate need of direct assistance, and a main duty which addressed groups of people who needed the highest level of assistance.

The service provided advice to a households to aid them and help avoid homelessness. Trafford had ranged between 6 and 0 rough sleepers with an average of 2 or 3 and the service had plans in place to help those individuals. The service also provide temporary accommodation when needed, which was often placement in a bed and breakfast. Trafford had seen up to 24 people staying in bed and breakfasts but it averaged around 12.

Trafford also received people in need of housing from other local authorities. There was a statutory duty for authorities to inform each other when this occurred and Trafford had been working with the other GM authorities to improve the notification process. The majority of placements from outside of the borough came from Manchester City Council and there had been over 30 notifications received from them since the 1st April 2021.

The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services concluded with an overview of the challenges the service was facing. There was an increase in demand expected following the conclusion of the moratorium on evictions, which had been in place during the pandemic. The service also faced challenges in terms of the cost of renting homes within Trafford compared to the level assistance people received. The pandemic had prevented the progression of a number of housing work streams, especially those that looked at the links between health and homelessness. The service was working to reduce the additional impacts of the pandemic through monitoring and co-working with organisations across Trafford. In the long term the council were looking to increase the provision of temporary provision available in the area to reduce the need to place people in bed and breakfasts.

The Vice Chair raised concerns around the people from Manchester who were being placed in a Travel Lodge in Sale who did not seem to be provided with

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support and did not know where to get support from. The Vice Chair added that he also had ongoing concerns around the people placed at the Ambelhurst hotel and he asked for additional information provided regarding those individuals and the support they received. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that Trafford had been working with Manchester City Council and Greater Manchester Police with regards to people placed within Trafford to ensure that a joined up approach was taken. The Ambelhurst was part of a wider Greater Manchester framework for placing homeless people and the framework aimed to improve support and increase safeguards for placements. The framework also linked with the social care and mental health services that supported the people in those placements.

Councillor Procter noted the national trend of more women presenting as being homeless and asked whether Trafford had seen a similar trend. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that he was not aware of such a trend in Trafford but he would review the data and pass the findings onto the Committee.

Councillor Dagnall asked what kind of support was in place for the vulnerable people in placements such as the Ambleurst and whether any of the support they had before being placed in Trafford (including family, friend, or social work support) was continued when they came to Trafford. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that when someone was placed they had a support officer assigned to them. Those support officers provided the person placed with details about the new area such as where local shops, pharmacies, and doctors were located. This had been especially challenging during the pandemic as many of the local amenities were closed, which had led to the Council providing hot food for residents directly in some cases. Any social or health care that the placed person needed was to be provided by the placing authority. Trafford checked people placed within the borough were aware of support available to them when they conducted welfare visits of placements.

Councillor Carter asked whether there was a target for the number of people placed at bed and breakfasts or temporary placements, what was the typical duration of stay in those types of accommodation, and what was the improvement target if the Council's performance was not satisfactory. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that he did not have the data available for the average duration of stay in bed and breakfasts but the Council's aspiration was to not use them at all. In order to achieve this the Council needed to have enough alternative forms of accommodation available that they could rely upon. Councillor Carter then asked for that data to be added as a KPI for the service and provided at a later date. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that the data was collected and would be sent to the Committee after the meeting.

Councillor Winstanley asked what the expected level of evictions was, including "hidden" evictions through price increases, as the pandemic came to an end. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that the service used the number of applications as an indicator of the number of evictions. It was felt that the main impact of the Covid 19 pandemic had not yet come through to the service and a greater increase in demand was expected over the course of the year.

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Councillor Axford asked how much funding was available for discretionary housing payments. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that funding was quite limited and offered to provide figures on that funding after the meeting.

Councillor Newgrosh asked where Trafford were looking to increase capacity to address issues including the need to use bed and breakfast accommodation. The Director of Growth and Regulatory Services responded that the Council had received a homelessness reduction grant to help address capacity issues and those funds had been used to hire additional staff to work with those seeking support. In the long term Trafford were looking to work with housing providers to increase the level of temporary accommodation available through the affordable housing programme and an additional member of staff had been hired to focus on that work.

The Vice Chair requested confirmation that notices had been received for the people staying in Sale Travel Lodge.

It was agreed by the Committee that due to the amount of follow up information asked for and the interest of Committee Members in this item that it come back to the Committee at a later date.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the Director of Growth and Regulatory Services provide the Committee with the information requested.
- 3) That homelessness in Trafford continue to be scrutinised by the Committee.

9. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2021/22

The Chair introduced the item and asked Members to note the items populated in the draft work programme and to put forward suggestions for items they wanted to be added. The Chair suggested two items for task and finish groups of highways services and commissioned services. The Chair recognised that these were two large areas and it would be for the task and finish groups to pick an area of focus as part of the scoping exercise. In addition to those two groups there was the continuation of the disability access task and finish group led by Councillor Winstanley.

Following the introduction Councillor Carter asked whether Members had to add items at the meeting or whether items could be added throughout the year. The Chair responded that Members could put forward items to be added to the work programme at any point in time either by raising it at meetings or by emailing the Chair, Vice Chair, the whole Committee, or supporting officers. Any proposals received would then be considered and agreed upon by the Committee.

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Councillor Axford noted that an update was scheduled for the next meeting on Climate Change and requested that the Committee cover the Council's response to climate change regularly.

Councillor Newgrosh asked whether the Amey Contract could be reviewed as part of the work on commissioned services. The Chair responded that the Committee had completed a task and finish group looking at the Amey Service back in 2018/19 and the report would be shared with Committee Members. Councillor Barclay asked that the Amey contract be included on the work programme so they could review whether the recommendations made by the task and finish group were implemented.

RESOLVED:

- 1) That the work plan be noted.
- 2) That the Committee agree to have task and finish groups on Highways Services and Commissioned Services.
- 3) That the Task and Finish Group on Dissabled Access continue.
- 4) That Climate Change be kept on the Work Programme.
- 5) That the Amey Contract be added to the Work Programme.
- 6) That the report on the Amey Contract from 2018/19 be sent to Committee Members.

The meeting commenced at 6.43 pm and finished at 8.29 pm