

POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 September 2024

Present: Councillor P Stuart (Chair)

Councillors J Robinson J McManus
P Gilchrist I Lewis
P Cleary S Mountney
EA Grey L Rennie
A Davies V Wilson
T Jones J Bird
G Jenkinson

19 **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting as well as those watching the webcast.

20 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received by Councillors Jeff Green and Harry Gorman. Councillors Vida Wilson and Gail Jenkinson were in attendance as substitutes.

21 **MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Members were asked to consider whether they have any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

No such declarations were made.

22 **MINUTES**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2024 be approved as a correct record.

23 **PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS**

The Chair reported that one public question and one Member question had been received.

24 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Owen Hodges asked in question in relation to regeneration in Birkenhead. Mr Hodges noted that he had viewed the Birkenhead 2040 framework video and would like to see a nicer shopping area and easier modes of public transport. He also voiced concerns about housing being built just to realise nationally set targets.

Mr Hodges asked the Chair if the Council had spoken to the Government New Town Task Force to ensure that the Council gets the support required to realise its vision.

The Chair responded to state that the Birkenhead 2040 Framework was endorsed as the Council's Interim Regeneration Strategy for Birkenhead and those parts of Seacombe and Liscard that are within its scope. In December 2023, the Committee agreed to establish a Regeneration Partnership to co-ordinate and accelerate the priority programmes defined by the Birkenhead 2040 Framework. The Partnership set out the priorities and objectives for each project within the Birkenhead 2040 Framework in a 5-year Business Plan.

The Chair explained that the Council had a long-standing relationship with Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government who remained supportive to the Council's vision for the regeneration of Birkenhead and the surrounding areas. The New Town Taskforce had been made aware of the opportunities in Birkenhead to deliver sustainable urban communities and achieve the housing targets locally and nationally. The Chair assured Mr Hodges that the Council remained in regular dialogue with the Task Force during the development of the Wirral Regeneration Partnerships 5-year business plan.

25 QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS

Councillor Jean Robinson asked a question as Chair of Shareholder Board, noting that the meeting scheduled for September 2024 had been postponed.

Councillor Robinson as the Chair of the Shareholder Board advised that there were two reports which would shortly need to be considered by Members and proposed a motion whereby Shareholder Board matters be automatically considered by the Policy and Resources Committee until further notice. Such a proposal being based on the fact that the Policy and Resources Committee is the parent committee to Shareholder Board. The proposal was therefore for Policy and Resources Committee to cease its delegation to Shareholder Board until further notice

Members discussed the proposed motion and clarification was sought that Shareholder board was to remain in the constitution for now.

On a motion by Councillor Jean Robinson, seconded by Councillor Paul Stuart it was,

Resolved – that,

1. all business that would ordinarily be considered by Shareholder Board now be considered by Policy and Resources Committee.

2. shareholder board remain in the Council’s constitution.

26 **SUPPORTING STATUTORY SEND SERVICES**

The Director of Finance presented the report which set out the context for demand in statutory services supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It provided Members with a local and national overview of the rise in demand for services and the impact that this has had on Wirral Council’s ability to meet growing demand.

Following a review of the statutory Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Service, additional investment was required to meet the Written Statement of Action and Improvement Notice requirements.

Members discussed recruitment of staff and monitoring of funding, as well as the governance of SEND improvement works.

Resolved – that,

1. the virement from Strategic Holding Account Contingency of £1.1 million for the 2024/25 financial year be approved;

2. the requested budgets to be addressed in future budget rounds, in order to meet the service capacity requirements in paragraph 3.3 of the report be noted.

27 **MAXIMISING INCOME**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits presented the report of the Director of Finance, which provided Members with an update in relation to a motion that was passed at Council on 4 December 2024, which recognised the significant amount of unclaimed benefit nationally.

Council asked that a proposal as to how the Council could further support residents to maximise income be brought to Policy and Resources Committee for consideration.

Members were informed that Policy in Practice Ltd was uniquely placed to partner Wirral Council with the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) application. The Policy in Practice LIFT application would provide data which enables the Council to undertake a series of campaigns to help residents maximise their income, including targeted campaigns.

The LIFT product enabled the Council to explore data to by identifying people in danger of crisis, and target support where it was most effective. It then tracks change to see which activities were working. Proactively targeted support by using administrative datasets that give a fuller picture. LIFT allowed the Council to combine datasets with its policy engine (datasets) to make better decisions.

Members queried how eligible residents were to be contacted, citing concerns that the most vulnerable were also the most likely to be digitally excluded. Members were assured that residents would be contacted directly. Members also discussed an extension of the Household Support Fund and thanked officers for their work undertaken supporting residents access unclaimed benefits.

Resolved – that it be noted that in accordance with Council resolution passed on the 4 December 2023, Policy in Practice Ltd (Company Registration Number 07042993) have been appointed to work with the Councils’ Household Support Fund Team to deliver a series of Benefit take up initiatives including Universal Credit, Carer’s Allowance, Pension Credit and Council Tax Support.

28 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair presented the report, and informed Members that the Committee was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme. It was reported that the work programme should align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which are within the remit of the Committee. It was envisaged that the work programme would be formed from a combination of key decisions, standing items and requested officer reports. The report provided the Committee with an opportunity to plan and regularly review its work across the municipal year. The work programme for the Policy and Resources Committee was attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

Resolved - That the Policy and Resources Committee work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year be noted.

EXTERNAL ANNUAL AUDIT REPORT 2022/23

The Director of Finance presented the report which provided for consideration recommendations of the Audit and Risk Management Committee in respect of External Audit Annual Audit Report 2022/23. Members were informed that the Audit and Risk Management Committee had responsibility for considering the external auditor's reports and opinions, relevant requirements of the International Standards on Auditing and any other reports to members with respect to the Accounts, including the Merseyside Pension Fund, and to monitor management action in response to issues raised by the external auditor.

The Annual Audit Report was an essential element of the independent external audit process. The Council's external auditors (Grant Thornton) substantially completed the Council's main audit of the 2022-23 Statutory Accounts in December 2023, except for the Whole of Government Accounts which no longer meet the threshold for requiring external audit, and Value for Money as previously reported to the Audit and Risk Management Committee. The audit findings for the Statement of Accounts were reported to the Audit and Risk Management Committee in the form of the Audit Findings Report in December 2023.

Members queried the Value for Money report and were advised that officers were expecting the draft report later in the year. Also discussed was commercial income and growth, Council investments, the new financial monitoring system and Wirral Growth Company.

Resolved – that Council be recommended to approve the publication of the External Audit Annual Audit Report 2022/23 and associated appendices.