

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Monday, 7 September 2015, County Hall Worcester - 10.00 am

Present:

Minutes

Mr C B Taylor (Chairman), Mr S R Peters (Vice Chairman), Mr M H Broomfield, Mrs P E Davey, Mr C G Holt, Mr R C Lunn, Mrs E B Tucker and Mr P A Tuthill

Also attended:

Mrs L C Hodgson, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Localism and Communities
Mr M L Bayliss, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning

Sander Kristel (Director of Commercial and Change),
Frances Howie (Head of Public Health, Directorate of Adult Services and Health),
Neil Anderson (Head of Community and Environment),
Annette Stock (Complaints Manager),
Sarah Daniel (Programmes and Relationship Manager),
Sharran Grove (Scrutiny Liaison Officer),
Suzanne O'Leary (Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager) and
Stella Wood (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. Presentation slides in relation to the Place Partnership; and
- C. The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2015 (previously circulated)

Copies of documents A and B will be attached to the signed Minutes.

138 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Mr S C Cross.

139 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

Councillor Kit Taylor declared an Other Disclosable Interest in relation to the Place Partnership as he was a member of the Hereford and Worcester Fire & Rescue Authority (a partner authority) and the Portfolio Holder

with responsibility for Planning Services and Housing at Bromsgrove District Council (a potential partner authority).

140 Public Participation

None.

141 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

142 Act Local in Worcestershire - Progress

The Cabinet Member for Localism and Communities, and the Head of Community and Environment were invited to provide an update on progress on Act Local.

Act Local in Worcestershire meant communities coming together to do things for themselves. To work it needed people to use their time, ideas and skills. The Council aimed to inspire people to get involved by sharing examples of good work already happening across Worcestershire, and by sign-posting people to sources of help, information and advice.

As outlined in the agenda, the Act Local in Worcestershire Framework identified four key areas which were crucial to delivering this vision:

- Community Leadership (role of local members)
- Community Offer (new ways of delivering services)
- Community Right to Challenge to deliver services and bid for assets
- Communication (working with partners, engagement and feedback).

As the Council's budgets continued to reduce, the Act Local Framework provided a methodology by which local communities (in partnership with the County Council) could sustain services. The Act Local Framework (Communities) was attached at Appendix 1, there was also a Partnership version available.

During the ensuing discussion, the following main points were raised:

The Library Service was one of the best examples of new ways of delivering services with the help of volunteers. For example, in Wythall, a charity 'Wythall Together' had been set up to operate the library.

Local people had also helped operate community transport, assisted by funding from the Worcestershire Councillors' Divisional Fund and from Bromsgrove District Council. It was understood that the Changing Futures Funding had been used to initiate similar schemes in Hagley and Belbroughton. Community Transport was continuing to develop and Community Action Malvern had been recognised as working particularly well.

The aim of Project Optimise was to work with Districts to reduce unnecessary overlap in service areas such as highways, street cleansing and emergency planning. Work was progressing.

Bishampton Pub and Post Office was a good example of the success of the Community Right to Challenge. The Parish Council had stepped in to deliver them. Each District had a list of buildings within communities deemed to be community assets on which communities had a right to bid.

The Council was supporting parishes through the bi annual Parish Conference. All parishes, not just those who were members of the County Association Local Councils (CALC) were invited to take part. The Parish Conference promoted the benefits of qualifications such as General Powers of Competence and would discuss, for example, how areas might benefit from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) payments.

The Council had funded the Changing Futures Fund for 3 years. An evaluation of the benefits of the fund and how it had helped increase the number of volunteers had been commissioned and was due to be published shortly. In the short term, the fund could provide business support to enable parts of the voluntary sector to become self-financing. The Council's role was to guide those wishing to volunteer to information and opportunities.

The Council was improving the Act Local web pages to make volunteering opportunities more widely known. Members asked about how people not online could access opportunities for volunteering and were advised that Digital Inclusion work included recruiting volunteers to help people get online.

Worcestershire Voices had withdrawn from doing a Joint Volunteering Strategy. The Council still planned to develop community capacity and was looking for 'no cost' opportunities such as building volunteering into contracts. For example, within Drug and Alcohol services, ex-service users could be recruited to help and advise their peers currently using the service.

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Partnership -
Progress**

Volunteering also helped communities come together as well as helping people to provide services no longer provided by the Council. A Community Interest Company had, for example, been set up to provide sports in Droitwich.

Members highlighted that the voluntary sector was experiencing more difficulty in getting core funding to provide services; it was acknowledged that there was less money in the system now.

Members asked how the delivery of the revised 'Library at Home Service' was working and whether sufficient management support was available for the volunteers. The Panel was advised that the service was now fully staffed, operational and visited more homes than before the review. The Service operated from local libraries and processes were in place such as CRB checks to ensure it was run properly.

Members asked if there had been any unexpected challenges in revising the Library Service and were advised that in Pershore the Council had suggested the Civic Centre as a location and the Town Council had had a completely different solution.

Members asked how effectively the Directorate was communicating Act Local to other officers. It was explained that workshops had been held but more could be done to improve communication. Directorates should be open to new ideas, although some services, such as highways, were governed by legislation and there were safety aspects to consider.

It was believed that Section 106 money would continue to be used to improve relevant areas. Some Members felt it was difficult to find out from officers about plans for 106 monies and were advised to speak to the relevant District Council Portfolio Holder as spending 106 money was normally the responsibility of the District Council planning function. However, the County Council was responsible for plans in relation to highways and education and Local Members wished to have the opportunity to be involved or have some input in the development of schemes where 106 money was used. Members felt that a discussion with officers was needed and asked that this message be passed on to BEC.

The Cabinet Member for Transformation and Commissioning and the Director of Commercial and Change were invited to provide an update on the development of Place Partnership Ltd (formerly the Joint Property Vehicle).

The Director gave a presentation outlining what had been achieved, current Property Assets, the status and benefits of the Place Partnership and the development of a new Property Asset Strategy.

Achievements to date included:

- Capital receipts approaching £33m
- Revenue savings >£2.5m
- Sold 99 freehold properties
- Disposed of 33 leases
- Avoided maintenance expenditure of nearly £5m
- Reduced office buildings down from 17 to 4
- Released 60,000 m² of accommodation for sale or alternative use
- Reduced energy consumption/m² by 22% and a reduction in carbon emissions of 24%.

Examples of case studies included:

- Parkside Bromsgrove – various partners had moved in demonstrating lower running costs and closer working together
- DEFRA/HMRC moving into County Hall – better use of this asset was made possible by Flexible and Mobile Working (FAME) – social workers were working out in the community where it was felt they should be
- Other case studies included Job Centre Plus, Kidderminster Library, Community led library services and Hartlebury Castle.

The Place Partnership was an innovative public sector owned commercial property management business which went live on 1 September 2015. It had six shareholders from representatives of the founding partner organisations: Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service, Redditch Borough Council, Warwickshire Police, West Mercia Police, Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council.

The Shareholders were members of the Board, which set the direction of the partnership, dealing with remuneration, any budget variance and financial performance.

Andrew Pollard, an experienced Solicitor and Barrister, had recently been appointed as the new Managing Director. Worcestershire County Council's Director of Commercial and Change, Sander Kristel was a Non-Executive Director of the Board.

Benefits of the Place Partnership:

- Reducing the portfolio size had resulted in £75m

savings.

- Housing land had been released for private sector investment, creating development and employment opportunities. City and Town centre regeneration opportunities i.e. whole town reviews. Total savings could be as much as £115m over 10 years.
- Service transformation, service integration, co-location and agile working practices.

A new asset strategy for 2016-2020 was being developed. New strategic goals included:

- To manage the Property Assets to ensure optimal efficiency and effectiveness
- To pursue the maximisation of value by seeking opportunities for residential, commercial or other economic development
- To influence service re-design and integration through effective challenge and design
- To exploit opportunities for income generation.

During the ensuing discussion the following main points were made.

Members asked whether the County Council consulted with relevant District Councils and complied with Local Development Plans. For example, what level of consultation was there if this Council planned to sell land marked for retail/industry in the local plan, and a housing developer was interested in buying. The Panel was advised that the County Council would initially need to consider whether planning permission might be granted.

Members asked at what stage in the process were they consulted on plans for buildings and were advised that it would be when a firm proposal was made. Members would like to be aware of proposals in advance and the Cabinet Member agreed to feed this back to see what might be done.

If Members wished to find out about current plans for assets in their Divisions, the Panel was advised that Peter Bishop (Strategic Commissioner) should be the first point of contact.

Members understood that the Emergency Planning team might have been moved to Hindlip and could not recall being advised of the move. Members would be advised of the location of this team. It was confirmed that the Place Partnership Team had moved to Kings Court, a building near the Worcestershire Royal Hospital.

It was explained that the Cabinet Member with

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Smarter
Working**

Responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning and the Chief Executive of the County Council represented the Authority's shareholders on the Place Partnership. The Cabinet Member would monitor that the Service Level Agreement was working effectively.

It was suggested that to keep up with developments, the Panel could invite the Managing Director and the Strategic Commissioner on an annual basis.

80% of the Place Partnership's business would be with the public sector while 20% could be with the private sector. The main aim was to provide services for the shareholders but also have the option to make a profit elsewhere.

One Town Reviews looked at all the public estate and integrated the activities of different partners, creating savings which could help fund front line services.

The Council was still the owner of significant assets and still had the Corporate Landlord Board. There was a large site in Kidderminster (shown on a map on the presentation slides) which could be divided in two or treated as one. Possibilities for future use included private rented housing, extra care facilities or a new health centre.

Various sites in Redditch were outlined in different colours on a map (shown on the presentation slides) and Members asked that it be made clear, in writing, what each building was, which partner organisation owned it and why the school was not included.

Overall, Members welcomed the clear presentation. It was concluded that more communication with Members on plans for property assets, and information on which teams had moved where would be welcome.

Members had asked to discuss data on complaints, Hub customer satisfaction, call and abandonment rates, and long and short term sickness absence data. The aim was to determine whether the data might give an indication of the effect on staff of changes brought about by 'Smarter Working' and help determine whether any further scrutiny work should be undertaken. Senior Officers were invited to aid discussion or answer questions on issues relating to their area as follows:

- Hub data – Sarah Daniel, Programmes and Relationship Manager

- Complaints – Annette Stock, Complaints Manager
- Sickness Absence – Elaine Chandler, Head of Human Resources (sent apologies)

Hub Data

Members were advised that the remit of the Programmes and Relationship Manager included managing the Hub (now run by Civita UK). The Council was responding to changing needs of customers by developing access to services in different ways. In the past, most enquiries had typically been through the telephone. Since 2013/14 the development of self-service channels for high volume, non-complex services, such as reporting a pothole or finding a bus service had been successful. Performance against average handling time or speed to answer was no longer comparable to what it was 2 or 3 years ago as the Council's "assisted" (telephony and face to face) channels focussed more and more on complex enquiry types.

Customer Demand

Worcestershire County Council's customer contact was received through the following channels:

- The Customer Contact Centre (The Worcestershire Hub Shared Service [WHSS] call centre);
- District Customer Service Centres in both the north and the south of the County;
- Customer self-service via the Worcestershire County Council (WCC) website.

Customer Satisfaction

The Council currently measured customer satisfaction through a survey used across all "assisted" channels. The survey measured the customer's opinion mainly on:

- How well the Worcestershire Hub dealt with the enquiry;
- Whether the customer had visited the website first to submit their enquiry and why they weren't able to;
- The customer's experience around resolution of the enquiry.

This information was then used to identify any issues and was shared with client service areas so that directorates could target where service levels and customer expectations were not met.

In 2013/14, 89% of customers were very or fairly satisfied

with the service they received with a sample size of 3,606. This fell slightly to 81% in 2014/15 although the sample size was 12% lower than the previous year. For the first quarter of 2015/16 73% of customers were satisfied or fairly satisfied.

Abandonment Rates

The Panel had asked for information on call abandonment rates and was advised that in 2013/14 56,677 calls were abandoned out of a total demand of 600,094. In 2014/15 (up until the end of June 2015) 24,295 were abandoned out of a total of 439,615 calls. It was important to understand that these figures were for the entire Worcestershire Hub Shared Service (WHSS) whose partners included the County Council, Malvern Hills District Council and Worcester City Council. It had not been possible to break down the figures by partner authority.

The percentage of abandoned calls over the last few years averaged about 6% and was considered favourable compared to the private sector.

Abandoned calls could happen because:

- The caller hung up;
- The caller had listened to a scripted message which answered their enquiry and they no longer wished to speak to an advisor;
- The caller had realised that they had dialled the wrong number after listening to a series of options.

Consequently the percentage of abandoned calls could not be used to make informed business decisions.

Although, from 27 July 2015, a new telephony system would operate from a new technology platform which would be able to distinguish the reason for abandonment in future.

During the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made.

Members asked about the average answer time and were advised it was about 2 minutes, although much longer at the beginning of a day and much less at the end. A Member recalled that during the Hub Scrutiny, call waiting times had been as long as 17 minutes in the morning. It was likely that this would have been when the Hub had taken on Revenues and Benefits call handling which had since been taken back.

Members asked if any attempts were made to contact customers who had abandoned calls to find out the reason for abandonment and were advised that only customers who completed calls were asked about levels of satisfaction. If a customer could not complete a call, an operator would intervene after no more than five incomplete attempts. If a customer did not select any option, a human voice would eventually answer. Virtual assistance had been put in place for some services such as applying for a bus pass although face to face contact was still available.

Complaints

The County Council produced annual reports covering complaints Corporately and in relation to Adults' and Children's Social Care (which had to be treated separately as required by legislation). Quarterly reports on complaints were also produced for Departmental Management Teams and the Senior Leadership Team.

A graph showing all complaints received over a six year period from 2009/10 to 2013/2014, as well as data on customer complaints received by the County Council in 2009/10 and in 2013/14 (before and after 'Smarter Working') was attached to the agenda report at Appendix 1. This showed the biggest rise in complaints during this period was in Children's Social Care (which rose from about 150 to 300). Complaints in relation to Safeguarding Teams had risen by 79% in 2012/13 and by 86% in 2013/14.

During the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made.

As the Council changed, the types of complaints changed and a new category had been added to reflect increases in complaints about communication in Children's Services (see page 17 of the agenda).

The public usually preferred to speak directly to an officer, such as a social worker. Due to Flexible and Mobile Working, social workers were no longer office based, spending more time out in the community. Clients now had to call the Access Centre or team administrators, which they may be unhappy about. This increase in complaints about communications could indicate that 'Smarter Working' and 'Flexible and Mobile' working were causing difficulties for clients although it was difficult to prove. There were a number of other possible reasons such as problems nationally recruiting social workers, leading to increased use of agency staff in Worcestershire.

Members were concerned about clients not being able to reach social workers urgently, it was explained the social care access centre could deal with urgent calls. Social workers had the technology to call clients back. It was important to raise public understanding of the service changes being made by the County Council and the reasons for them (i.e. increasing the time social workers spend in the community and reducing overheads). New ways of working took time to bed down.

Local Government Ombudsman complaints were also rising (reaching 50 in 2014/15 compared to around 40 in 2009/10) partly because premature complaints now had to be recorded even if the complaint turned out not to be against this Council, and partly as clients were becoming more aware of the complaints process. More complex complaints were increasing as the Council contracted out more services; the Council was still responsible for the service whether it was in house or commissioned out.

Members asked when a service request became a complaint and were advised that, for example, if someone complained that a streetlight was out, this would be treated as a service request but if they complained that it still wasn't on this would be treated as a complaint.

It was noted that sometimes the complaints team had difficulties obtaining information from some providers.

The Quarterly report on complaints sent to the Senior Leadership Team was in a relatively new format, with a greater focus on lessons learned and what had changed as a result. More detailed quarterly reports were sent to Directorate Management Teams. The report for Q4 2014/15 was attached to the agenda paper at Appendix 1a.

Business, Environment and Communities Directorate (BEC) received the highest volume of complaints. In 2013/14, the number of complaints about the standard of service had decreased; it appeared that complainants were more likely to question the policy rather than the service received. Notable increases in BEC in 2013/14 were as a result of changes to the issuing of waste permits. Others were about school transport where the policy had changed, meaning less students qualified and complaints rose as a result.

Members felt that it was very difficult to draw conclusions from the complaints data on whether 'Smarter Working' had led to increased complaints and difficulties for staff.

In relation to the consequences of Flexible and Mobile Working, members felt the information on complaints, particularly about communications in Children's Services, was useful, indicating that the public needed to be made aware of new ways of working.

Members asked the Complaints Manager's view on how best Councillors might review complaints information. The Panel was advised that the Quarterly SLT reports, which already went to Cabinet Members with Responsibility and Lead Members, might be the most useful.

Another Member felt it was up to Councillors to indicate what information they wanted to see on complaints. It was agreed that Members could easily access the Annual Reports on Corporate, Adults, Children's and LGO complaints from the County Council's website.

Members would further consider possible next steps.

Sickness Absence

Employee sickness absence information showing short and long term sickness absence for each year and Directorate from 2009/10 to 2014/15 was provided at Appendix 6 of the agenda. It was noted that long term sickness absence meant 21 days or more continuous absence. How average employee sickness absence per FTE compared to other authorities in 2014/15 was at Appendix 7. Members were advised to contact the Head of Human Resources (Elaine Chandler) if they had any queries or questions about the data provided.

The meeting ended at 12.20 pm

Chairman