

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Tuesday, 21 July 2020, On line - 10.00 am

Present:

Minutes

Mr A D Kent (Chairman), Mrs M A Rayner (Vice Chairman), Mr G R Brookes, Mrs A T Hingley, Mr R J Morris, Prof J W Raine and Ms C M Stalker

Also attended:

Mrs L C Hodgson, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities

Ms K J May, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning

Andrew Spice (Strategic Director of Commercial and Change)

Hannah Needham (Assistant Director for Communities)

Steph Simcox (Head of Finance, Chief Executive's Unit)

Sheena Jones (Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager, Commercial & Change)

Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator)

Alison Spall (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2020 (previously circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

274 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the arrangements for meetings taking place online.

Apologies were received from Mr A Stafford and Mr K Daisley.

275 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

276 Public Participation

None.

277 Confirmation of the Minutes of

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 June 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

the Previous Meeting

278 Performance and Year End Budget Monitoring

The Panel received details on the performance and financial information for services relating to Corporate and Communities, specifically:

- Performance Information (PI) for Quarter 4 (January to March 2020)
- Financial information for the 2019-20 draft outturn.

Performance Indicators for Quarter 4

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change advised the Panel that the data set provided an overview of the key performance indicators as at March 2020. The Panel had received a full update on services at its previous meeting.

Registration and Coroners

The Assistant Director explained that performance for the previous year had been good across all indicators. The Birth Registration Service had recently re-started following lockdown and staff had managed to clear the majority of the backlog, with just 125 births still to register. This was a great achievement in such a short timescale and the Council was currently the highest performing authority in the West Midlands in this respect. In response to a Members question, the Panel was assured that checks and balances were in place to ensure that all births during lockdown were registered. Some small wedding ceremonies were now taking place in registry offices and other licensed premises, with a maximum of 30 attendees in line with Government guidance. The Team was also very busy re-arranging wedding dates for couples whose ceremonies had been scheduled to take place and now needed to be moved. The CMR for Communities praised the efforts of the Team for their achievements under the considerable time pressures they faced.

Communications and Consumer Relations

The Strategic Director highlighted that there had been an increasing proactive use of social media during the year. During lockdown a range of methods had been used to communicate with staff and the annual staff survey was currently underway to obtain feedback. He expected to see a significant increase in the 'increasing staff

engagement' indicator by the next set of data.

The Chairman referred to the red RAG (Red, Amber, Green) rating for the PI's relating to Stage 2 Children's Social Care complaints (in 65 days) and Stage 2 Corporate complaints (in 25 days). It was acknowledged that waiting for information from external bodies sometimes added to delays in response time and that this was an ongoing challenge affecting all local authorities. Following the discussion, more detailed information was requested on:

- the total number of complaints received for each PI
- the number completed within threshold and the number that went over the threshold
- the nature of complaints
- a new indicator giving the number of compliments received.

Management Information Analytics and Research

The Strategic Director commented that the PI's for these Teams were positive with all statutory returns completed on time. The Chairman praised the data updates that Members had received during lockdown.

Human Resources and Information Technology

The Panel was reminded about the investment that the Council had made in ICT services over the past few years, particularly focusing on the resilience of the services, the end-user experience and cyber security. These improvements had continued during lockdown despite the additional challenges of enabling and supporting staff to be able to work from home. The staff were praised for their efforts in this respect.

The Chairman commented that Members being able to engage in the democratic process, and particularly last week's Full Council via zoom had been a huge step forward and one which he hoped would be built on going forward. There were significant savings in time and money to be gained, but also the on-line processes seemed to have encouraged more public interest and participation in the Council's meetings. The Strategic Director commented that the systems and technology in place were proven to be able to support the Council going forward. He highlighted that the results of the annual Staff Survey which was currently underway would be used to help shape the future of the organisation.

The Panel was informed that Sandra Taylor, the new Assistant Director for IT and Digital had started in post earlier this month. She would be taking forward the digital agenda to ensure that the Council continued to develop digitally and that all systems were digitally safe and resilient.

The CMR for Transformation and Commissioning was pleased to announce that the Council had been shortlisted for the Municipal Journal (MJ) Local Government Achievement Award in the Digital Transformation category. She was very proud of the IT Team for this achievement and was looking forward to the final on 2 October.

The Panel discussed the Human Resources PI's data and the following points were made:

- There had been a slight deterioration in long term sickness levels for the quarter, although short term levels had improved.
- Sickness reporting procedures had not altered during lockdown although, good practice had been adapted to respond to the differing needs of staff working from home.
- In response to the concern about use of agency staff, the Strategic Director explained that sometimes there was a need for people with specific skills sets to be used for short periods of time for certain specialist tasks, however the cost of agency staff was continually monitored by the Senior Leadership Team to ensure that the use was essential and that value for money was achieved.
- The Strategic Director praised the Human Resources Team for the efficient way in which they had managed the process of staff transferring from Babcock and Civica back in-house.

Communities

The significant increase in the use of the E-library service, especially during lockdown, was highlighted. The Chairman praised the E-library services which had been a really helpful resource during lockdown. He questioned how the Council's provision compared to neighbouring authorities, for instance offering access to online newspapers and magazines. The Assistant Director explained that the Council's service was based on the

current contract in place with BorrowBox, the terms of which would be reviewed at the point of renewal. It was agreed that comparative information about what other local Councils offered would be provided to the Panel. The CMR for Communities thanked the Libraries and IT staff for the speed at which the libraries digital offer had been expanded and for the raft of new initiatives that had been set up, including virtual job clubs and sessions for children.

The Assistant Director reminded the Panel of the timeframe for the further re-opening of libraries. 6 main libraries had already opened, a further number would be re-opening on 1 August and all remaining libraries would open on 1 September. It was anticipated that browsing within libraries would be re-introduced on 1 October, subject to appropriate safeguards.

The Panel was advised that the Countryside standards PI showed a deteriorating situation, which was largely as a result of the impact of the February floods on the country parks. During lockdown, the country parks had been well used in a sensible manner.

The data revealed that visits to the County's museums had increased by 8.5% in the last year. Hartlebury Museum had just been re-opened following lockdown. In a discussion about the difficulties faced by other museums in the County, the CMR reported that funding from the Government was now available through the Cultural Fund to support museums and theatres facing financial difficulties due to COVID-19. She also referred to the work of the Joint Museums Committee and the annual report of the Museums' service which had just been published.

Financial information for 2019-20 Draft Outturn

The Strategic Director highlighted that since the Panel had previously received financial data, there had been some changes to the figures due to capitalisation of some costs. The Council was now in a trading arrangement with Worcestershire Children First and a series of service level agreements had been set up.

The Panel was informed that the Outturn figures for the corporate areas was very positive, with an overall underspend of £1m. Key variances included savings relating to the Talent Programme, a reduction in contract costs in both Commercial and Property services and reduced staffing costs in Human Resources, Commercial

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Councillors'
Divisional Fund**

Services and Legal Services, the latter also having increased income levels during the year. It was also highlighted that the organisational change programme which, had impacted the corporate areas was within the agreed financial parameters. The CMR for Transformation and Commissioning thanked all the staff for their efforts and commitment towards enabling the organisation to be safe and well managed throughout COVID-19.

It was noted that the Gross Budget column had been omitted from the data but would be included in future updates.

A Member sought clarification in relation to the Programme Office heading being shown as 'no variance'. The Head of Finance explained that there were two funding streams involved, capital and reserves, and that each had a different way of being capitalised.

The Chairman asked whether the Reserves/Grants column could be split in future so that Members could see the breakdown for each. The Head of Finance advised that the items included in this heading were all 'one-off' amounts to be used in one financial year. Grants which were of an ongoing nature, would be included instead within the Revenue Budget.

The Assistant Director reported a strong end of year position for Communities with an underspend of £260k and an improvement of £0.5m from Quarter 3. The majority of the underspend had resulted from an underspend in libraries relating to staffing and supplies and a reduction in the contract costs relating to the Hive, as well as additional income generated by Registration Services. The Panel was informed that the Archaeology Field Service had a lower than forecast income, which was partially offset by a reduction in supplies and services.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Finance for providing a summary of the Council's budget areas split by Directorates and Scrutiny Panels.

The Panel received a report which presented an annual update on the Worcestershire Councillors' Divisional Fund (WCDF). The Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager (DGSM) reminded the Panel that the purpose of the scheme was to enable Members to facilitate 'good works' for the benefit of their division, focusing on environmental, economic or social well-being issues. In

total, 703 submissions had been authorised for payment during the year with 93% of available monies being spent and £29,581 agreed to be rolled over to 2020-21.

During the year Members had received guidance reminding them of key points to bear in mind, for example the need to declare an interest under the Members Code of Conduct and the importance of considering the financial viability of the potential recipient and to check on their VAT status.

Whilst the digitalisation of the process had been widely welcomed, the Chairman raised an issue which was causing some concern for Members. He explained that some organisations were pre-filling the proforma and sending it to all councillors, anticipating that it might just be signed and submitted. This did not fit with the purpose of the Scheme which, was to allow members to help local divisional priorities and there was concern that there could be abuse of the system. The DGSM commented that some organisations wrongly viewed it as a grant scheme but it was Members' decision as to which cause they wished to support. The DGSM suggested removing the proforma from the website to help alleviate the problem and reminded members that all applications were also checked and authorised and would be questioned if they did not confirm to the Policy. Following further discussion, it was agreed that the DGSM would write to all Members offering guidance in respect of the pre-filled forms that they received.

A Member queried what would happen to the funding awards made during 2019-20 which hadn't been spent due to COVID-19. The DGSM advised that if members had allocated funds in 2019-20 or 2020-21 to an event or initiative which did not proceed due to the ongoing Coronavirus restrictions, then the allocation, once refunded, could be brought back into this year's fund and be reallocated.

Cllr Raine suggested that an analysis of the investment in local communities made via the WCDF would be helpful to gain a wider appreciation of the coverage of the scheme and offered to complete this on behalf of the Panel. The Chairman thanked him for this offer and felt the information could be used to send out a positive message to demonstrate one of the ways in which local councillors have a direct impact in their local communities.

The CMR for Transformation and Commissioning

280 Work Programme Refresh 2020-21

suggested that Members should be reminded that their allocation should be spent before purdah.

The Panel were supportive of the continued WCDF and it was agreed that:

- The Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager would write to all Councillors to provide guidance on handling the general mail shots and pre-filled proforma requests for funding.
- The proforma be removed from the Council's Website to discourage its misuse in relation to the above.
- A reminder would be sent to all Councillors to ensure their divisional funds were spent before purdah.

The Panel reviewed its draft 2020/21 work programme and considered which items should be investigated as a priority.

Following a detailed discussion, the Panel agreed its 2020/21 work programme for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 22 July and noted that the scrutiny work programme would be agreed by Council on 10 September 2020.

It was noted that the work relating to the County Council's Energy Purchasing Arrangements would be carried out in a Scrutiny Task Group format, a proposal for which would be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Board for approval on 22 July. It was proposed that the Task Group would be led by the Chairman (Cllr Kent) and Councillors Raine and Morris had indicated their continued support for this work and their willingness to be part of the Task Group if approved.

The meeting ended at 11.30 am

Chairman