

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Tuesday, 10 December 2019, County Hall Worcester - 2.00 pm

Present:

Minutes

Mr A D Kent (Chairman), Mrs M A Rayner (Vice Chairman), Mr G R Brookes, Mr K D Daisley, Mrs A T Hingley, Mr R J Morris, Prof J W Raine and Mr A Stafford

Also attended:

Mrs L C Hodgson, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities
Andrew Spice (Strategic Director for Commercial & Change),
Hannah Needham (Assistant Director for Communities)
Carol Brown (Service Manager - Libraries and Culture)
Jennifer Edwards (Senior Project Manager)
David Griffiths (Head of Commercial)
Paul Harbison (Consumer Relations Officer)
Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator)
Alison Spall (Overview and Scrutiny)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 November 2019 (previously circulated).

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

251 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors Ms C M Stalker and Ms K J May.

252 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

253 Public Participation

In line with the rules of public participation, the Panel was informed that Mr Christopher Hand had submitted a request to take part in this meeting in relation to the item on the Libraries Strategy. This request had been approved and Mr Hand was invited to address the Panel for 3 minutes, during which he set out his views on the draft Strategy, in particular with regard to the impact on the professional library staff.

254 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 November 2019 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

255 Libraries Strategy

The Panel received a report which set out details of the draft Libraries Strategy which was to be considered by Cabinet on 20 December 2019. The report provided the background to the libraries remodelling process, including the extensive public consultation process that had been undertaken.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities (CMR) advised that considerable progress had been made in modernising Worcestershire's library services in recent years. It was stressed that the Transformation Programme had never been about seeking to close libraries, but instead it had focused on how the Council's statutory function could be fulfilled in a challenging financial environment, whilst also ensuring value for money. The CMR provided a brief overview of the draft Strategy, including the five strategic ambitions which set out the vision for the libraries service for the next five years. The Panel was assured that all 21 of the libraries in the County formed part of the statutory offer.

The Assistant Director reminded the Panel of the journey that had been taken to arrive at this stage. The modernisation programme, which had resulted in efficiency savings of £3.9m since 2011/12 had been achieved as a result of a range of transformational approaches, including a comprehensive property remodelling programme, staff and management restructures and investment in self-service technology.

With the findings of the Worcestershire Libraries Needs Assessment in 2018 and a set of recommendations for going forward, the Cabinet had agreed to launch a wide-ranging public consultation exercise, which was then completed by the Spring 2019. A Local Government Association Peer Review was also completed in May 2019 and the Cabinet had consolidated all of the feedback and learning that had been obtained in order to shape a medium to long term Strategy, which would then underpin all future delivery changes. In the meantime, savings had continued to be delivered.

It was recognised that Panel had played an active and constructive role in the above process, including taking

part in a number of site visits to libraries outside of the County. These visits had proved beneficial to inform the Scrutiny process by expanding Members learning of different service models including how they operated in practice. One of the issues that had been highlighted was the significant investment which would be involved in operating an open library, because of the high cost of security monitoring systems.

The Service Manager - Libraries and Culture outlined the detail of the five strategic ambitions, as follows:

- *A Library service for everyone*, with initiatives to raise awareness and widen community engagement including an extended digital offer and working with external partners. The Assistant Director highlighted that the implementation of the strategy would need Corporate support and involvement to ensure that it was successful.
- *Libraries First*, putting libraries at the heart of the delivery of Council and community services. Libraries would become the front door to Council services and provide new opportunities for services to be delivered.
- *Resilient, Independent and Connected Communities*, using the libraries brand to deliver services to improve the health and quality of life of residents. The Panel was advised that libraries provided trusted spaces where services could be offered, which could potentially reach more people and therefore improve best value. As an example, Kidderminster Library had a working space where staff could connect to the Council network, and therefore could be used by a variety of staff when their job demands required a temporary base away from their office.
- *Prosperous Communities* – Developing new services to support business enterprise and skills and to help people into work. The Hive was cited as an example where there were currently a variety of initiatives offering support to businesses for their growth, for example with training facilities, adult learning, job club and traineeships.
- *Sustainable and Innovative libraries* – Investing in new service models and securing new funding to future-proof the libraries service. The Panel was informed that a key approach going forward would be to use every opportunity to expand the use of shared buildings, with a continuation of the property remodelling programme. The Service Manager advised that there had been little public

support for the community managed libraries, therefore instead the community support model, for instance as currently in Hagley and Cats hill libraries, would be extended. In terms of opportunities for service growth, the potential of Section 106 funding was raised. Members were keen that the libraries team were made aware of all the potential opportunities for tapping into the S106 monies, including where new communities were being developed or to redevelop an existing community building which was no longer viable.

Members raised a number of issues and questions as follows:

- A Member asked how more residents could be encouraged to use the range of libraries services on offer. The Service Manager explained that there were a range of initiatives that were aimed at achieving this, especially with regard to digital services, of which awareness levels were particularly low.
- In terms of maintaining momentum of this awareness raising, the Panel was advised that the Team's work would be creative and targeted, for instance seeking to raise awareness amongst groups which were currently under-represented
- Where an open plus library system was being considered, the point was reinforced that safeguarding needed to be given the highest priority when arrangements were put in place.
- Whilst acknowledging that the five ambitions were very worthy, a Member queried what underpinned them and whether any local authority had evidence that by raising awareness, a significant difference could be made to the use of services. The Assistant Director explained that the impact of the Strategy would need to be tracked in accordance with the Needs Assessment base line.
- A further question was raised as to whether the Council had the resources available to be able to deliver the plans set out for libraries. The Assistant Director confirmed that over time the resources would be available, provided savings continued to be identified and corporate support was forthcoming.
- The CMR highlighted that Worcester City Council had provided some funding to support Warndon and St John's Libraries.
- In response to a question about whether the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership

(LEP) was involved with the Hive, the Service Manager advised that the LEP was involved through the Economic Development and Learning and Skills teams, but not directly with the libraries.

- A Member suggested that it would be helpful to include an overall ambition statement to tie in all the aspects of the Strategy. 'Active Minds' was a possible theme for this, which would directly link to efforts to improve the mental health of residents.

The Assistant Director provided an update on the libraries savings plan for 2018 - 2021. The Panel was advised that there was still a further £294k of savings which needed to be identified and delivered in 2020/21. These savings would be achieved through measures such as renting space in libraries, introducing self-service technology and seeking further community support. It was highlighted that the Open Plus library proposals were included in the business plan for 2020/21.

The Senior Project Manager provided the Panel with details of the implementation time line going forward. The key initial elements of work would involve:

- Developing the workforce and determining the best fit for the future management and staffing structure.
- Focusing on developing a robust Communication and Engagement Strategy
- A close check on technology systems to ensure continued integration with the Council's Digital Transformation Strategy
- Identifying further service development opportunities and improvements to service planning
- Continuing with the property re-modelling programme including innovative use of spaces and co-location with partners.

The Panel was informed that the Transformation Programme would continue to be managed through the Libraries Programme Board. The Libraries Team were also keen to maintain the current relationship with the Scrutiny Panel, which had proved to be beneficial.

In response to a few detailed queries raised by Councillor Hotham, it was agreed that Officers would liaise with him outside of the meeting to clarify the matters.

The CMR thanked the Members of the Panel for the time they had given to the libraries issue. She reassured the

256 Statutory and Corporate Complaints and Compliments system

Panel that the aim of the Strategy was all about modernising the libraries service, rather than closing any of the current sites.

It was agreed that the Panel's comments would be forwarded to the CMR and would include:

- The Panel's support for the Strategy, seeking assurance that sufficient resources were available to deliver the strategy
- A request to see a detailed Implementation Plan when available
- The suggestion for consideration be given to including an overarching ambition statement relating to the 'Active Minds' theme to link to the development of the libraries service
- Where possible, the exploration of opportunities for S106 monies that might benefit the development of the libraries service
- The need for the highest priority for safeguarding when proposals for unstaffed hours were considered.

At the September Panel meeting, the Panel had requested that a detailed report be produced covering the Council's statutory and corporate complaints and compliments system. The Director presented a report which set out background information about the complaints process, detailed information for each area and the key issues and hotspots to be aware of, including:

- Since the removal of Stage 3 of the Corporate representations process earlier this year, there had not been an increase in the % of complaints received by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO).
- Fewer statutory Children's and Adults Social Care complaints had been received this year to date, compared with 2018/19, with Children's complaints having reduced by more than 50%. Corporate complaints had risen in the same period.
- The Economy and Infrastructure Directorate continued to receive the most complaints. The Stage 1 response rate had improved in the year to date, however there was also an increase in the number of complaints fully or partly upheld. The Panel was informed that the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) regularly carried out a peer challenge on the Stage 1 responses.

- Fewer complaints were progressing to a Stage 2 investigation, but those that were, were taking a longer time to be responded to.
- The implications of an LGO maladministration or injustice ruling could be significant, with substantial financial awards issued to complainants.

The Consumer Relations Officer (CRO) provided further detailed information including:

- The way in which the Team was organised, including the use of external investigators.
- The different arrangements in place for the statutory children's and adults complaints and also the corporate complaints system and the variances for deadlines by which complaints needed to be acknowledged and each stage completed.
- The procedure carried out by the Investigation Officers, which culminated with a report to the relevant Director or the Chief Executive of Worcestershire Childrens' First (WCF). He advised that if the Director or Chief Executive did not agree with the report's findings, they had to set out their explanation as to why this was the case. For WCF, Stage 3 then involved an Independent Review Panel, whilst for Adult Social Care, the level of risk determined whether the complaint was then reviewed internally or externally.

Members raised a number of questions and comments about the service, with a summary set out below:

- In response to a Member's question, the CRO advised that complaints and compliments could be submitted by post, via comment cards/leaflets, or on line, but that all were received in the central Consumer Relations Unit.
- A Member requested that a schematic diagram of the complaints procedure be provided, so that the flow of the processes could be more easily understood.
- In response to a query as to whether learning points gained from customer feedback were taken into account for future training needs, the Director confirmed that in such cases SLT received recommendations for actions going forward.
- Further information was requested about the time limits that were in place and how performance

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Arrangements**

was measured against these.

- The volume of feedback and complaints handled by Councillors was highlighted. It was suggested that the way in which this linked to the formal complaints system needed to be looked at, as currently many of these contacts might not end up being recorded centrally.
- A request was made for a drill down into the data to provide more detailed statistics to a future meeting. In addition, it was highlighted that information would be useful to demonstrate where the delays arose in the process.
- A Member suggested that benchmarking with other Councils would be a helpful process to complete.
- A Member recounted his experience of previously serving on an Independent Review Panel and finding that the unanimous decision of the Panel was then overturned by the Chief Executive, a situation he found difficult to comprehend. The CRO confirmed that the Chief Executives of WCC and WCF had the final decision-making responsibility when using the Council's internal process.

It was agreed that a report would be brought back to the Panel with further information as requested above.

The Panel received a report which provided an update on developments relating to the Council's energy purchasing arrangements. The Director explained the background to the current arrangement.

The Council had purchased its energy from West Mercia Energy (WME) since 2012, with the current level of purchasing at approximately £6m of electricity and gas each year. WME was a Joint Committee entity owned in equal shares by Shropshire Council, (the host authority for administration) Telford and Wrekin council, Herefordshire Council and Worcestershire County Council. WME operated as a Public Buying Organisation and purchased energy requirements through a trading desk with its contracted supplier, currently Total. Their buying strategy was 'low risk hedging' meaning that energy was purchased in small volumes of relatively low value to the total energy portfolio. Each year WME set an annual price per unit of energy for which the Council was charged. This was a fixed price which gave the Council budget assurance throughout the year.

It was highlighted that WME had a number of customers

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which all currently paid less for their energy units than the four owning authorities. The owning authorities received a share of the surplus from trading activities, however, this surplus has been reducing over the years and currently stood at £150k pa.

It was noted that the climate change levy figure should read £0.0043/kwh (paragraph 11 of the report).

The Chairman suggested that due to the complexity of this issue, more detailed information was needed. It was therefore agreed that Cllrs Kent, Raine and Morris would carry out this work and report back to the Panel at its meeting in March 2020.

A Member requested that when the work was carried out, the timescales for the Council's commitment to WME and the details of any opt-out clause should be looked at.

The Panel received details on performance information (PI) for services relating to Corporate and Communities for Quarter 2 (July to September 2019).

The Director provided an overview of the performance data, indicating that it continued to be an improving picture for the vast majority of the PI's. Members were pleased to be able to see improvements in areas which they had recently scrutinised in detail.

A Member requested that the sickness rates be split into long-term and short-term sickness for future reports to allow Members to gain a more detailed view.

259 Work Programme 2019/20

The Panel received details of their current work programme for review.

It was agreed that a report on the 'Progress Monitoring of the Organisational Change Programme' be brought to the March Panel.

In respect of the January Panel meeting and the Budget to be considered, it was agreed that a copy of an email sent with guidance on the Budget process would be circulated to all Panel members, along with a link to the on-line budget book.

It was agreed that the follow up actions on the Complaints data would be reported to either the January or March Panel.

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm

Chairman