

## Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel Wednesday, 17 June 2020, Online only - 10.00 am

### Minutes

#### Present:

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, Ms C M Stalker and Mr A Stafford

#### Also attended:

Mrs L C Hodgson, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities  
Ms K J May, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Transformation and Commissioning  
Mr A I Hardman, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

Andrew Spice (Strategic Director of Commercial and Change)  
Paula Furnival (Strategic Director for People)  
Richard Taylor (Assistant Director for Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement)  
Hannah Needham (Assistant Director for Communities)  
Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator)  
Alison Spall (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

#### 266 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that the meeting was being held online to comply with the regulations issued for the coronavirus pandemic which enables meetings of the County Council to take place, visible to the public, whilst they cannot take place at County Hall.

Apologies were received from Mr K D Daisley.

#### 267 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

#### 268 Public Participation

None.

#### 269 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 January 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

**270 Update on Corporate and Communities in response to COVID -19**

The Overview and Scrutiny Board had requested that all the Overview and Scrutiny Panels look at how services had been affected as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and highlight any emerging issues that the Board needed to be aware of as well as reviewing their own work programmes in light of this.

The Panel received a detailed report which provided an update on areas within its remit as follows:

- IT and digital services,
- Communities and libraries
- The Organisation, its employees and the Organisational Change programme.

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change (C&C) advised that whilst the Council was still operating in the response stage to the pandemic, it was also now working through various elements of the recovery stage.

**IT and Digital services**

The Strategic Director (C&C) explained that the significant improvements to the IT infrastructure that had been taking place since 2018 had improved the resilience of the system and meant that the IT and Digital team were in a much better place to respond to the recent unprecedented level of demand on their services. He gave an overview of some of the major recent challenges including:

- With remote working, a peak of 2900 staff simultaneously using the Council's Virtual Private Network (VPN).
- The daily bandwidth usage of the Internet circuit rising to 60-70% at times.
- The average weekly video call level rising to over 1,000, from a level of 30 per week prior to COVID-19.
- The need to develop a number of specific applications to respond to various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. Here 2 Help website and App, Volunteer Redeployment app and COVID-19 testing app.

The Panel was informed that the resilience of the network infrastructure had been further improved in recent months due to the establishment of a secondary Internet data circuit at Wildwood to act as back up for the main circuit. In addition, a key link in the system had been upgraded from 1 to 10 gigabits per second, which had enhanced the performance of the remote working

system. In response to a question from the Chairman, the Strategic Director (C&C) advised that whilst they had budgeted for some increase in the level of gigabit, the increase to 10 gigabits would involve some additional incremental costs.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Transformation and Commissioning paid tribute to the vital role that IT staff had carried out across these services to ensure that Council business could continue to be carried out. The rapid establishment of a number of new platforms and apps such as Here 2 Help had been crucial. She also drew attention to the fact that the insourcing of Babcock and Civica had been completed during lockdown as well as further implementation of Liquid Logic. Members praised the Team for managing the transfer of services back in house during lockdown and the Human Resources Team were recognised for their experience and competence in this role.

The Strategic Director (C&C) confirmed that the Council would be looking at the opportunities and challenges presented by the rapid move to digitalisation and would be seeking to embed efficiencies gained as a result.

The impact on employees physical and mental health from working at home was discussed. It was recognised that this had proved to be far more difficult for some employees because of the lack of a dedicated space available in their home and whether they were trying to juggle work with caring responsibilities. The CMR for Transformation and Commissioning highlighted that the health and well-being of the workforce was crucial, as they were key to the provision of all the Council's services. She recognised that some staff had suffered in isolation with a lack of personal interaction.

The Strategic Director for People advised that they had been capturing the views of staff about home working and whilst the staff were adjusting to the new ways of working and were feeling well supported, they had also raised the problem of feeling isolated. Contact with their teams was important and they had been embracing new technology to enhance this contact. It was highlighted that a few staff had found the different way of working suited them and was working very well.

The Assistant Director (Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement) (HR,OD &E) advised that it was important that Managers were as effective as possible in their management of remote teams and there was training available to support them

with this. There were mental health and well-being courses available for all employees too which enabled them to access this structured support. In terms of practical help with equipment, staff had been asked to complete a risk assessment of their home working arrangements and in response to these and subsequent conversations, needs had been identified and appropriate equipment was being supplied. This equipment has largely been small items such as headphones, keyboards etc, but some larger equipment, such as desks and chairs has also been delivered to employees' homes where necessary, with the support of the Highways and Transport team.

### **Communities and Libraries**

The Assistant Director for Communities provided an overview of these service areas, including the work that was now taking place to recover services which had been impacted during lockdown.

#### Registration and Coroners

The Panel was informed that all services within this area had ceased during April and May, with the exception of death registrations. Members noted the peak of the deaths being registered was 6–12 April, with a total of 251 deaths recorded. The Chairman highlighted that by mid-May the death rate was showing a lower level than the previous year. The Assistant Director advised that whilst there might be a slight lag in deaths being registered, she was unaware of anything else which had impacted the figures and felt they were generally comparable with last year's figures for May.

The Chairman asked about the role that staff had played offering empathy and support to the bereaved. The Assistant Director assured the Panel that the staff were well trained and had continued to offer such support over the telephone. For those who needed additional support, they were able to signpost to Bereavement support or Here2Help as appropriate.

In terms of the recovery process, the registration of births had re-commenced on 10 June and the Service was on track to return to normal by the end of June. Guidance on Weddings and Civil Partnerships was yet to be received from the Government. The Test and Trace service was now up and running and working well, with Council and Health services working closely together to ensure maximum effectiveness.

The CMR for Communities expressed her gratitude to staff within Registration Services for their professionalism and hard work during this period of immense pressure. She felt that this Council as a whole had responded well to the COVID-19 situation, but also by working together with colleagues in District Councils and health bodies, this had ensured that the best possible service was able to be provided to the residents of Worcestershire.

### Coroners

The Panel received an update on recent activity within the Coroners Service. Small inquests, where court attendance might be required would be restarted from the end of June. In response to a Member's question about the backlog of all inquests, the Assistant Director confirmed she would report back with specific details.

### Libraries

The Panel was reminded that all the Council's libraries had closed on 24 March. Since that date over half the library staff had been redeployed to support the Council's Here2Help Scheme, responding to requests for support from Worcestershire residents.

The main focus of service delivery for libraries has been through the digital library hub, which was always part of the overall library strategy going forward, but which had been initiated early as a result of the situation created by COVID-19. The new Hub was focused on helping Worcestershire residents to stay active and connected with their communities and brings together a wide range of digital library resources and services, including opportunities to attend virtual library events. Since the closure of the libraries there had been a huge increase in numbers of digital library members and in e-book and e-audiobook downloads.

In terms of going forward, an update was provided on library transformation work. The procurement stage was currently underway for the open library technology at Droitwich, Stourport and Rubery libraries. Details of the planned phased re-opening of libraries over 3 phases was set out for the Panel, with the first phase commencing on 6 July and involving the 6 main libraries. It was anticipated that if the social distancing guidelines were sufficiently relaxed, all libraries would be able to be re-opened by September, subject to adequate numbers of staff and volunteers being available.

Members raised a number of issues regarding the provision of libraries:

- Work had commenced towards finding a mutually agreeable approach for re-balancing the Hive staff costs across the Council and the University of Worcester which would deliver library efficiencies for the Council. The Assistant Director for Communities explained the background to the current arrangement and the Council's plans for restructuring, which required a re-focus of staffing needs. There were now plans to have clusters of libraries with an Area Manager for each cluster. In addition, a role of Service Development Manager would cover this aspect across the County. A meeting had taken place with the University the previous day and discussions were ongoing.
- A Member asked how the Library staff had coped with being redeployed to the Here2Help initiative. It was explained that as library staff were used to acting in a customer service role, they were naturally well suited to this role. It was acknowledged, however, that the types of issue that they were dealing with, were emotionally difficult at times. To provide support and back up, help was available from health colleagues, both in terms of dealing with some of the more complicated cases, but also for the individual staff who needed support.
- The legacy of Here2Help was raised and how to ensure that the experience of library staff was not lost. The Assistant Director commented that it had been a huge learning curve, and staff had developed skills which they would take back into their normal jobs and which would be helpful for developing community and voluntary links going forward. The CMR for Communities reminded the Panel that libraries had been talked of in terms of 'community hubs' and as such, going forward their role could be greatly enhanced as an important, safe community space. The Strategic Director for People added that under a 'Think Local, Act Personal' theme, the Here2Help initiative could be taken forward, in partnership with others. Discussions were currently taking place and costings for options for such a Scheme were being considered.
- A Member asked whether the clustering of libraries would result in any job losses. The Panel was advised that consultation on the management

restructuring exercise was due to be take place in mid-July and then implemented thereafter. Assurance was given that job losses would be avoided as recent vacancies, had not been filled leading up to this exercise.

### Archives and Archaeology

The Panel was informed that all practical work relating to the Archives Services had ceased on the 24 March, but digital work was continuing. It was anticipated that the service, based at The Hive, would start some limited face to face service with the re-opening of the Hive in July, but a fuller service would be restored in September, subject to public health guidelines at that time.

On 31 March it was announced that Worcestershire's Archive service had retained its Accredited Archive Service after completing its first full cycle of assessments and visits by the National Archives. The CMR for Communities congratulated the Archive service staff on this achievement, it was one of only three in the country to have achieved this. She thanked the Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Manager, who had recently retired from the Service for her support in helping the Team achieve this goal.

Archaeology staff who had worked at home were processing and cataloguing items, which had kept income being received. Some very small- scale excavation work had been carried out in late April on sites where the work was deemed to be essential and where social distancing could be followed.

### Trading Standards

The Panel was informed that staff had been very busy during lockdown ensuring that businesses had remained closed during the first phase of the Council's response to COVID-19; warning the public of potential COVID-19 scams and then in recent weeks preparing for the re-opening of High Streets, shops and businesses.

### Countryside Greenspaces

Waseley Hills and Worcester Woods Country Parks had both remained open during lockdown, although the cafes and toilets were closed. On 1 June, both cafes had re-opened for takeaway only. In response to a question about toilet facilities, the Panel was advised that those at Waseley Hills had remained open, because the Council

has responsibility for cleaning them. The toilets at Worcester Woods remained closed as they were managed by the Café. Once the Café was allowed to re-open, there would need to be agreement about the cleaning of the toilets.

### Here2Help Scheme

The Here2Help Scheme was launched as One Worcestershire's community action response with the sole aim of supporting residents through the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those who were having to self-isolate and/or had additional needs (as a result of COVID) and could not get help from family or friends. By early June there had been 2920 requests for help and over 3000 offers of help. The main requests for help had related to food and medical needs.

Members expressed their support and praise for the Scheme which had proved to be a valuable source of help for residents for practical help and advice. As referred to earlier, discussions were now ongoing about the future role of the Scheme.

A Member asked whether the Council was sure that it had been able to identify all the people who had needed help. The Assistant Director for Communities explained that the service was available for everyone to access. In terms of the shielded population, there was a national scheme, which the Council would be asked to follow up on in certain circumstances for instance where food parcels were not being taken in by shielded residents, and would be proactive in working with District Council, so that checks could be made at the local level. There had only been direct contact with a limited number of the shielded population as many of that group had sufficient support from their own network.

## **The Organisation, its employees and the Organisational Change programme**

### Workforce and Engagement

The Strategic Director (C&C) explained some of the key workforce activities that had taken place as part of the Council's COVID-19 response, including:

- measures to protect and support vulnerable and at-risk employees
- identifying key workers and implementing a process for them to carry out their duties

- designing and implementing a voluntary redeployment process with district councils
- setting up and co-ordinating all testing for public sector (non-NHS) staff who were eligible for testing from a range of organisations across the County.
- Training on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for nursing and care homes across the county, plus ongoing support.
- Communications – keeping staff and residents updated on latest developments through all available channels. A 300% increase in media calls had been experienced daily during this time.

### Recovery Stage

In respect of the recovery process, the Panel was informed that the Council's planning has been aligned to the Government's COVID-19 alert levels, which were currently at level 4, although moving towards level 3.

Members raised a number of issues regarding the process of moving forward:

- In respect of the 792 employees who were most at risk, a question was asked as to what level of support they were receiving. The Assistant Director (HR, OD & E) advised it was recognised that this group would be feeling more isolated and with uncertainty as to how long they had to remain at home. Regular individual contact has been made with these employees and they had recently been asked to complete a risk assessment to see whether there was a different way they could be working to allow them to return to work with the right support.
- The Officers were commended for their success in procuring PPE. The Strategic Director (C&C) advised that the procurement team had done an outstanding job in obtaining PPE through a variety of contacts both locally and nationally. In the medium term, a proactive management of supply was planned to ensure that reliable lines of supply were achieved from local sources where possible, ensuring adequate stockpiles were available.
- It was explained that the Director of Public Health was the lead on the Test and Trace Service. In line with the national programme, the Team had plans in place to respond to local outbreaks, although there had not been an outbreak where

those plans had been implemented as yet. The mobile test units were crucial for large scale testing and there was immediate priority testing available when required.

- It was suggested that the change in culture needed to be utilised moving forward with the redesign programme. The Strategic Director (C&C) highlighted that the gold/silver/bronze organisational structure which was implemented to manage the COVID-19 situation mirrored the proposed redesign structure with strategic, management and individual service levels. He advised that there was an opportunity for a re-focus, and the change in recent months had proved there were different ways of working to be embraced going forward.
- A Member suggested that a County wide seminar style event should take place in the future to review the Council's response to Covid-19 and ensure that all the lessons learnt (both the opportunities and the challenges) could be taken forward to inform future plans. Another Member highlighted that such an event should also involve looking outwards and lessons should be learnt from the experience of other Councils where appropriate.
- The reliability of the testing facility at Worcester Warriors ground was questioned, as it involved residents obtaining the sample themselves. The Panel was informed that the test was most accurate when you were tested within 4 days of having symptoms. A key aspect was the need for residents to activate the barcode on their test, otherwise there was a delay in obtaining the results.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for an excellent report which had enabled Members to gain a detailed understanding of the work that had been carried out during the first few months of the pandemic and also the plans being implemented for recovery going forward. The CMR for Transformation and Commissioning thanked all staff, both on the front line and in support teams who had played their role in ensuring that residents were safeguarded and that critical services for residents were maintained.

The Panel agreed that the following comments should be highlighted to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board:

**271 Member Query Case Management System**

- That it was important to look at the lessons learnt from COVID-19 in terms of a whole County response (including all partners). It was suggested that in due course a County wide Seminar takes place ensuring that both the opportunities, challenges and best practice from other Councils are considered.
- The Panel's thanks and appreciation be conveyed to staff for their tremendous efforts during lockdown. The Cabinet Members were also praised for all their work.
- That when procuring goods, wherever possible, consideration should be given to local sourcing e.g. PPE as this would help to boost the local economy.
- The Panel would like a report on how the Here2Help Service will operate in future and also an update on the Council's continued response to COVID-19 to outline the lessons learnt and the implications for the Council moving forward.

The Panel received a report which set out options available to manage Member queries to Service Area Managers. The Strategic Director (C&C) explained that Members currently used a variety of channels for their enquiries as there was no centralised system in place. The queries were not always logged, dependent on which channel was used and Members weren't able to access an oversight of how a query was being progressed.

The report set out four different options for the Panel to consider, with the recommended Option 1 for a Member Query Case Management system being provided in-house by the Council's Digital Transformation Team, utilising the existing Freedom of Information request management system. The Strategic Director advised that if Members supported this option, there would be no additional cost to the Council to implement the system. It was anticipated that the necessary detailed works to set up the system could be started in September.

The Chairman was supportive of the proposed system, and the streamlined process that would be able to be established. He felt that such a system would significantly enhance the productivity of Councillors and enable management to gain an understanding of the levels and areas of demand. He was encouraged by the proposed timescale suggested and looked forward to a system being established.

**272**      **Worcestershire  
County Council  
Energy  
Purchasing  
Arrangements**

It was agreed that the Panel supported Option 1, a Member Query Case Management system being provided in-house provided by the Council's Digital Transformation Team, utilising the existing Freedom of Information request management system and that the CMR for Transformation would be advised accordingly. The Panel noted that the detailed work to take this forward would commence in September 2020.

In December 2019, the Panel received a report which set out the Council's approach to the procurement of its energy supply. At that meeting, it was agreed that a group of members would be set up to look into this matter in more detail. Following an update on progress in January 2020, the group's work was paused and the work re-prioritised due to COVID-19.

Since starting this work, the Council had entered into a 2-year fixed price arrangement for the unmetered supply in early 2020, which had led to significant savings for the Council.

The report highlighted that the energy market was extremely volatile at the moment due to the pandemic. Forecast demand had decreased significantly with an impact on wholesale pricing of between 2-5% and it was difficult to predict energy prices.

During the discussion about the Council's current arrangements with WME, the CMR for Adult Social Care (who was one of the Council's representatives on the WME Joint Committee), suggested there was some misunderstanding on this issue and he would welcome the opportunity to discuss further and that the group should also talk to other members of the WME Joint Committee.

The Chairman confirmed that this should be an area of priority for the Panel, remain on the Panel's work programme and be picked up again by the group to include speaking to representatives of the WME Joint Committee.

**273**      **Work  
Programme  
2019/20**

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

Following discussion, it was confirmed that the following reports would be requested for forthcoming meetings:

Items for July meeting:

- Worcestershire Councillors Divisional Funding Scheme
- Performance and In-Year Budget monitoring

Items for September meeting:

- Performance and In-Year Budget monitoring
- Council's Energy providers and costs
- update on best practice regarding the process of transferring services back in house which have previously been commissioned out.

The meeting ended at 12.20 pm

Chairman .....