

## **Minutes of the Corporate and Communities**

### **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

#### **County Hall Worcester**

**Monday, 8 November 2021, 2.00 pm**

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#### **Present:**

Cllr Mike Rouse (Chairman), Cllr James Stanley (Vice Chairman),  
Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Laura Gretton, Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cllr Emma Marshall,  
Cllr Natalie McVey and Cllr Craig Warhurst

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services and  
Communication  
Cllr Tom Wells, Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director for Communities  
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer  
Richard Taylor, Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement  
Jo Dalton, Head of Communications and Engagement  
Annette Stock, Complaints Manager  
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 24 September 2021 (previously circulated).

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

### **329 Apologies and Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. There were no apologies for absence.

### **330 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip**

None.

### **331 Public Participation**

None.

### **332 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 24 September 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

### **333 Performance and In-year Budget Monitoring and 2022/23 Budget Scrutiny**

#### In-year Budget Monitoring – Quarter 2

The Deputy Chief Finance Officer (DCFO) advised the Panel that as at Quarter 2 the year end forecast position showed a marginal overspend for CoaCh and the Chief Executive's Unit was largely break even, with a few minor variances as detailed in the report. One of the variances related to additional expenditure in connection with the purchase of property related software following the insourcing of Place Partnership Ltd. The DCFO advised that they were currently looking at ways for this to be financed outside of CoaCh. The areas of underspend had been used to offset some of the increased costs, for instance, relating to legal costs for childcare cases.

In respect of the Communities budget, the Panel was informed that at Quarter 2 the year end forecast was for an overspend of £227k, which was mainly as a result of reduced income from The Hive, which was not likely to be received this financial year. The Assistant Director for Communities (ADC) explained that the main financial pressure had resulted from Civica moving out of the Hive. Consideration was being given to using the vacant space for a youth hub facility and she was liaising with the Department for Work and Pensions regarding possible grants available to assist this purpose. It was stressed that this possible income would not be at the same level as was previously obtained.

The ADC also highlighted that ways in which the Archives/Archaeology unit could generate more income were being looked at, and a bid had just been submitted for an Archaeology contract. Other areas were also being reviewed to see whether there was any scope for efficiency savings. In response to a Member's question about the potential of development streams, the ADC advised that there were two elements, firstly the advisory service which was base budget funded and where historical records were cared for and advice was provided for planning applications. The second element related to a field service and this was where there was the opportunity to tender for commercial work. The Panel was informed that the team was developing the skills required to be able to successfully bid for work. The Head of Libraries, Archives and

Archaeology was currently putting together an Action Plan on income generation and was expecting that within the next 6 months the team would be in a better position to bid for significant work.

### Budget Scrutiny

The Leader of the Council had suggested that Scrutiny Panel's might wish to discuss emerging pressures and challenges for services in relation to the 2022/23 Budget at this meeting.

The DCFO advised that a post pandemic review of operations had identified a number of key pressures which would impact services including the rising costs of transport, energy and pay. It was noted that in CoaCh, the majority of the budget related to staffing. The Government had confirmed that it would return to an annual pay award, but the pay award had not yet been set for this financial year. The Assistant Director for Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement (ADHR) advised that the Council supported the suggested pay award of 1.75% arrived at through national bargaining, but that the trade unions were seeking a much higher rate. It was likely to be February before a final pay award was confirmed.

The Panel was informed that there were difficulties in recruiting key specialist staff on a national basis, and agency staff were therefore being used to support certain specialist roles, leading to significantly increased costs. The Strategic Director for Commercial and Change advised that the issue was particularly acute for CoaCh due to the many different specialist roles. Members felt that this recruitment issue was one which needed more detailed review in terms of the staffing costs and ensuring cost mitigation.

On a positive note, the ADHR was pleased to confirm that the Council was currently maintaining an 85% permanency rate for Social Workers, where there had previously been significant recruitment and retention issues. Also, the Council was growing its use of and support for apprenticeships, with over 100 apprentices currently being supported through use of the levy in Worcestershire businesses.

With the RPI increasing and likely to be at 3% by the end of the calendar year, the Panel was advised that inflationary factors were putting pressure on services just to remain as the status quo.

The Strategic Director advised that the Council currently had £630m of procurement managed by the Council's Commercial team. For some of the contracts such as Microsoft, market influences could lead to a sudden increase in costs, whilst for major contracts due to end next year, such as the street lighting contract (negotiated by West Mercia Energy) there would inevitably be an increase in contract price. The Panel was informed that CoaCh had a number of procurement interim staff with specific knowledge to provide support.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Communication commented that whilst the inflationary factors presented a change in circumstances, he

was impressed with the way in which the Procurement Team were facing the challenges and had confidence in them. He was pleased with the investment being made in the Apprenticeship programme and that succession planning was being built in.

The increased cost of transport and the impact on the supply chain was raised by Members and the question was asked as to what the Council was doing to mitigate these costs? The Strategic Director explained that as the Council didn't buy many goods and services itself, these costs tended to sit with suppliers and contractors. Where the Council used transport such as for home to school transport, there were some fixed contracts and some other arrangements. Additional costs would be mitigated wherever possible, but it was hoped that this was a relatively short-term issue.

Members expressed their concern about the emerging pressures and challenges and the resultant impact on Council budgets and services. The Chairman highlighted that the Panel was due to review the Corporate Procurement Strategy at its January meeting. In the meantime, Panel's comments would be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board.

#### Performance Monitoring

The Panel received performance data for Quarter 2 and asked a range of questions which were responded to as follows:

- Registration of deaths within 5 days – concern was expressed about the red and deteriorating performance in this area and that the data for September 2021 was missing. The ADC explained that the September 2021 data was missing because of a national technical problem. The deteriorating performance related to delays by General Practitioners (GP's) submitting forms which resulted in deaths not being able to be registered promptly. It was confirmed that some GP's were repeat offenders. It was agreed that the Chairman (on behalf of the Panel) would lobby primary care colleagues to improve performance. The Panel agreed that this issue would be included on the Panel's work programme.
- Death registration appointments within 2 days – it was agreed that as this performance was 100% and green that a breakdown could be included in future graphs.
- Increasing Staff Engagement – A Member questioned why the data for December 2020 to June 2021 was missing from the performance graph. The ADHR explained that this gave a misleading impression, and he reassured the Panel that there had been a lot of work taking place on staff engagement including regular staff briefings, targeted conversations during staff performance reviews and regular consultation with trade unions.
- Sickness Rates – A Member sought further clarification on the sickness rate figures. The ADHR highlighted that the figures for September and December 2020 were incorrect and should read 3.22 and 5.23

respectively. He advised that there had been an increase in sickness rates as a result of long Covid cases and also with staff being signed off work whilst they awaited treatment, which had been delayed due to Covid. A Member queried how the Council's Covid sickness figures compared to national averages. The ADHR advised that unfortunately local authorities were taking very different approaches as to how and when Covid was being recorded as sickness, with some not recording it as sickness at all which did not help with offering any meaningful comparisons. It was requested that a graph showing sickness days versus working days be incorporated into the performance data in future.

- Compliments – The Strategic Director drew attention to the number of compliments received this year, which was double the previous year. The majority were for adult social care services, though there was also 20 for children's social care and 6 corporate compliments too.
- Library usage – The Panel noted that since they were re-opened library visits had not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels, although use of e-services had significantly increased.

### 334 Overview of Council Communication

The Panel had requested an overview of the Council's Content and Communication function. The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Communication gave a brief introduction to the report following which the Head of Communications and Engagement (HCE) provided an overview of the key issues. Some of the points highlighted were as follows:

- The growing importance of social media, but also that traditional media remained a key communication channel too.
- The Team had become more effective at communicating with residents during the pandemic, for instance with the issuing of public health messages.
- There was more emphasis on hyper local targeting of publicity with a better understanding of different audiences.
- Work was underway to develop better ways for Councillors to share messages in their local area.

Members questions created a number of areas of discussion, and the following points were noted.

- In terms of drilling down into figures on 'followers' to gain a better understanding of the profile of the followers, the HCE advised that whilst there was a general understanding of the profile of followers, it was not possible to delve deeper to obtain detailed information on each platform. Engagement was the key aim, as well as numbers of followers, the Team were keen to see how often a message was viewed and how people interacted, for instance the number of likes and shares. More people were encouraged to 'follow' by creating 2-way conversations and by overlaying channels.

- The Cabinet Member referred to the need for Councillors to take on a promotional sales role for the Council and advised that he was working with the HCE to develop a short paper on media issues to assist Councillors to develop in this role.
- The Chairman commented that it would be useful for the quarterly monitoring if the social media profiles could include age and gender profile by platform, to enable the Panel to drill down into the data. Also, for the 'traffic across social media channels' to include a more detailed breakdown, eg number of hits.
- On the issue of boosting social media, the HCE advised that 'boost it' posts were used on a regular basis on Facebook, with very positive outcomes.
- A Member suggested that people might be less likely to respond to a social media post with a positive comment and queried how the success of the various initiatives could be measured. The HCE explained that social media posting was only one aspect of engagement, with others including website interactions and face to face drop-in centres. Following a press release, many connections were received upon which sentiment analysis could be carried out.
- The HCE confirmed that actions could be tracked after messages had been shared. Members reported that the messages that they received were sometimes lengthy and in a format that was difficult to share. The HCE confirmed that future messages forwarded to Members would be sent in an easy to share format, which Members could automatically share with ease. The possibility of sharing messages with Officers and partners was also raised.
- In response to a question about whether the Communications Team was sufficiently resourced to handle 'One Worcestershire' and 'Visit Worcestershire', the HCE advised that three key vacancies were currently being recruited to covering the above two aspects and a specialist social media role. The ADHR explained that there was a careful focus on ensuring that resources were in the right areas to ensure that there were clear career pathways in the Unit.
- A Member asked whether there could be a training session for Members on media issues. The Cabinet Member advised that one had taken place just after the election. The HCE would re-run the session at an appropriate stage.

The Chairman thanked the HCE for the presentation and it was agreed that Communications would be included on the Panel's work programme to ensure that the Panel were able to focus attention on this key area at appropriate times.

## **335 Traded Services Overview**

The Panel had requested an overview of the Council's Traded Services portfolio and strategy. The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Communication advised the Panel that a Traded Services Commercial

Strategy had been developed in 2019 and had incorporated input from this Panel obtained through a Members workshop. In light of the impact of the pandemic, the Strategy now needed to be reviewed and revised and a number of different strategic approaches would be adopted to enable this to take place.

The Strategic Director advised that gross income generation from existing traded services was around £9m and Members were apprised of the current areas of activity that contributed to this total, including property rental, libraries and archives and archaeology.

In terms of progress being made, the Panel was informed that a commercial review of the Council's testing laboratory, known as Scientific Services, had led to its closure as it was not making a surplus. This, therefore, resulted in a cost saving for the Council.

The Strategic Director explained that there would be a review of each area of income and it would be determined whether there were any opportunities for the cost base to be changed and increased income to be made. It was explained that this was how the partnership between the Council's Archives unit and Ancestry.com had been established. This had enabled the Bishops Transcripts to be available to Ancestry.com in return for a licence fee and other benefits to the Council, with total income and cost savings amounting to £200,000.

With respect to opportunities currently being explored, the Panel was informed that these included the maximisation of usage of the Council's corporate buildings following the introduction of the smarter ways of working programme and the installation of solar farms on Council owned land.

Members made a number of comments about the current situation and options for the future:

- There was support for commercialisation and seeking to maximise income for the Council through fees and charges and investing in facilities to gain a greater return.
- A Member expressed concern that a Traded Services Strategy would be outdated very quickly.
- Members felt that focussing on skills sets and core competencies was important and taking a cautious approach was supported.
- In response to a Member query about whether the Council could invest in a start-up company, the Strategic Director advised that a local authority trading company could usually be established for most areas, but they often created little profit. The Cabinet Member gave an example of a company that he had been involved with through a different local authority and thought that there a number of reasons why the Council would wish to avoid setting these up.

## Update on Performance Monitoring of Comments, Compliments and Complaints

Following consideration of performance monitoring of comments, compliments and complaints in July, the Panel received a further update which included the feedback obtained from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) for 2021. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication advised that the complaints team had recently been transferred to the IT and Digital Team, where it was anticipated that efficiencies to the systems could be made through automation. The Strategic Director commented that the LGSCO letter was an improvement on the previous years, although there were still some areas for improvement, to be addressed across the Council.

The Complaints Manager advised that the 2020/21 Annual report relating to Corporate representations had just been published on the Council's website and the reports for Adult Social Care representations and Children's Social Care representations were due to be published imminently. She provided the Panel with a brief overview of the trends shown in the above reports. She highlighted that as a result of the efforts of Worcestershire Children First, the timescales for stage 1 children's social care complaints being completed had significantly improved this year.

The Panel raised a number of questions as follows:

- LGSCO letter remedy process. The Chairman referred to the delays in the remedy process which had been raised in the previous year's letter and were still persisting. The Complaints Manager acknowledged that there were still some issues with the system and the Strategic Director agreed to follow this up and ensure it was resolved. When the LGSCO makes findings against the Council, the Complaints Manager highlighted that on occasions as well as requiring the Council to tighten procedures and offer a financial remedy, they might also take matters one stage further and ask the Council to investigate whether other customers could have been disadvantaged in the same way that the complainant had been.
- Independent Investigators. The Complaints Manager confirmed that 9 new investigators had been recruited recently, with a further two due to join the Team by the end of the year. It was clarified that the investigators were not employees as they couldn't be guaranteed a certain level of work. Most of these investigators were part-time and they also often worked in the role for other authorities or had other commitments. The new recruits would help to spread the load of the Stage 2 corporate or social care complaint cases (and also for some adult cases) and it was anticipated that the impact of this recent recruitment on the compliance data was likely to be seen by March 2022.
- LGSCO letter cross referencing. A Member queried the impact of the inability to cross reference the Ombudsman and Council cases. The Complaints Manager advised that the lack of referencing caused a

number of issues for instance, the figures on the Councils website wouldn't necessarily match with those on the LGSCO site. Also, in some circumstances, there weren't case references, of cases that the Council had no knowledge of, which is then counted against the authority.

- Statutory Children's complaints completed in 65 days. The Complaints Manager confirmed that any complaints involving staff would be routed through the staff disciplinary system rather than the complaints procedure. With regard to the impact of key staff being unavailable either through sickness or because they had left the Council, the Complaints Manager confirmed this did cause some problems at times and discussions had been taking place as to whether access to ex-employees could be possible in future.

In respect of the action plan for improvement of Stage 2 Complaint investigation timescales agreed at the July Panel meeting, the following progress was noted:

- *Direct access to Liquid Logic for Independent Investigators and Independent Persons* - this had not yet been achieved. The Strategic Director agreed to take this matter forward.
- *5 working day limit for agreeing interview notes* - this had been implemented and was making a difference.
- *Promote use of Conflict Resolution Meetings* - this had been offered in a handful of adult social care cases but take up had been limited. The outcome of one case was awaited to see whether it was successful.

The Panel requested an update report at its meeting in March 2022.

### **337 Work Programme 2021/22**

The Panel was asked to review the Work Programme for 2021-22. It was noted that an extra meeting would take place in February to consider:

- Smarter, healthier, and greener ways of working; and
- Annual update on the Council's energy purchasing arrangements via the West Mercia Energy Joint Committee including the Business Plan.

With respect to the libraries item scheduled for May 2022, the Chairman asked members to consider what specific area they would like to focus on.

With the addition of an update report on Complaints being added to the March Panel, the Work Programme was agreed.

The meeting ended at 4.40 pm

Chairman .....

