

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

### **Scrutiny Panel**

#### **County Hall Worcester**

**Monday, 14 February 2022, 2.00 pm**

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#### **Present:**

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

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Adam Kent

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Richard Taylor, Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement  
David Griffiths, Head of Commercial  
Dave Corbett, Management Information Analyst  
Sheena Jones, Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager  
Alyson Grice, 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 January 2022 (previously circulated).

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

#### **346 Apologies and Welcome**

Apologies were received from the Assistant Director for Transformation and Commercial.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication joined the meeting remotely.

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

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None.

### **348 Public Participation**

None.

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

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 17 January 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

With reference to the future of Redditch Library, the Panel was informed that the matter would be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB). All Members were free to attend meetings of OSPB.

### **350 Smarter, Healthier, Greener Ways of Working**

The Panel had requested an overview of the activities and initiatives being undertaken by the Council in support of Smarter, Healthier and Greener ways of working.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication introduced the report noting that, from the perspective of developments in IT, there was a massive opportunity for the Council to move forward and make good decisions based on good knowledge. Officers and Members were working at pace to increase productivity and improve communication.

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change made the following main points:

- The Council had had a flexible working policy for many years and had been looking to build on this before the pandemic. More recently, following the pandemic, there had been a move towards use of Microsoft Teams as a basis for flexible and mobile working.
- Given increased flexible and mobile working there was a need to optimise the Council's estate and consider whether there was sufficient capacity. Other councils had taken a range of approaches to this.
- Consideration was being given to providing employees with the opportunity to purchase an electric vehicle (EV) through a salary sacrifice scheme.
- The Council's move to LED lighting should be seen in the context of rising electricity costs.
- There was a need to strike a balance between meeting the needs of residents and maintaining good productivity.

The Chairman noted the overview nature of the report and reminded the Panel that this was an opportunity to identify any specific issues that they would like

to consider in more depth at a future meeting. The Panel was given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- In response to a question about the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles, the Panel was informed that as part of the EV scheme participants would be provided with a home charger. There were a number of ways to take forward such a scheme and the approach taken would depend on the number of employees who wished to take part. It was confirmed that the chargers in the underground car park at County Hall were specifically for use by the County Council's fleet of EVs, something that could be changed as necessary. Concern was expressed that the scheme should be accessible to all employees whatever their residential circumstances. In response, it was confirmed that any scheme would aim to include mitigations for employees who did not have access to off street parking.
- A Member noted that there had been little investment in the Council's estate in the last ten years and, given the age of the Council's assets, it was likely that investment would be needed in the next ten years. It was suggested that decisions about what was done next would be critical. The Strategic Director reminded Members that the Council had recently taken back resources from Place Partnership Limited (PPL) and was now in a better place to look at what was needed. It was acknowledged that buildings were getting older and it was important to be careful about where investment was focused. The aim was to optimise the estate and take this forward in conjunction with partners where possible. In relation to the one public estate strategy, the Panel was informed that there were regular meetings and work plans across the local authorities in Worcestershire including the district councils, with the aim of using the estate collectively.
- In response to a question about the climate and biodiversity emergency, Members were informed that the Council was highly focused on reducing its carbon footprint as far as possible. The Sustainability Team was working across the Council on this and the work done in the Corporate and Commercial Directorate was a small but important component which contributed to the work rather than set the strategy.
- A question was asked about what the Council was doing to audit the effectiveness of working from home. The Panel was reminded that productivity was already managed in a number of ways, including via case management systems such as Liquid Logic, overlaid with good management techniques. Effectiveness was measured by looking at outcomes and data. It was acknowledged that hybrid working would create savings but would also need to demonstrate effectiveness.
- Members were reminded that performance conversations had continued with a focus on well-being. Throughout the pandemic, the majority of Council employees had worked without change with only 20% moving to work from home. Workplace assessments had been undertaken virtually and equipment had been distributed as necessary. During lockdowns many employees had had children at home or other caring responsibilities and remote working had allowed them to have flexibility around this. Staff surveys had been undertaken and all staff had been required to take part in a mandatory learning programme.

- It was suggested that costs saved by the Council as a result of increased working at home, were passed on to individual employees in the form of additional lighting and heating costs and adding to their carbon footprint. It was acknowledged that there would need to be further discussion about this in the future, although it was noted that, due to the system of heating used, the heating at County Hall could not be fully turned off.
- It was acknowledged that the response to the pandemic had been a very reactive process and there was now a chance to design systems to improve ways of working. For example, the Liquid Logic system could facilitate smarter working in social care by allowing fieldworkers to take a large amount of data into a client's home via a handheld device.
- A question was asked about whether the Council was confident that it was prepared for changes in the ways residents wished to access services as the country emerged from the pandemic. It was confirmed that there were plans to look at the customer experience, including further use of 'chatbot' technology. Previously there had been concern that this might alienate residents, but experience and data suggested that this was not the case.
- It was confirmed that staff had been informed about tax relief available to those working at home and had been encouraged to apply.
- The CMR discussed the potential to move to fully agile working and noted the importance of monitoring outcomes and KPIs to ensure delivery. Data was critical to improving productivity and he gave the example of Freedom of Information Requests and Subject Access Requests where accurate data would indicate whether a question had already been answered previously. He felt the Council was moving into a very exciting time and suggested that many of the developments would not have happened so quickly without the covid pandemic.

In summarising the discussion and potential action, the Chairman made the following main points:

- It was noted that work was ongoing to establish a method of measuring productivity in relation to working at home. Once the approach was agreed, data should be added to the quarterly performance information received by the Panel.
- The Panel would like to monitor the percentage of staff who were designated Flexible workers/Office based/Fieldworkers etc and this data should be included in the Panel's quarterly KPIs.
- The Panel would like to ask the Adult Care and Well-being O&S Panel to consider adding *The effectiveness of hand-held technology used in adult social care* (ie devices used in clients' homes) to its work programme.
- The following should be added to the work programme for consideration later in the year
  - Worcestershire One Public Estate
  - Electric Vehicle charging points on the County Council Estate

The Panel received a demonstration of Pentana, the Council's new system for producing its performance scorecard. The system was currently being trialled

and it was hoped that it would be used to produce performance data from Quarter 1 2022/23. In response to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that the aim was to give Councillors and members of the public access to real time data rather than simply a snapshot in time, allowing changes in performance to be noticed at an early stage.

## **351 Recruitment and Retention of Staff**

The Panel had requested an update on the Council's position in relation to recruitment and retention of staff, including challenges faced, recruitment to specialist roles, vacancy management and the use of consultants.

By way of introduction, the Assistant Director for Human Resources, Organisational Development and Engagement made the following points:

- The Panel was reminded that nationally recruitment and retention remained difficult and the recruitment market was now increasingly employee-led, with employees being able to choose from multiple roles. Data from the Local Government Association showed that 78% of all councils and 85% of upper tier authorities were experiencing problems with recruitment.
- A new workforce strategy had been developed which set out where the Council would need to be in three years' time, including the infrastructure which would need to be in place. In terms of recruitment, the aim was to set the County Council out as an employer of choice in a competitive market.
- Over 80% of the Council's workforce lived in Worcestershire and over 40% worked part time. 58% of employees were within 10 years of retirement, although it was acknowledged that with early access to pensions being available with little reduction in benefits, many employees would choose to retire early. There was a need to address succession planning in key areas.
- In terms of interventions, payment of market forces supplements and welcome and retention payments needed to be evidence based. Members were reminded about the successful scheme to recruit and retain social workers in Children's Services. As of December 2021, 92% of all positions and 99% of management posts were permanently filled. Regionally, no other local authority had comparable figures, although it was acknowledged that Birmingham City Council was able to offer better rates of pay. The Social Work Academy had been another success providing recruits with a clear career pathway.
- At Quarter 4 2020/21 the Council had a turnover rate of 7.03% compared with an average rate for local authorities of 13.6%. Workforce engagement was important and the Council had been responsive to points raised in the staff survey. The employee value proposition (EVP) was key and would set out the unique set of benefits that the Council would offer.
- An Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy had been developed and an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager was currently being recruited.

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

- The Chairman noted that the report was wide-ranging and, although some interventions were possible, many other factors were not under the Council's control with market forces playing their part. It was confirmed that exit interviews were undertaken in key areas (such as social work) and reasons given for leaving often included better flexible arrangements or a more convenient location. However, it was not always possible to follow up with applicants who chose not to take up offers of employment.
- The CMR noted that recruitment was currently a problem for local authorities and businesses worldwide. Low unemployment meant that workers could choose who they worked for and it was critical that the Council became an employer of choice. In relation to the age of the workforce, he noted that people had experienced life differently through the pandemic and many senior experienced people were choosing to take themselves out of the workforce. There was a need to consider succession planning and apprenticeships offered an opportunity for clear career progression. It was noted that apprenticeships were not just aimed at young people.
- The Council wanted to give its employees freedom within boundaries and empower staff to get the job done. It was critical that the Council recruited and retained the right staff, although it was accepted that some turnover was healthy.

The Panel was given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were noted:

- With reference to the need to recruit younger staff, a question was asked about plans to include a salary sacrifice scheme for childcare vouchers. It was confirmed that the Council was looking to develop a 'My Benefits' portal which would include access to a childcare voucher scheme. The portal would aim to reduce monthly spend for employees and ensure financial well-being, and may offer discounts within Worcestershire and to national leisure activities.
- A Member noted the importance of succession planning including the nurturing of individuals by more experienced colleagues. The Assistant Director reminded Members that each service area was also using the Workforce Strategy to develop annual Workforce Plans which would focus on succession planning. This plan would follow through into team and individual objectives as part of the performance review process. This work was supported by HR Operations Partners who worked with Managers to identify internal talent. Workforce Plans were due to go live on 1 April 2022.
- A Member informed the Panel that he was impressed by the report and felt it demonstrated a good understanding of how to engage the workforce and drive it forward. He went on to ask about what was being done to mitigate the impact of staff leaving on those colleagues who remained. In response the Assistant Director suggested that the use of agency staff was part of the answer, although this needed to be done in a planned way with, for example, long term placements of social work

agency staff being arranged in order to ensure continuity and the building of strong relationships.

- In response to a question about what a healthy age profile would look like for the Council, it was suggested that this would be different for different service areas with, for example, an older workforce in adult social care and a younger profile in support areas.
- In response to a question about delivering the strategy, Members were informed that this would include looking at data (for example reasons for absence) and engagement with staff and recognised trade unions.
- The percentage of the workforce who felt valued was given as 39% in the Workforce Strategy. It was suggested that a higher figure might have been expected in a local authority setting. Members were informed that work had already started to tackle this with a revised engagement strategy. More recent figures had been more positive.
- It was confirmed that the Council had signed up to the Investors in People and Disability Confident schemes but perhaps more could be done to promote this.

In conclusion, the Chairman welcomed the positive story and suggested that consideration should be given to publicising the work done on staff recruitment and retention in order to further promote WCC as a good place to work.

## **352 Corporate Procurement Strategy Overview**

The Panel considered the latest draft of the Corporate Procurement Strategy.

The Head of Commercial provided Members with a demonstration of the Power BI procurement dashboard which gave information on how much the Council spent with third parties and where this money was spent. It also showed the main providers and suppliers and the trend of spend.

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change noted that the procurement dashboard would be shared with the Panel in due course. It provided real time information and would also be available to local suppliers. The importance of maintaining compliance in a changing world was noted. The country had now left the EU and the Council needed to be in a good place to take advantage of new opportunities.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- It was noted that the environment for corporate procurement changed frequently with the latest challenges being inflationary and supply chain pressures. In response to a question about what was being done by the Council to mitigate these pressures, the Strategic Director noted that, in general, the Council did not buy things with direct inflationary pressures. Instead, the Council would be buying a care home place or letting a contract for an infrastructure project. It was important that the procurement strategy reflected this. However, it was also noted that contracts with no allowance for inflationary uplift may create pressure on suppliers. In this situation, contract management was key.

- 60% of the Council's spend was on social care and it was important to recognise the issues caused by pay inflation and staff shortages.
- The advantages and disadvantages of buying-in a service against providing it in-house were discussed. It was confirmed that the majority of the Council's legal work was undertaken by in-house lawyers.
- It was suggested that by spending more of the Council's budget with local firms, this money would be kept in the local economy. Members were reminded that, above a certain threshold, the Council should not show favouritism to local companies, although adding the requirement for a company to demonstrate social value would make it more logical for a local firm to be chosen.
- A question was asked about whether it was possible to monitor the environmental record of companies being employed. The Panel was informed that it was the intention to introduce carbon footprint management for suppliers, with the Council offering support and advice on carbon footprint mapping. The Commercial Team was working with the Sustainability Team and it was hoped that this would start this year.
- A Member suggested that there was a need for a commercial approach to be embedded across the culture of the organisation with staff being encouraged to become more commercially minded. In response, the Strategic Director suggested that a commercial focus may not be appropriate for the majority of the council's staff who were working in social care. There was a fine balance and, although staff could be asked to consider the commercial implications of their work, this should not be at the expense of their primary role.

### 353 Work Programme

The Panel considered its work programme and agreed to add the following:

- Worcestershire One Public Estate
- Electric Vehicle charging points on the County Council Estate

It was also agreed that:

- The Chairman of the Adult Care and Well-Being O&S Panel would be asked to consider adding *The effectiveness of hand held technology used in adult social care* to the Panel's Work Programme;
- The Chairman would discuss procurement in relation to the Ringway contract with the Chairman of the Economy and Environment O&S Panel.
- The results of the staff survey and their impact on the Workforce Strategy would to be circulated to the Panel when available.

The meeting ended at 4.25 pm

Chairman .....