

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Council Chamber, County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 26 July 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Tom Wells (Chairman), Cllr James Stanley (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Matt Dormer, Cllr Steve Mackay and Cllr Emma Stokes

Also attended:

Cllr Simon Geraghty, Leader of the Council

Paul Robinson, Chief Executive
Andrew Spice, Strategic Director for Commercial and Change
Phil Rook, Chief Financial Officer
Rob Morris, Head of Business Intelligence
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Jo Weston, 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 26 June 2023 (previously circulated).

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

1327 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies had been received from Councillors Alastair Adams, Brandon Clayton, Shirley Webb and Richard Udall.

The Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager reported that Mark Hughes, Parent Governor Representative, had resigned from the role.

1328 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

1329 Public Participation

None.

1330 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 26 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1331 Update on the Corporate Plan

The Chairman welcomed the Leader and Chief Executive to the meeting and invited them, with other Senior Officers, to update the Board on progress against the 2022-27 Corporate Plan. The Leader reminded the Board of his Annual Report to Council on 18 May 2023 and referred to the four key priority areas:

- Open for Business
- Children and Families
- The Environment
- Health and Wellbeing.

The Chairman invited discussion and across the four pillars, the following points were made.

The Chairman was concerned with the language used for the Children and Families pillar, expressing a view that many residents may not have children nor a family and the focus was perhaps alienating. In response, the Chief Executive reported that there was only a small proportion of measures in relation to family, yet there was many aspects of childhood which contributed to better life outcomes, such as access to jobs, higher paid employment, requirement for social care and contribution to the economy in general. It was further suggested that these factors were driven by upbringing, education, lifestyle and good mental health.

As Children and Families was a statutory function of the Council it would not be right to remove the area from the Corporate Plan and by including it, it clearly showed that the Council was meeting its statutory duty. 'Family First' was the Worcestershire Children First (WCF) approach to children at risk of being taken into care. It was known that outcomes were significantly better if a child remained with their family if safe to do so. Keeping children safe was a core responsibility and safeguarding was everyone's responsibility.

The Corporate Plan had been refreshed, not rewritten, however there was acknowledgement that the cross cutting theme of Communities was vital. The Council had been an enabler and facilitator for a large number of Communities, especially through the Here 2 Help programme, launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, monies allocated to each Councillor through Worcestershire Councillors' Divisional Fund (WCDF) were increasingly used to empower communities.

The Chairman of the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel thanked Officers for utilising Power BI in producing Panel and OSPB reports, however reported that there was very little in the OSPB Report that was relevant to that Panel.

The Leader acknowledged that Overview and Scrutiny Panels did not align to the 4 pillars of the Corporate Plan and suggested that the language used in future Corporate Plans could be amended to include more reference to corporate functions rather than the council's journey, in addition to communities as a cross cutting theme.

When asked whether a satisfaction rate of around 80% in the Worcestershire Viewpoint resident survey was good, it was suggested that it was very difficult to benchmark against other authorities, however, the figures across recent years was following a national trend.

A Member commented that as Worcestershire was a diverse County, the nature of communities would differ from place to place, however, agreed that if communities could get family right, then it would automatically push for better education, better health and better employment prospects. It was suggested that as each of the six districts were unique, it would be interesting to report data at district level, rather than county wide.

In response the Leader stated that reporting County level data was appropriate, however, appreciated that data was collected at district level. Acknowledging the differences, pooling data with district councils was something which could be investigated in the future.

The Chief Executive was clear that a council priority was narrowing the gap and the County had hidden pockets of deprivation, however, the function of a local authority was to help deal with all inequalities, alongside other stakeholders, such as national health services.

For clarity, it was explained that the Corporate Plan was an overarching document which provided a high level summary. There was a lot of activity associated with it and a lot of data which underpinned what was reported. Everyone was clear that the Corporate Plan's aim was to build a healthy, well-educated Worcestershire.

If Members were interested, the data behind the performance indicators could be provided. Furthermore, if Members believed something was missing it could be considered for future reports.

Members of OSPB agreed that shaping strategies together between county and district councils was important going forward.

Education performance was not improving and routinely fell below the England performance. Funding continued to be less than the national average and despite a recent increase, there was no evidence that the differential was closing.

The Council had been on a 7 year journey to improve services for children. Safeguarding had been the priority and it was now a safe service, proven by rigorous external inspection by Ofsted. The focus had been relentless.

The Leader was pleased with the work on transitional arrangements between school and employment that the Council and Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) had undertaken and reported that a focus of Corporate Strategy Planning (CSP) in the Autumn would be building more school places and looking at resources. The number of primary school places was about right, but the planning system did not focus enough on requirements for secondary school places.

It was noted that Ofsted inspections of schools were also very rigorous, and the bar was constantly being raised, however, there was acknowledgement that education performance was drifting down and raising attainment would be a priority for CSP. The Chief Finance Officer reported that Worcestershire was the 40th worst funded authority for school funding but it was suggested that the Government's fairer funding programme was up to 4 years away. When asked whether there was much disparity between funding of primary and secondary school pupils, it was agreed that figures would be provided after the meeting. For clarity, the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) was nationally determined.

It was clarified that when Worcestershire children were educated in neighbouring authorities, the funding followed the pupil and there was no impact for Worcestershire, unless it resulted in County schools having falling numbers on roll as that would affect funding overall.

A Member commented that considering the County's diverse communities and the different backgrounds of children taught, teachers were doing an amazing job.

Members of the Board agreed that much could be done practically to improve education and outcomes, advocating the success of Breakfast Clubs for example.

Although performance of first choice of schools was encouraging, home to school transport was always an issue. When asked whether planning services could look at catchment areas to reduce need and potentially length of school bus route, the Leader reported that although the countywide figure was positive, there was much disparity and the home to school transport budget was increasing. After the COVID-19 pandemic, demand had increased and children were travelling longer distances to school. Furthermore, there had been an increase in children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in place which had transport attached to it. The Leader reported that if the Council could mitigate the climb in home to school transport it would be a win.

Although good quality education was key and the Council was responsible for outcomes, it was noted that the Council had no control over academy schools, which made up about half of the County's schools overall and virtually all secondary schools.

In relation to timeliness of trains between Worcestershire and key economic centres, the Leader was asked how the Council could persuade train operating companies to stop high speed trains at the newly opened Worcestershire Parkway station. In response, the Leader was very pleased with the success of Parkway and it was already outperforming its 25 year plan. There was currently more activity on CrossCountry trains compared to the Great Western services. The Department for Transport was now more involved in planning, which had previously just been train operating companies.

Rail usage had changed and was increasingly used for leisure, not just for the daily commute. The Council was actively lobbying for better connectivity in Worcestershire. Due to its success, Parkway would soon require more parking, however, expansion had been built into the original plans. The Leader agreed to take the issue of additional trains stopping at Parkway to the Council's Strategic Rail Partner (SLC Rail) as everyone agreed there was a strong commercial case.

The gap between the median salary for jobs based in Worcestershire and Great Britain was lower than average. Access to higher paid, higher skilled jobs was of concern to the economic development of Worcestershire and there was a need to raise the average salary.

A Member referred to the resident population aged 16-64 qualified at Level 3 or higher and questioned whether it was too wide to analyse and break the cycle of economic activity. It was suggested that residents didn't quite have the right skills set, however, there was a number of good quality jobs available and employers were increasingly open to flexible working to attract individuals who were looking to return to the workplace. There was evidence that people were returning to the workplace. Global discussions were taking place on the use of Artificial Intelligence, both the positive impact and the unknown.

It was noted that opportunities for growth in Worcestershire, included 3 sectors; advanced manufacturing, cyber security/IT/Defence and Agri-Tech. This was a new measure and would be explored if figures were declining.

Performance in relation to waste was noted. The Government was due to update their position on waste collection, however public engagement locally was undertaken by district councils. There was much discussion about national comparisons as there were differences in contractors and what was able to be recycled and what was not – for example in some authorities, foil could be recycled. It was noted that Worcestershire figures may be higher, however, waste was not being sent to landfill. It was believed that Government may introduce a national system and be standardised.

In relation to the measure to improve the condition of the roads and pavements to be amongst the best nationally, it was noted that the Government was changing the way this was measured. The condition of roads in the County was good compared to other authorities, however, environmental factors, such as a bad winter, could change the condition of the network in an instant. For clarity, the smaller the number, in the case of 2021/22 at 9%, was better and

the Coarse Visual Inspections were good. It was agreed that comparable data with neighbouring authorities would be good for future reports, if possible.

Health and Wellbeing was becoming increasingly important and there was still more that could be done. Councils had a role to play in keeping residents living independently for longer and leading healthy lifestyles.

There had been an increase of 2.5% each quarter for the last two years of people aged 65+ living independently for longer and the Leader was pleased with the steady figure, especially against a backdrop of an ageing population. The Board noted the average age of someone going into residential care in Worcestershire was 82.

Nationally, the NHS was looking at prevention to reduce the number of people requiring treatment. Although not confirmed, it was suggested that 1% of the NHS budget was to go into preventative measures. Work such as falls prevention, ensuring suitable housing, warmth, social aspects and access to local services and shopping was ongoing. There was a shift in views and people were now thinking at retirement age, do I move one last time to age well.

Board Members suggested that district councils could look at their housing stock, especially bungalows, or accommodation which could include live in carers quarters when required. There had been an increase in lift purchases in houses and this trend was expected to continue.

A Member referred to the 63.7% of adults aged 16+ who were active for more than 150 minutes each week, a figure comparable to England, and commented that everyone had a part to play in improving activities available. As leisure and parks services were under threat and district council resources were being squeezed, there was a personal responsibility to undertake physical activity and have a sensible diet. Ageing well was most challenging for single older men, who were known to suffer greater loneliness. Examples of generations together were given, where people of differing ages bonded over shared interests. Everyone agreed that communities were fundamental.

The Board also agreed that loneliness was of growing concern and human interaction was vital in keeping active for longer.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on activity levels and social interaction; however, links were being rekindled and activities were starting afresh.

One Member commented that it would be a false economy for district councils to close parks and leisure centres. Some district council parks had been awarded green flag status, for their environmental success.

Council Tax figures were recorded as being in the lowest 25% of all County Councils across the UK.

The Chairman thanked the Leader, Chief Executive and Officers for the open and honest discussion and agreed to confirm the Board's comments in writing following the meeting.

1332 Budget Scrutiny 2024/25

The Leader, Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer had been invited to discuss, and agree with the Board, the process for Budget Scrutiny 2024/25.

The Board believed the current scrutiny process was scheduled too late in the year to make a difference and asked how scrutiny could have a more meaningful role. Members felt that Panels had an in depth knowledge, with one Member highlighting the recent scrutiny contribution to the Cabinet decision on the relocation of Redditch Library.

Each of the 57 Members currently had a £10,000 allocation (per year) from the Worcestershire Councillors' Divisional Fund (WCDF) to spend on initiatives in their Division. In addition, each Member had access to a Highways Fund. Suggestions were put forward that the WCDF remit could be limited to fund other activity or additional funds could be allocated to individual Members.

The Leader welcomed all suggestions, however, would not want to complicate the WCDF nor the scrutiny of it. Of more interest was the trends in budget and pressures, particularly in adult social care, children's social care and home to school transport. In addition, pay and contract inflation across all service areas.

The Council could broadly budget for project costs, however, could not pre-determine Government funding. The annual budgeting process was frustrating, however, a three year allocation would result in less flexibility, whereas planning was difficult with the one year settlements.

The Leader believed that resources provided by the Government would be improved, to compensate for pressures, such as inflation and contract costs.

The OSPB Chairman asked whether scrutiny could consider the trends and budget pressures in the areas identified during the Autumn Panel meetings, with the intention to feed in to the budget setting process. The Leader welcomed the involvement, especially in relation to learning from others and against a national backdrop of challenge. The Board agreed the approach and further agreed that the usual January draft budget discussions would be 'light touch'.

The Meeting was adjourned between 12:10 and 12:20pm.

1333 Scrutiny Chairmen (and Lead Member) Update, Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Panel Chairmen present provided an update on recent Scrutiny meetings and activities.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Steve Mackay)

The Panel had met twice since the last OSPB. One meeting was held with Members of the Adult Care and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Panel to look at several all age strategies. The second meeting considered Quarterly Performance and Year End Budget Monitoring, the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership Annual Report 2021-22 and Worcestershire Children First and the Independent Care Review.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Emma Stokes)

The Panel had contributed to the Cabinet discussion on the relocation of Redditch Library by gathering evidence and asking questions prior to any decision being made.

Web Redevelopment and the Power BI project had also been Items of recent scrutiny. The Chairman acknowledged that recent meetings had been heavily focussed on the communities aspects of the Panel's remit and wished to change the emphasis for upcoming meetings.

Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Matt Dormer)

The Panel continued to hold its meetings around the County, hearing from Leaders on their economic challenges. The most recent meeting was in Worcester City. Themes were emerging, including transport connectivity and access to broadband.

Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

It was agreed that relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panels would be asked to consider the proposals put forward by the Leader in their Autumn meetings.

The next OSPB Agenda included the Annual Update from Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP). The Chairman explained that as he was a Member of the WLEP, he would ask the Vice Chairman to lead on the discussion.

The meeting ended at 12.40 pm

Chairman