Worcestershire county council

Minutes of the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall Worcester

Thursday, 19 January 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Emma Stokes (Chairman), Cllr James Stanley (Vice Chairman), Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cllr Emma Marshall and Cllr Natalie McVey

Also attended:

Cllr Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication
Michael Hudson, Chief Financial Officer
Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director for Communities
Rob Morris, Head of Business Intelligence
Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Deborah Dale, Community Engagement Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 November 2022 (previously circulated).

393   Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillors Richard Udall and Craig Warhurst and from Councillor Marcus Hart (Cabinet Member for Communities).

394   Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

395   Public Participation

None.

396   Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

397   Update on the Council's Support for Volunteers and Volunteering Through the Here2Help Service

The Panel had requested an update on Worcestershire County Council's (the Council) support for volunteers and volunteering through the Here2Help Service (Here2Help), following on from the previous report in September 2021.

The Service Development Manager for Communities and Partnerships summarised the report. The main points highlighted were:
- Here2Help was set up in March 2020 as a direct response to the needs of local people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- It was now nearly 3 years since the pandemic but there were still a large number of people who needed help.
- Over 16,000 hours of volunteering had been delivered by a network of over 1,000 volunteers in areas such as food collection, medication delivery and support for COVID-19 clinics.
- A Volunteering Development Officer had been appointed within the Communities and Partnerships Team and was driving this work forward.
- Here2Help was able to mobilise very quickly and was able to provide support to Worcester City Primary Care within a week to help with flu clinics, showing that the process to get this in operation was capable of flexing to demands within the community.
- There had been positive feedback from volunteers and there were many different ways that the Council engaged with them to ensure volunteers felt supported and valued.
- Links had been made with the Council's wellbeing week for staff, to promote volunteering as an important part of wellbeing.
- An internal working group of representatives involved in volunteering across the Council had been set up to look at standardising and streamlining processes across the organisation. This group would also look at the cost benefit of volunteering and shared policies.
- The Council was developing the WeCan network (Worcestershire Community Action Network) which was a group of six local infrastructure organisations for the voluntary community sector (VCS) to look at joint working and how the Council and WeCan were able to work more effectively together and maximise support collectively.
- The Household Support Fund, coordinated by the Service Development Manager for Communities and Partnerships was a £3.95 million fund to provide support around:
  - o Free school meal vouchers
  - o Energy support scheme through Act on Energy

- One off payment to pensioners on pension credit or low income, carers and those with a disability
- One off winter payment where applicable.

The Chairman of the Panel commented on the value of volunteers and felt it was heartwarming to see how many people were helping through volunteering.

It was agreed that as part of the Panels quarterly performance monitoring, data would be provided around how people were benefiting from volunteers and the value of the Volunteering Development Officer role. It was noted that statistics relating to the outcomes of referrals or requests for help should be available within the next quarter, however, for the statistics cutting across several Scrutiny Panel's remit, further advice would be sought.

During the discussion, the following points were noted:

- The work of the Here2Help since its inception in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was commended.
- Here2Help and WeCan provided two pathways where volunteers could register for volunteering.
- Clarification was requested on how volunteers could register and whether the transition between these two networks had been seamless. It was confirmed that this was a transition period for Here2Help and WeCan with both pathways advertising volunteering positions in a collaborative way thus providing a joined-up service.
- COVID-19 had impacted on the numbers of volunteers, and therefore recruitment continued to be a challenge. It was agreed that the Panel would be provided with data relating to number of volunteers who were no longer volunteering for the Here2Help Services and the reasons why.
- In response to a question about how the Here2Here Service would continue to evolve moving forward, it was explained that the role of Here2Help Service, post COVID-19 and what business as usual would look like was being considered by the Volunteering Development Officer. An executive summary of the business plan would be shared with the Panel.
- In response to a question about how the added value of the Here2Help Service was measured, it was confirmed that it was possible to quantify the added value by the number of volunteer hours eg in the Countryside Centres and green spaces where volunteers worked alongside staff to undertake fence repairs.
- A member questioned whether there were any volunteer roles in education such as helping with reading. The Panel was advised that any requests for help from schools would be sent to WeCan and also advertised via Here2Help. This question would be fed back to the Volunteering Development Officer to look into.

In summary, it was agreed that the Panel would receive quarterly performance monitoring information on the Here2Help Service and would be provided with a

further update on the Service in due course including the Executive Summary of the Business Plan.

The Chairman thanked officers for the report and looked forward to a further update.

398   Data Analytics

The Panel had requested a further update on the data analytics and PowerBI work that was discussed at its meeting on 17 January 2022.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication introduced the report and thanked the Panel for its part in driving PowerBI forward. The CMR felt there was huge advantages for the Council in the greater use of data to improve productivity, efficiency and deliver better and quicker services for residents.

The Head of Business Intelligence summarised the key points from the report relating to PowerBI and the following points were noted:
- The Council had established a PowerBI Deployment Project sponsored by Public Health and led by the Head of Business Intelligence to develop a consistent and sustainable approach to the adoption of PowerBI across the Council and ensure responsible data management.
- Some reports had already gone live and were in the public domain.
- The creation of corporate workspaces was underway, one of which had been specifically created for the Panel and was a good way of sharing reports to designated groups.
- Since the writing of the Report, further work had been undertaken resulting in movement along the maturity curve towards the deployment of PowerBI Premium. This would enable report developers, with appropriate permissions, to share PowerBI reports with anyone in the Council.
- Training would be provided for superusers to assist with developing expertise.

During the discussion about Worcestershire Insights/Instant Atlas, the following points were highlighted:
- Public Health had procured Instant Atlas to create an observatory of publicly available data called Worcestershire Insights to supplement the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This would provide useful, descriptive statistics for staff, commissioners, partner agencies, members of the public and voluntary and community sector and was purchased at a very low cost and represented good value for money.
- The information that would be put into the public domain such as scrutiny reports, performance reports etc. was still under development but due to go live over the next few months, following the redesign of the Council's website.
- The Panel could be provided with a further update an update in due course.

The Chairman of the Panel stated this was a complex report and confirmed that the Panel would be using PowerBI at its March Panel meeting for performance monitoring of key performance indicators. This data available to Councillors would enable them to find information in one place in real time, to identify trends, to compare data with previous years and to improve efficiency, productivity and save residents money.

Panel Members were invited to ask questions and the following points were noted:
- In response to a concern that, if residents were able to access information via PowerBI, councillors could be asked complex questions on subjects they may not be familiar with, the Panel was advised that, as more information was made available publicly, the priority would be to ensure that councillors were aware of what information was available and were provided with training as the project moved towards rollout.
- Datasets would be available around the Council's priorities, and Members would have the opportunity to request any data be included that would normally be available through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests.
- In response to a question about the possibility of income generation and how this would be measured, the Strategic Director of Commercial and Change explained that, sometimes the Council carried out work for other partners which may generate income but this was incidental.
- A question was asked about whether PowerBI would reduce the number of FOIs requests received, as these could be very time consuming. The CMR responded that with easily available public data, people could be signposted to the information before it became an FOI.

In conclusion, the Chairman welcomed the report and confirmed that the Panel would be going live with PowerBI for its public meeting in March and requested a further update in July, once PowerBI had gone live to ensure it was a successful process.

399   Budget Scrutiny 2023/24

The Panel considered the draft Budget for 2023/24 for the areas within the remit of the Panel and the main messages from it, as identified by the Director for Commercial and Change and the Strategic Director for People.

The Chief Financial Officer introduced the Report and advised the Panel that Cabinet had published the draft Budget Proposals on 5 January 2023 and that the Council was now entering a stage of engagement with various partners and organisations. Any comments from this meeting would be fed back to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 30 January which would then be fed back to Cabinet on 2 February and then be included in the Council meeting of 16 March 2023.

The budget headlines were:
- There had been a £27.7m increase in the Council's net budget of which £14.1m related to the increase from Council Tax income, £8.4m from the increase in Business Rates/SFA and £5.2m net use of reserves.

- The Local Government Settlement Grant of £26.3 million had been announced in December 2022 and had been welcomed by the Council.
- The Council was experiencing budget pressures for 2023/24 with a £30.6 million demand in care services.
- The Council's capital programme would continue with further money being invested into highways and footpaths and a further £3.5 million funded from reserves for public transport.
- Proposed Council Tax increase of 2.94% plus a 2% Adult Social Care levy equating to a £69 p.a. increase for a Band D property and would remain one of the lowest increases in Council Tax for County Councils without fire responsibilities.
- The budget pressures relating to Communities were c£2m due to pay and contract inflation which would be offset by £1.64m of savings resulting in a net investment of c.£0.3m.
- The Corporate areas had total revenue investment and inflation of c£10.8m, revenue savings, efficiencies and income generation of £8.6m resulting in an overall net investment of £2.2m.
- There was a £0.5m revenue increase to for Legal Services
- One of the largest savings in the whole of the budget was Pension Fund backdating totalling £4,464m. The Panel were advised that the pension fund has done incredibly well in terms of its level of investment which enabled employer contributions to be reduced, giving a significant saving.
- The Revenue Net Investment for the roll out of the Libraries Unlocked technology totalled £225k.
- Savings of £184k in HR relating to vacancy management were on course as in Financial Services for example, vacancies had already been deleted and there was no expectation to recruit to them.

During the opportunity for questions, the following main points were noted:

- It was confirmed that the £0.5m increase in investment for Legal Services was to support the continuing demand for childcare cases. Previously, efficiencies had been used to offset demands in the Legal Team, but this was no longer possible with the scale of increased demand within these services. Worcestershire Children First (WCF) would continue to work on early intervention and prevention and no reductions were anticipated in this area. It was likely that the Public Health Ring Fenced Grant (when received) would increase by the rate of inflation and there would be further investment into front line services for adults and children's care.
- As a result of successful investment performance of the Pension Fund, the Council's contribution had reduced from 22.3% to 19.4%, resulting in a significant saving of £4.464m for the Council.
- In relation to the proposed move to introduce a standardising 'vacancy factor' (ie holding vacancies wherever possible) of 6.5% for all staffing budgets there is a savings target of £184,000 for CoaCh. It was however noted that this would be challenging for some areas.
- It was confirmed that every library (except the Hive) was being considered as part of the roll out of libraries unlocked, although it may not be appropriate for every library. The savings target for this initiative

was £225k. The proposals relating to Redditch Library were not detailed in this Budget Report due to the funding being provided by external funds and also the consultation had not yet closed.

- In response to a question on whether, in respect of the Arts, the Public Health Ring Fenced grant would be devolved to Severn Arts, the Panel was advised that the contract with Severn Arts was due for renewal and there was no appetite to consider any other alternative for delivery as Severn Arts were doing a great job.
- The Strategic Director for CoaCh confirmed that the revenue savings and income generation targets for CoaCh were achievable.
- There was a £800k target to maximise income generation across the County Hall Campus which would be achieved by leasing parts of County Hall.
- A Member questioned how fluctuations in inflation would impact on the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan. It was explained that fluctuations' in inflation were taken into account during contract negotiation and would be monitored accordingly.

The Panel was keen to look at the individual budgets within its remit and to scrutinise through Quarterly Budget Monitoring during 2023/2024 year with a view to feeding into the 2024/2025 budget process starting in September 2023.

400   Work Programme

The Panel considered its work programme and agreed for the Countryside Parks and revenue opportunities item to be considered at the March meeting.

The meeting ended 12:05pm

Chairman …………………………………………….