

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

### **Scrutiny Panel**

#### **County Hall Worcester**

**Friday, 29 September 2023, 1.30 pm**

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#### **Present:**

Cllr Emma Stokes (Chairman), Cllr Emma Marshall (Vice Chairman),  
Cllr Peter Griffiths and Cllr Richard Udall

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services  
and Communication

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change

Mark Fitton, Strategic Director for People

Richard Taylor, Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement

Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer

Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital

Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations

Geoff Hedges, Senior Project Manager, Digital Centre of Innovation

Appleyard, Customer Services & Relations Manager

Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance)

Ben Keep, Principal Highways Liaison Officer

Kate Griffiths, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager

Emma James, 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 25 July 2023 (previously circulated).

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

#### **426 Apologies and Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Panel members Natalie McVey and James Stanley, and from Cllr Marcus Hart, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities.

During the meeting the Chairman agreed to a change in the running order of the Agenda, and Item 9 (Customer Contact Centre) was considered after Item 6 (Performance of Comments, Compliments and Complaints).

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

None.

#### **428      Public Participation**

None.

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

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 25 July 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **430      Performance and 2022/23 In-Year Budget Monitoring**

In attendance for this item:

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change

Mark Fitton, Strategic Director of People

Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer

Richard Taylor, Assistant Director for Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development (OD) and Engagement

Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital

Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst

Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

It was noted that the report concerned in-year 2023/24 monitoring (the report heading incorrectly stated 2022/23).

##### **Performance Information for Quarter 1 (April to June 2023)**

The Lead Analyst explained that the performance indicators (PIs) were the same as previously, although this was always open to review should the Panel feel other information would be useful. The report also included a link to the Power BI version, which was now on the 'Our performance' page of the Council's public website.

The Panel Chairman commented that it was incredibly useful to have the Power BI version available, as it was live information.

Officers were congratulated on the success of increasing staff engagement in surveys. However, when asked whether targets would therefore now be increased, the Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement explained that best practice indicated levels of 30-40% and since the aim had been to increase engagement across all areas, it was unlikely that this could be further improved.

There may now be a move to bi-annual staff surveys following feedback that staff did not feel the need to engage as very little had changed over a shorter period – however the Panel Chairman cautioned against this shift, as it could create complacency. The Assistant Director agreed that staff feedback was very important and one thing being considered was quarterly snap surveys on specific areas.

Regarding sickness rates (cumulative), which were deteriorating, the Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement clarified that there had been a negligible increase in short-term sickness however the projected year end performance was 7.63 days (average per full time equivalent), which would be down from 8.45 days at the end of the previous year. The number of staff on long-term sick was key to this PI, as this skewed the data, and Officers had engaged with the unions on a number of interventions, which had seen a 27% reduction, for example intervening when a member of staff had been off for 20 days as opposed to 28.

The Chairman commented that data presented for libraries presented a positive picture, moving forward.

### **Financial Information**

The Deputy Chief Finance Officer (CFO) referred to the information provided for period 4. Appendix 2 set out the corporate budget perspective for the Council followed by the areas within the remit of the Panel.

Additional information was included in the report on pay and contract inflation, one of a number of areas which had been requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board as part of budget scrutiny.

#### Pay Award

The Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement confirmed that the pay award for 2023/24 needed to be agreed by the three unions (GMB, Unison and Unite). Unison had balloted its members, who had rejected the pay award but there were insufficient numbers to enable industrial action. Unite members had rejected the offer and voted for strike action. GMB was also balloting its members and it was likely to be late October or early November before the position was known.

It was emphasized that the Council had stated the proposed pay award was a final offer. A handful of local authorities had opted out of national pay bargaining. The CMR for Corporate Services and Communication made the point that the delay was depriving staff of their increased pay which would be a lump sum. The Assistant Director commented that the delay could cause difficulties for staff with the current increases in costs of living.

#### Contract Inflation

The Deputy CFO explained that the information provided reflected the fact that inflation was based on all living costs and not just shop purchases. The charts provided demonstrated that while inflation was now decreasing, budget setting for 2022/23 had been based on trajectories of an earlier reducing trend, which had indicated that inflation would not still be as high. The fact that many

contracts had already been set meant the Council was not benefitting from the recent decrease in inflation, as they were set for the year; this was predominantly an issue in children and adults' care, and factors such as agency rates and transport costs made planning very difficult.

The CMR highlighted that the West Mercia Energy contract had built in a link to market price, which was bringing cost benefits and demonstrated the importance of not being tied into contract rates.

When asked about contract durations, the Strategic Director of Commercial and Change advised that good practice pointed to contracts with short-term extensions but there was a whole range of durations for example some were one year, some may be five. The Council used the dynamic purchasing method, although some were not open to negotiation, for example for Microsoft options.

When asked whether the Council had access to providers' books when negotiating contracts, the CMR felt that very little was hidden, and the Officers advised that while the Council had the right to request information, the fact remained that information could be presented which may not necessarily be the full picture.

The Council's Commercial Board met monthly and reviewed mechanisms for how contracts were structured, and was chaired by the Chief Executive or the Strategic Director.

Areas of particular budget pressure were packages of care for children, adults and also school transport, where numbers and therefore demand, was not fixed, and these areas were being subject to scrutiny by the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

The Panel asked about the governance and approval process for contracts. The Deputy CFO acknowledged the role of Scrutiny in looking at the performance of individual contracts and referred to the fact that the entire budget and capital programme was discussed by Cabinet and subsequently full Council.

The Strategic Director explained that the Council's constitution did not include a financial amount to decree when a contract should be highlighted as a key decision to the Cabinet. The main deciding factor was whether public discussions would be involved, such as a new school. It would not be appropriate for all contracts to be discussed by Cabinet.

The CMR pointed out that contract information was also communicated to local members.

However, when setting contracts there was a scheme of delegation and financial thresholds – those with a value up to £200,000 could be signed off by Chief Officers, but those with a value from this point up to £500,000 required consultation with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility. Cabinet Member with Responsibility decisions needed to be documented and displayed on the

website. Anything over £500,000 was for Cabinet to approve unless a pre-existing delegation, from Cabinet, was in place.

Panel members acknowledged the particular difficulty of contract inflation for children and adult services and that current levels of inflation were unprecedented.

#### Budget Position for 2023/24 Period 4

The Deputy CFO referred to the forecast overspend of around £1m (10% of its budget). One of the main variances was an underachievement in-year of the Wildwood tenancy Income target, however it was pointed out Officers' hard work meant that the majority of the site was under offer but there would be a delay until income came in. This project had also benefitted local businesses as there was a shortage of real estate options for smaller businesses.

The other main area of overspend was use of consultants for specific projects, for example surveyors and lawyers, and it was explained that their use was unavoidable as their roles related to areas such as health and safety. The Directorate was striving not to pay excessive rates and consideration was being given to things which did not have to be done.

In relation to contract pressures, the situation was improving and the variable rate included in the West Mercia Energy was bringing benefits across the estate.

The Vice-Chairman praised staff efforts to maximise use of the County Hall site, for example the Lakeview Café, and the CMR agreed the site was a key asset, but took a lot of work.

## **431 Performance of Comments, Compliments and Complaints**

In attendance for this item:

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital

Geoff Hedges, Head of IT Customer Service  
Paul Appleyard, Customer Services and Relations Manager  
Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services  
and Communication

The Strategic Director introduced the report, which was in depth and included the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Annual Review letter for 2022/23.

Regarding the four late remedies to complaints upheld by the LGSCO, the Director pointed out that this was a very small number from the thousands of interactions with the Council. Officers had since met with the LGSCO which had been very positive, and one example of actions since taken was a new system to remind staff of deadlines.

In discussing the report, the following main points were raised:

- Panel members raised the issue of vexatious complaints, and the Officers explained there was a Policy, and the Team which dealt with complaints would liaise with the individual staff member to discuss whether a complaint should be classed as such. It was also possible to decree that a complainant may only approach a specific experienced officer in order to protect other staff.
- The CMR agreed the importance of protecting staff since some emails were accusatory and upsetting for individual staff.
- The CMR agreed consideration would be given to ensuring staff were aware of HR support available for dealing with vexatious complaints or phone calls and the Customer Services and Relations Manager would provide a further update outside of the meeting to Cllr Udall about support provided.
- It was clarified that phone calls were not recorded as there were rules requiring clear permission be given.
- Everyone agreed the value of compliments, which made a real difference to staff morale and provided insight.
- Panel members noted that numbers of complaints recorded were higher than the previous year as each complaint point was recorded, and a complaint letter could for example include eight points. In future reports, the information would be adapted to clarify this fact, for example the number of complainants and whether individual complaints included points of different natures.
- The Officers explained that the new representations management system had been designed in-house to replace the legacy system, which should make a dramatic difference.

The Panel Chairman was pleased to see what was in place had been reviewed to reflect the feedback received.

## **432 Customer Contact Centre**

In attendance for this item:

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital  
Geoff Hedges, Head of IT Customer Service  
Paul Appleyard, Customer Services and Relations Manager  
Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change explained that the Agenda report included the wide range of services and technologies used within the Council's Customer Contact Centre, as well as performance metrics, which were very positive and the Centre had recently been shortlisted for an award for the UK National Contact Centre Awards.

In the discussion which took place the following main points were made:

- The Panel Chairman highlighted that the Contact Centre being shortlisted for the award was particularly pleasing for a public sector organisation.
- The CMR also praised the work of this small Team and highlighted the work on the website which meant the public could reach the Council 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – a great example of technology being used to improve a service.
- In response to a query, the Assistant Director (AD) for IT and Digital reassured the Panel of the Team's focus on digital inclusion, since there would always be some individuals who needed different ways or more help with their enquiries.
- The CMR referred to the difference in costs for transaction, for example £4.44 by telephone compared to £0.09 by chatbot, which provided a clear indicator of the future direction.
- The Chairman asked about learning from using chatbot and the Officers explained it was constantly being reviewed by checking its current use or errors with human input.
- Regarding quality targets such as average handling time, reassurance was given that calls requiring more time, for example for a complex enquiry, the system was not intended to pressurise staff, although any staff whose calls were habitually longer would be worked with. Phone calls tended to be more complex since simpler enquiries were generally sent via chatbot or online communication.
- When asked about distinguishing between the responsibility of services for the County Council and District Councils, it was the Officers' experience that this did not matter to the public, although the website was designed to be clear.

## **433 Member Portal**

In attendance for this item:

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital  
Paul Smith Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations  
Ben Keep, Principal Highways Liaison Officer

Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication

The Chairman referred to the Agenda report and emphasized that the aim of the discussion was to discuss the update provided, rather than individual cases.

The Assistant Director for IT and Digital introduced the report, explaining that since the launch of the Member Portal in 2021, it had been reviewed in the Autumn, and a number of improvements had been made which had improved response times, so that all service level agreements were being met.

The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations commented that his Directorate (Economy and Infrastructure) was the biggest user of the Portal, and that a benefit of this was the discipline it injected in order to provide a response to cases. The system was a very powerful reporting tool.

The CMR and the Officers were keen for regular review of the Portal as part of finessing the system, and as part of this feedback from the Panel was welcomed.

The following main points were made:

- The improvement to response times, as evidenced by the graph was welcomed, although the point was made that this measured speed of response rather than time taken to complete action required.
- It was explained that cases remained live until completed, with acknowledgement that some issues took a long time, due to their nature, such as traffic regulation orders (TROs).
- The Officers wanted to get to a point where the system was consistently updated.
- The Panel Chairman found the Portal useful in particular as an evidence base and reference tool to respond to constituent queries.
- It was suggested that feedback on the Portal would vary depending on whether it was from councillors, managers, staff or the public.
- The Panel Chairman pointed out that she found it necessary to print out cases and add written notes, and another Panel member reported problems with the map feature not opening.
- A Panel member queried who authorised cases to be closed and pointed out that it was unclear to councillors whether the issue had been closed to a member of the public's satisfaction or because nothing further could be done.
- The Assistant Directors confirmed the Portal had been a step change in informing staff about areas requiring attention, and had also helped directorates respond to the financial challenges. The Portal had been a culture change for staff and was welcomed as a tool for efficiency, transparency and management.
- The AD for IT and Digital acknowledged a request to indicate hotspots in numbers of enquiries per subject area on the map.
- The CMR highlighted the benefits of the Portal at a number of levels, for example he used his councillor Facebook page to signpost members of



the public to report highways issues – and Panel members were advised that Highways Liaison Officers would be happy to explain how this worked.

- The AD for IT and Digital would follow up plans for training or a councillor guide on use of social media.
- A request was made to enable members to share an issue with another member (for cross boundary issues).
- Several Panel members asked about escalation processes, which were acknowledged by the CMR, although he reminded members that the responsibility to respond within the SLA lay with the relevant directorate, rather than those managing the Portal itself.
- Regarding escalation processes for cases related to highways, the Officers from the E&I Directorate explained that members should contact either the AD for Highways and Transport Operations, or the Head of Highways and Transport Liaison. Liaison Officers were frontline staff, who may need to consult other Officers on cases however there may be categorical reasons to deny request for works, for example a specific Policy.
- The CMR highlighted that 50% of cases were having to be entered onto the Portal by Highways Liaison Officers, which had much higher costs per transaction, therefore it was important to encourage councillors to log cases themselves.
- A request to add the ability for members to indicate use of divisional funds for particular cases would be considered.

The CMR and the Officers present welcomed the suggestions for development of the Portal, which would be considered.

## **434 Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

In attendance for this item:

Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change  
Sandra Taylor, Assistant Director for IT and Digital  
Adam Kent, Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication

The CMR welcomed the discussion about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Council's future Strategy, which was very comprehensively set out in the Agenda report.

The Assistant Director for IT and Digital (AD) summarised the report which included the Council's current position for use of AI and the massive potential to bring benefits and efficiencies. However, potential risks were also massive, therefore governance would be very important and human guidance. The AI Policy was being considered by the Corporate Governance Team, which would establish best practices and ethical usage, both of which were crucial for the Council.

AI had been used to generate part of the report, therefore a disclosure was included in the report. Managing the introduction of AI was challenging and would require investment, resources, skills, staff and training.

The Panel discussed the report and the following main points were made:

- The CMR highlighted that the Council was trying to get ahead in exploring potential use as well as risks from AI.
- Acknowledging the huge amount of work involved, the Panel Chairman welcomed the aim to get ahead since use of AI was inevitable, and good decisions would be important.
- There was a need for care in ensuring use of AI did not 'lose' people, for example those who could not use a chatbot, and the AD explained that in terms of data, AI could help the Council identify any such individuals.
- A Panel member also highlighted the potential for AI to help identify sectors of the population more vulnerable to discrimination.
- The point was made that tools available nationally could be used, and it was explained that the Council's Policy had been drafted making use of the Socitm (Society for Innovation, Technology and Modernisation) Policy.
- The AD would be speaking at a national conference about the Council's approach with AI.
- Panel members and the CMR acknowledged the wide range of potential benefits from AI, such as identifying health conditions, trends and analysis of health data (for example in a pandemic scenario), detecting unusual access of IT systems, detecting language associated with suicide on social media, and support for businesses – these were not seen to replace human input but to enhance outcomes.
- The CMR pointed out the importance of the Council deciding its priorities for use of AI.
- The Panel agreed the importance of the Council's Policy.

The Chairman highlighted AI as the way forward, therefore it was important to be aware of the opportunities as well as the risks.

## **435 Work Programme**

The Chairman would contact Panel members to invite suggestions for scrutiny task groups, as requested by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board.

The meeting ended at 3.55 pm

Chairman .....