

Minutes of the Corporate and Communities Overview and

Scrutiny Panel

County Hall Worcester

Thursday, 23 November 2023, 2.00 pm

Present:

Cllr Emma Stokes (Chairman), Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cllr Natalie McVey,
Cllr James Stanley and Cllr Richard Udall

Also attended:

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

Mark Fitton, Strategic Director for People
Hannah Perrott, Assistant Director for Communities
Andrew Spice, Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Richard Taylor, Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
Rob Morris, Head of Business Intelligence
Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance)
Jo Hilditch, Head of Digital, Data and Web Services
Samantha Morris, 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 29 September 2023 (previously circulated).

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

436 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, including the members of the public who were attending for the discussion about the Libraries Unlocked Implementation Update (Agenda item 5).

Apologies were received from Councillors Emma Marshall and Craig Warhurst.

437 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

438 Public Participation

Emily Keenan spoke as a local resident and a member of the Friends of St John's Library (in Worcester). She put forward the concerns of 1433 local residents who had signed a petition and over 100 people who had attended a meeting of the Friends about implementation of Libraries Unlocked.

The Chairman thanked Emily for the petition and her comments and confirmed that she would receive a written response to any questions which were not answered during the discussion on Libraries Unlocked (Agenda item 5)

439 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 September 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

440 Libraries Unlocked Implementation Update

In attendance for this item:

Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Assistant Director for Communities

Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities
Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Communities welcomed the opportunity to update the Panel and appreciated the input from members of the public present. He explained that the report focussed on library services for residents across Worcestershire, of which St John's library was one library. Times were financially very challenging and from a recent County Council Network event, the CMR was aware that other shire areas did not have anywhere near the level of library provision as in Worcestershire.

The Council had given a guarantee to retain 21 libraries but this did require some reduction in staffing hours. Overall, the Libraries Unlocked implementation was very much about improvement and enhancement and the Council had a successful track record with implementation so far.

In reference to points raised by the public participant, the CMR was not convinced by the suggestion to steer away from the pre-consultation feedback which had been done pre-Covid, and emphasised there were no proposals to stop community groups at any libraries. He acknowledged there would be concerns and questions, but provided reassurance that these would be picked up by the consultation exercise.

The Assistant Director for Communities (Assistant Director) referred to the report which set out the progress already made on the implementation of Libraries Unlocked, and the expected operational timeframes for individual libraries. The libraries were all different, with different issues for implementation, for example positioning of CCTV, or asbestos removal. Staff consultation was also underway.

Implementation would reflect on the learning from the 2019 consultation exercise and the experiences of Libraries Unlocked in Droitwich and Stourport libraries. Consultation on each library needed to be timed once potential 'go live' dates and feasibility for the technology was known, in order to be an informed exercise. However, there was a specific Libraries Unlocked webpage, which included frequently asked questions.

Positive experiences from Libraries Unlocked so far included sign up by 3000 people in Stourport, and by 61% of active library users in Droitwich, which demonstrated widening access. The Assistant Director reiterated the fact that there was no intention to reduce activities or groups although some timings may change, which would be through engagement.

The Assistant Director was aware there had been some concern about the safety of young people accessing libraries in locked hours, although they could be accompanied by an adult and the experiences from Droitwich and Stourport showed an increase in active library members in the 11-15 age group (5.6%) and a 22% increase in active members in the 60 to 90 age group. Based on experiences, consideration was being given to opening libraries unlocked membership up to 15 year olds, to help with GCSE study.

Regarding concerns about safety, there was the possibility of introducing live monitoring of CCTV, although it was highlighted that experience in Droitwich was not showing safeguarding issues; books were not being taken and there had only been one or two minor incidents, for example a group of young people who entered the library but this was swiftly dealt with by community support officers and parents.

The Chairman invited questions and the following main points were made:

- Cllr Udall spoke as the local councillor for the St John division which included St John's library and sought clarification on the envisaged date in early 2024 for consultation on that library. The Assistant Director advised that there wasn't a specific date at present but it would be before the start of the next financial year. There was an acknowledgement of people's desire for a specific date but the date would depend on the results of the actions outstanding as detailed in

paragraph 7 of the agenda report as there may be issues outside of the Assistant Director's control, for example asbestos.

- Cllr Udall sought further details about the engagement itself and was advised there would be physical face to face conversations, likely to take place once the technology had been installed and could be demonstrated, and this may involve staff from the other libraries where it had been implemented. Engagement sessions would also take feedback around staff sessions and the opportunity for community groups to use unlocked time free of charge.
- The Panel was advised that anyone signing up to Libraries Unlocked would receive a face-to-face induction to include information about the technology but also importantly, about safeguarding and what to do in an emergency.
- Cllr Udall referred to the petition for St John's library, signed by 1500 people and points raised to the CMR, and asked him what room there was for compromise. The CMR pointed out it would depend on the compromise – there was a budget and commitment and it may be possible operationally, to staff a library for longer on certain days but the CMR did not want to mislead anyone that the staffing budget could be upped for this library.
- The CMR was asked whether there could be consideration given to earlier consultation or discussion on St John's library. Whilst the CMR was happy to talk he agreed with the Assistant Director that it was better to have discussions based on facts rather than unknowns.
- Regarding Warndon library and the configuration of the Fairfield Centre, it was confirmed that dialogue would take place about use of the space and groups held there once feasibility studies were complete in order to know any cost issues. Early thinking suggested moving the library to the front of the building would make better use of the space in the building for more learning activities.
- A Panel member voiced support for Libraries Unlocked and highlighted libraries as one of the best community assets available.
- A Panel member who had previously worked within the libraries service asked about arrangements for the 8pm closing time of Libraries Unlocked and whether there had been instances of people being locked in. The Assistant Director provided reassurance that at ten minutes to 8pm announcements were made and no further people would be able to enter buildings. The face-to-face induction would explain closing arrangements and emergency instructions and there had been no incidents to date.
- The Assistant Director was asked whether Sundays or early mornings (8am) openings would be considered as part of Libraries Unlocked and advised that Sundays may be an option, depending on energy costs, and that implementation was demonstrating a benefit for working age people, in particular those with children.
- The CMR for Corporate Services and Communications reflected on his time as previous Chairman of the Panel, during which plans for libraries had been looked at including the possibility of closure, yet they had been retained. The CMR highlighted the benefits to library users of the technology available for example e-books and newspapers daily.

- The CMR for Corporate Services and Communication asked about patterns of library use referring to fundamental shifts in library access in his own division since the Covid pandemic. The Assistant Director acknowledged that library visits had gone down and there had been a real hike in electronic access – behaviour patterns had changed but this was not attributed to solely to e-activity. Visitor levels were now creeping up and were at 71% of pre-pandemic levels. There was more work to do in promoting libraries as a safe, warm space in particular for more vulnerable and elderly residents.
- A Member suggested that the Panel should ask the CMR to engage with user groups in advance of making a decision which would aid the outcome of any proposals. The Panel Chairman agreed with prior engagement however acknowledged the potential issues with library buildings and preferred the tailored approach to the process.

In summing up, the Panel Chairman referred to the CMR for Communities' point that the Council was securing and preserving library facilities in challenging times. Libraries Unlocked were part of managing limited resources for the best possible outcomes, where libraries were considered on an individual basis, to create the best provision for that area. The Chairman was particularly pleased to see positive statistics on library use from Libraries Unlocked so far and was supportive of the planned access for 15 years olds, and therefore reassured by the report to the Panel.

She expressed gratitude to the members of the public present and felt confident that their points would be addressed and the correct process followed.

441 Performance and 2023/24 In-Year Budget Monitoring

In attendance for this item:

Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
 Assistant Director for Communities
 Deputy Chief Finance Officer
 Assistant Director for Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development (OD) and Engagement
 Head of Business Intelligence
 Lead Analyst

Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities
 Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

Performance Information for Quarter 2 (July to September 2023)

The Chairman referred to the information contained in the report and available through Power BI, which provided an additional resource for this Panel.

The Chairman asked whether the presence of RAAC (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) in the County Hall building had impacted negatively on marriage ceremonies for couples who had planned to have their ceremony at

County Hall. The Assistant Director for Communities advised that the site remained open for marriage ceremonies and when the new ways of entering the building was introduced, all couples had been contacted and the number of ceremonies had not been affected – which the Panel Chairman was very pleased to hear.

The Chairman praised the increased uptake in bikeability training, something which had been discussed at a full Council meeting. It was pleasing to see the evidence of actions being followed through and the Chairman asked that this PI information be retained in the Panel's regular updates.

The Chairman sought clarification about staff short term sickness and the average number of days lost through short-term sickness per member of staff. The Assistant Director for Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development (OD) and Engagement advised that based on Quarter 2, the average number of days per employee would be just under two days for the year, however it was important to note that the data was to a certain extent skewed since it was reported monthly and managers may not 'close down' an episode of sickness before payroll was run.

The Chairman proposed to review of the set of performance data received (appendix 2) as part of Agenda item 10 (Work Programme).

Financial Information for Period 6

The Chairman commented that Cabinet's discussion of the budget position earlier that day had clearly indicated the situation was being addressed, and until the Government settlement was known, it was very difficult to comment.

The Deputy Chief Finance Officer confirmed that the forecast presented was for a full 12 months, and that Power BI had been updated now that the Cabinet discussion had taken place.

442 Overview of Worcestershire County Council's Contractual and Pay Inflation

In attendance for this item:

Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Assistant Director for Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development (OD) and Engagement

Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

The Panel raised the following points:

- The Chairman expressed concern and sought clarification about the pay bargaining for staff in the groups for whom an outcome had still not been reached. The Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement (Assistant Director) explained this related to education professionals employed in local authority services (Soulbury Officers) and JNC Craft

Workers. The Council supported national pay bargaining, however for these staff groups, the 'employer side' and the 'officer side' had so far been unable to reach a settlement. Further complications were that the national 'employer' side had issued its full and final offer, alongside the fact that a number of unions had taken a ballot, and although the result was unanimously in favour of industrial action, this was only relevant to individual areas, because the ballot had been disaggregated. Mediation had now been requested, and Chairman asked for the Panel to be kept updated on the ongoing negotiations to reach pay settlements for these staff groups.

- The Strategic Director explained that in order to support service areas across the Council as a whole, the Commercial Team was endeavouring to commit more resources and time into contract and supplier management, which was especially important to manage inflation increases. The Council performed well in this area, although efforts were constrained to an extent by recruitment challenges for this skillset, which was a regional issue.
- The Officers clarified that although inflation was reducing, Council budgets remained particularly pressurised in three areas (placements for adults and children, and home to school transport), and prices remained high.
- Regarding the inflation figures for categories of spend included in the report, the Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication made the point that the considerable ability of staff to maximise efficiencies was being dwarfed by demand for key service areas such as placements for children and adults.
- When asked whether there was a gender pay gap and what progress had been achieved, the Assistant Director explained that he would be able to provide specific details after the gender pay gap data had been run in February, however he believed the Council had compared very favourably to the local authority average at the last data run. In addition, there were a number of strategies to encourage applications and address any issues.

The Panel Chairman acknowledged and paid tribute to the efforts and competence of staff in managing budgets, in the face of unprecedented budget pressures, for which the Panel was very grateful.

443 Worcestershire County Council's Workplace Menopause Support Programme

In attendance for this item:

Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Assistant Director for Human Resources (HR), Organisational Development (OD) and Engagement

Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

The Chairman spoke on behalf of the Panel in welcoming the Council's workplace menopause support programme, and the increased visibility of information, for example posters in toilet facilities.

The Panel raised the following points:

- It was important for men to also understand the menopause.
- A Panel member had attended a recent session for staff, which had been very positive and the Council's approach was encouraging discussion, openness and removing the taboo around menopause.
- Regarding staff sign up for the available training sessions and interest from male staff members, the Assistant Director for HR, OD and Engagement explained that nothing was mandated and that uptake had been very good, and although the majority attending were women, 6% were male, which included some male managers - there was a push to educate male managers and education was the key.
- Officers advised that the biggest problems reported about the menopause by staff were concentration, anxiety and depression.
- The menopause support programme was delivered by individuals who were passionate about this area, but there was not a dedicated team, and local NHS organisations had enquired about the programme.
- The Council wasn't planning to have a specific policy as it was felt that provision of support was the important thing.

444 Digital Inclusion

In attendance for this item:

Strategic Director of Commercial and Change
Head of Digital, Data and Web Services

Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Corporate Services and Communication

The Strategic Director of Commercial and Change introduced the report and highlighted that despite developments in IT and increasing use of technical means to communicate with residents, there was a commitment not to forget access for all people wanting to use services. The Panel was assured that accessibility and legislation on digital inclusion was taken very seriously, with continued emphasis.

Questions were invited and the Panel raised the following points:

- The Chairman highlighted the importance of the Council maintaining some face to face engagement, and referred back to the example of the Libraries Unlocked induction to new users. There was a continual move towards more digital processes, but the report stated that (in England) 27% of people were not digitally capable, and it was important to know how to assist them.
- A Panel member fed back comments from a local headteacher that the number of households without internet access was increasing for a

variety of reasons including faith or terminating access due to digital addition.

- The Strategic Director reassured the Panel that communication channels would be kept open for those who could not, or would not use digital means, although it should be recognised that they were high cost.
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility (CMR) for Corporate Services and Communication pointed out that in some ways increased technology may appeal to some people who had become disengaged with digital communication, since options such as chatbots were becoming more sophisticated in resembling human communication and could be verbal.
- The CMR also pointed out it was important to continue to work with people who may fear change, and to keep them aware of the options available to them.
- A Panel member raised the issue of digital inclusion as part of implementation of Libraries Unlocked.

The Chairman thanked the Officers for the report and their attendance.

445 Work Programme

An update on the Council's preparedness for the PSTN/ISDN switch off was scheduled for the Panel's meeting on 18 January and the Strategic Director for Corporate Services and Communication would provide the Chairman with a briefing note ahead of the meeting.

In relation to performance information provided to the Panel, the Chairman asked Panel members to consider appendix 2 of the report on Performance and 2023/24 In-year Budget Monitoring, and to let her know any suggestions for changes or additions to the regular information provided to the Panel.

The meeting ended at 3.30 pm

Chairman