

Resources and Equality Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 2 February 2023

Attendance

Members of the Resources and Equality Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal
Cllr Udey Singh (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Crofts
Cllr John Reynolds
Cllr Zee Russell (Chair)
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Lovinyer Daley
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Ellis Turrell
Cllr Greg Brackenridge

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Alison Shannon
David Pattison
Charlotte Johns
Claire Nye
Heather Clark
Lamour Gayle

Scrutiny Officer
Chief Accountant
Chief Operating Officer
Director of Strategy
Director of Finance
Head of External Funding and Digital Projects
Head of Customer Engagement and
Registrars

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Zee Russell, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public.
- 2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Russell explained the process to be followed during the meeting for asking questions.
- 3 **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following Councillors:

Cllr Dr Paul Birch J.P
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Jaspreet Jaspal

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Customer Experience Strategy Consultation Update**

The Chair invited Lamour Gayle, Head of Customer Engagement and Registrars, to give the presentation.

The Head of Customer Engagement advised the panel that the presentation would provide background to the development of the draft customer services experience strategy and an update on progress since the panel meeting in October 2022.

The Head of Customer Engagement advised the panel that it was agreed at the time a further report would be presented to the panel on the outcome of the consultation and engagement work on the draft strategy. A copy of the revised draft strategy was attached at Appendix 1.

The Head of Customer Services commented on the method used to consult with local people and specific groups about the draft strategy and an analysis of the responses. The draft strategy was being presented to the panel for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Head of Customer Services commented on the key themes from the consultation exercise and the work done to address specific issues, for example, improving the ability for the public to access customer services online using facilities in libraries and community hub, the introduction Live Chat, improved accessibility, and translation services, providing clear communication with residents.

The Head of Customer Services advised the panel that focus groups have been established to continue and evaluate service delivery progress, particularly in relation to the implementation of a new omni channel customer services solution.

The Head of Customer Engagement and Registrars advised the panel that the revised strategy will be presented to Cabinet for approval on 22 March 2023. The panel were invited to comment on the revised draft strategy.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the report.

The panel commented on the reference to the public using local library IT facilities to access Council services in the presentation but highlighted the availability and opening hours of libraries varies considerably across the City. This issue of library coverage and current opening hours needs to be considered before encouraging people to use this option. The panel suggested that the current library opening hours provision needs to be reviewed.

The Director of Strategy advise the panel that the comments have been noted and would be included as part of work being done to make Council services more accessible.

The panel welcomed the report.

The panel commented on the high volume of telephone calls and expressed concern about long waiting times for public and the commented on the importance of the public being able to speak directly with the Council to resolve a query.

The panel suggested that it would be helpful for the strategy to have clear service performance targets for how long the public should be expected to wait for a telephone calls and emails to be answered.

The Head of Customer Services commented that the introduction of the new omni-channel telephony system systems will improves the current service as detailed in the presentation. The new system will provide performance targets, and will be supported by regular focus groups surveys to check that the service is meeting public expectations. The Head of Customer Services added that performance data will be published on a regular basis and on the Council's website.

The panel queried the process for collecting views of the public about their experience of the service when they contact the Council.

The Head of Customer Services advised the panel that survey questions are asked at the end of inquiry from the customer. At the start of the call the customer would be asked if they would be willing to take part in the survey and the questions would cover the reasons for them contacting the Council and how they would like to access customer services in the future.

The panel asked for more details about the reference in the appendix about plans for using new digital technology to deliver the priorities detailed and specifically if the plans will involve existing employees or if the aim is to recruit extra employers and the related costs of doing this.

The panel wanted assurance that customer services personal data collected using the new technology would not be shared with a third-party external organisation and if customers would be asked specifically for their consent to share information when contacting the Council.

The panel queried the plans for using new technologies such as artificial intelligence to deliver Council services in a more efficient way and for examples for the systems being considered.

The Head of Customer Services advised the panel that the feedback from customers is that they like simple inquiries dealt with using automated response as this would be more efficient rather than waiting to speak to a customer services adviser, for an example, a query about bin collection date.

The Head of Customer Services commented on plans for introducing systems for dealing with simple transactions and to provide alternative ways for people to contact the Council for example using webchat options. The new omni-channel telephony communication system would not require any extra employee resources as the focus would be on opening additional lines of communication for the public.

The Head of Customer Services commented that service gets about 3000 calls a week, and if a proportion of simple transactions within this number can be dealt with by an automated response, then this will have the benefit of freeing up a customer services officer time to provide a face-to-face service for someone who needs this.

The Head of Customer Services commented on work done with colleagues in data analytics team to analyse call trends and to better understand the reasons for increases in call activity with the aim of using the intelligence to improve the service, for example, providing better signposting information on the website.

The Head of Customer Services highlighted the benefits of the new technology to the service for example, helping to identify areas of low take up of blue badge applications which led to a local promotional campaign and local surgeries to raise awareness of the scheme and to support people to make applications in those areas.

The panel queried how the service would prioritise in a situation where there a high number of telephone calls and web chat enquiries to the Council. The Head of Customer Services reassured the panel that the omni-channel telephony system would enable the Council to manage the volume of different types of enquiries in a more efficient way by having a single communication channel for customers rather than having separate systems to deal with telephone calls, web chat and emails which is the current arrangement.

Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy, commented on the investment in new forms of artificial intelligence and reassured the panel that the approach of the Council is driven by digital, and it will learn from the best technological ideas that could be adapted to meet the needs of the service. The Director of Strategy assured the panel that the Council is responsible owner of personal customer data and will only use the information in the way it was agreed to be processed and used.

David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, offered further reassurance on the Council's compliance with any legal requirements on the use of personal data and advised that data will only be processed for a new purpose if this is compatible with the original purpose, or the Council has a clear legal obligation and the person's consent. The Council's data protection policy has recently been updated.

The panel queried the process for getting a person's consent about the use of their data. The Chief Operating Officer advised the panel that the person would have to choose to share their data by opting in.

The panel queried the process for making vulnerable groups aware of the changes detailed in the presentation and suggested that Facebook and WhatsApp could be used, particularly in those areas with limited access to library facilities. The panel suggested that Councillors have local knowledge that could help if the customer services survey does not fully engage with local people.

The Head of Customer Services commented on the public engagement plan, highlighting the use of community pop up events across the City and the co-location of service in Wolverhampton Homes buildings and community venues to reach people and identify other locations, who would not necessarily visited the Civic Centre for advice and information.

The Head of Customer Services commented that with regards using WhatsApp to communicate with residents there are discussions ongoing about the inclusion of different social media apps in the omni channel communication system.

The Head of Customer Services updated the panel on a scheme where a Wolverhampton Homes Customer Service Officer was based in the Civic since December 2022 and highlighted it is a good example of the benefits of co-location.

The panel discussed the importance of the service engaging with residents from different local communities and the barriers they may face in accessing Council services online.

The Head of Customer Services reassured the panel that the service is aware of the issue and is working with colleagues in EDI team to look how Council services can be made as inclusive as possible.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

The Head of Customer Services to note the comments of the panel on the draft Customer Experience Strategy.

6 **Digital Wolves Strategy Update**

The Chair invited Heather Clark, Head of Digital Projects, to present the report.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the importance of a futureproofed digital infrastructure to Wolverhampton and highlighted the benefits of the infrastructure to the City.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the progress made since the previous digital strategy was approved in January 2020. The latest version of the strategy builds on progress made since this was published. The Head of Digital Projects outlined the key aims of the strategy, for example, the ambition for Wolverhampton to be a Gigabit and Smart City using futureproofed digital infrastructure, including full fibre broadband and 5G.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the key achievements of the digital Wolverhampton programme since 2019 to date. The Head of Digital Projects added that the Cabinet Member for Digital Cities and Resources has responsibility to taking forward the strategy.

The Head of Digital Projects briefed the panel about progress of developing the digital infrastructure and the key achievements to date, highlighting the fact that Wolverhampton has now surpassed other Black Country authorities in terms of both gigabyte growth and full fibre growth compared to the situation in 2020. The Head of Digital Projects listed the range of local and wider benefits of improving the digital infrastructure for different groups, such as new jobs, increase in property prices and cost savings and increased productivity.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the progress of the digital inclusion work and gave examples of case studies of how individuals have benefit from the different initiatives such as Wolves Tech Aid.

The Head of Digital Projects outlined a range of initiatives linked to work to further build on the digital innovation and the economy.

The panel were invited to comment on the report and the presentation.

The panel welcome the report and congratulated the presenter on the excellent progress made since 2019 and the decisions made since to introduce a range of initiatives to anticipate and adapt to future technological innovations.

The panel commented on the higher charges from the company installing full fibre broadband for residential properties compared with other internet providers and asked for the details of take up.

The Head of Digital Projects agreed to send a request to CityFibre about the roll out of the programme for details of residential take up rates.

The Head of Digital Projects accepted that the new broadband service is more expensive and advised the panel of work with colleagues in cost-of-living team to promote lower social tariffs for broadband, where people in receipt of certain benefits get cheaper broadband connectivity rates.

The Head of Digital Projects highlighted the offer to help residents to connect to the internet with a six-month phone sim card if they cannot afford broadband connection costs.

The panel welcomed the extra financial support offered to people on qualifying benefits to get access to the internet but queried support for people whose income is above this level but not eligible for any further help as a result. The panel suggested this group of residents should also be supported in the future with other help if they cannot afford to connect to the broadband.

The Head of Digital Projects commented that people who do not qualify for social tariffs are encouraged to check internet provider comparison see current offers, which can be similar to the social tariff rates available.

The panel discussed the work being done to encourage residents to develop their digital skills and change careers into digital jobs and queried if the level of training offered would allow them to apply for higher skilled jobs.

The panel also queried the support from the Council to get businesses to use local people with digital skills trained in Digital Bootcamps rather risk them going to Manchester or London for jobs.

The panel queried the incentives provided by the Council to encourage digital businesses to either remain in Wolverhampton or to re-locate to the area.

The Head of Digital Projects commented that the Digital Bootcamps provide training over several weeks, which can be done either face to face or online and is focused on job opportunities with employers. The Head of Digital Projects added that the job roles the training given is aimed at does not require an ICT background and highlighted the importance of a willingness of people to learn new skills at this stage of their career development.

The Head of Digital Projects commented that the Council is working with the University of Wolverhampton to promote their digital offer and highlighted the strength of the offer. There is recent evidence of digital businesses being attracted to Wolverhampton based on the offer.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the work being done to develop digital skills of local people which will be supported by the creation of the Digital Wolverhampton Infrastructure Academy referred to in the presentation. The work of the Academy will help residents to benefit from job opportunities created through the upgrading of digital infrastructure.

The Head of Digital Projects commented on the range of work being done by the Council to support businesses to grow and to support digital innovation in key sectors and to promote the digital economy offer in Wolverhampton.

There was panel discussion about possible risk to health linked to the rollout of the 5G network. The Head of Digital Projects commented on the current findings on studies about any possible risk to health and reassured the panel about safety of the 5G programme. The Director of Strategy agreed to share the links to the findings with panel to offer further reassurance.

Resolved:

1. The panel welcomed the progress made and the approach taken to delivering priorities in the revised Digital Wolverhampton Strategy.
2. The panel comments on the progress of the strategy to be noted.
3. The Head of Digital Projects to provide information on studies which have investigated health risks linked to the 5G programme.
4. The Head of Digital Projects to provide the panel with information about the take up of CityFibre by residential properties and the date when the installation work will be completed.

7 **Treasury Management Strategy**

The Chair invited Alison Shannon, Chief Accountant, to present the report.

The Chief Accountant advised the panel the treasury management activity report was presented to Cabinet in November 2022 and then to Council in December.

The report detailing the Council's treasury management activity is being presented to the panel for information and comment. The Chief Accountant advised the panel that comments will be fed into the final draft that will be presented to Cabinet.

The Chief Accountant explained the background to the treasury management strategy and advised that the Council's activities are underpinned by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) Treasury Management Code of Practice (Code).

The Code requires a nominated body be responsible for ensuring effective scrutiny of the Council's treasury management strategy and policies, the Resources and Equality Scrutiny Panel fulfils this role. The treasury management strategy is reviewed annually.

The Chief Accountant gave a definition of the term 'Treasury Management' and the six elements covered by the strategy report.

The Chief Accountant advised the panel that the Council can only borrow to fund its capital programme and that this is supported by other funding such as grants and capital receipts, from the sale of assets.

The Council is under a statutory duty to keep under review how much can it afford to borrow to ensure that it is affordable and also fund the capital programme. The Chief Accountant advised the panel that the Council's strategy is to use cash balances (described as internal borrowing) first to fund capital expenditure to avoid the need for external borrowing.

The Chief Accountant commented on the changes to the Treasury Management Code of Practice and Prudential Code that CIPFA introduced in December 2021 which were aimed at strengthening the requirements for skills and training and applying restrictions on borrowing for investments not specifically for treasury management purposes. The required changes to the Code that apply to the Council will be incorporated into the strategy from April 2023.

The Chief Accountant commented that the changes to the Code have not affected the way the Council currently manages the capital programme or treasury management activities.

The Chief Accountant gave further details about the Council's policy towards borrowing and investments.

The Chief Accountant gave a summary of the Council's performance against five prudential indicators detailed in the presentation.

The panel were invited to comment on the report and presentation.

The panel queried the average interest rate payable for borrowing and the amount forecast to be spent on interest payments in 2022-2023.

The Chief Accountant advised the panel that all Council loans are set at a fixed rate. The borrowing rates charged by Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) change on a regular basis and is used as a basis to forecast future interest rate changes. The Chief Accountant advised the panel that total interest cost payments 2022 – 2023 is £27 million - £11.5m (Housing Revenue Account) and £15.6m (General Fund).

The panel discussed the rationale for borrowing and how it supports the delivery of the Council's strategic priorities. The Director of Finance advised the panel that Council borrowing is used for investment in assets such as schools to maintain them at a good standard and to invest in new digital technological developments referred to in the previous agenda item discussion. The Director of Finance added that some investments in property also generate income which is used to meet borrowing costs.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the treasury management activity for the second quarter of 2022-2023 as detailed in the report and presentation.

8 **Resources and Equality Panel - Draft Scrutiny Work Programme 2022- 2023**

The Chair invites Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, to present the report.

The Scrutiny Officer briefed on the panel on the agenda for the next meeting and invited comments on the draft work programme.

The panel queried the removal of the Yoo Recruit Review item from the work programme.

The Chief Operating Officer advised the panel that the item had been removed in error and confirmed it will be on the agenda for the panel meeting on 16 March 2023.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.