



Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 28 November 2018

Attendance

Members of the Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Paula Brookfield (Chair)
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Ian Brookfield
Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal
Cllr Peter O'Neill
Cllr Jane Stevenson (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE

In Attendance

Cllr Val Gibson
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Martin Waite
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal

Employees

Andy Moran	Director of Commercial Services
Claire Nye	Director of Finance
Gail Rider	Head of ICT
Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Michelle Howell	Finance Business Partner
Lisa Taylor	Head of Customer Services

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following Cllrs:

Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded

3 **Minutes of previous meeting (26.9.18)**

The minutes of the previous meeting were confirmed subject to the suggested revised wording being changed, as being a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **Matters arising**

Agenda Item 5: Treasury Management – Annual Report 2017-18

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, advised that there was no update at this time and further information would be presented to the panel on 6 February 2019.

5 **Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel Work Programme - Draft Work Programme 2018/19**

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, presented the draft work programme report for comment.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to establish a working group to review progress of changes to the customer services system. The following members agreed to be nominated to the working group:

Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Jane Stevenson
Cllr Martin Waite
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal
Cllr Milkinderpal Jaspal

6 **Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2019-2020**

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, presented the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy report which sets out the financial position of the Council and work done to address the projected budget challenge. The Director of Finance commented that proposals classed as financial transactions and base budget revisions will be managed through internal processes. The panel were invited to comment on the budget reduction proposals and comment on the budget scrutiny process.

The panel discussed the value of their contributions about budget proposals and expressed some concern about the size of the report and the number of appendices which need to be considered and referenced to get a full understanding of the plan to achieve a balanced budget. The Director of Finance commented that the Council has a legal responsibility to set a balanced budget and that Councillors are consulted on the proposals. The Director of Finance agreed to consider ideas for making the information more manageable as part of the budget consultation review.

Louise Miles, Cabinet Member for Resources, commented that the public had been invited as part of the budget consultation process to say how they would like to be consulted in the future. The Cabinet Member for Resources advised that there had been discussions with Chair of Scrutiny Board about the role of scrutiny members in the budget scrutiny process, which may include looking at the whole budget, rather than on the basis of Cabinet portfolio responsibility.

The panel commented on the current arrangements where panels scrutinise budget proposals within their remit and suggested that a different approach was needed to understand the impact on the Council as a whole, to have a more effective budget scrutiny process.

The panel commented about the lack of detail about the implications of savings proposals and the presentation of figures which do not properly explain the difference between a budget reduction or an income generation idea.

The panel commented on the remit of the panel which requires a different approach to the budget scrutiny process to understand the implications of proposed changes on how services are delivered in the future. The panel discussed the list of risks detailed in Table 3 of the report and suggested there was a need to explore them in more detail to better understand the impact on policy and service delivery. The panel considered that the current information makes it difficult to understand how key risks were considered during the budget process and other cross cutting issues.

The Director of Finance agreed to consider how to present the information about risks associated to the medium-term financial strategy to meet the concerns of the panel in future reports about the budget.

The Cabinet Member for Resources commented on the overall poor level of attendance at the public budget consultation events and further thought would be given to what could be done to improve the situation.

The Cabinet Member for Resources praised the positive meeting with members of Wolverhampton Youth Council as part of the budget consultation process.

The panel discussed the value of panel members making comments on the budget proposals and the limited scope to make significant changes. The panel suggested that a different approach was needed to the scrutiny of the draft budget and mediumterm financial strategy document.

The panel suggested the panel should consider the budget consultation process and procedure, and an assessment of risks. The Director of Finance commented that training sessions on the budget had been offered to Councillors to support them in understanding the Council's budget previously, but attendance had been poor.

The Director of Finance agreed to discuss with colleagues about offering briefing sessions on the budget as part of the consultation process. The panel commented on the importance of the panel understanding the whole budget and the implications of what is being proposed.

The Cabinet Member for Resources commented that during the public consultation events there was consensus in the responses in wanting to have issues put into context so that they could better understand the implications of the budget proposals.

In addition, information could be presented differently with an explanation to help people better understand the budget proposals.

The panel suggested that a special meeting should be arranged to consider and comment on scrutiny process of the budget, in recognition of its wider remit and responsibility for financial matters to support the delivery of Council Services.

Resolved:

The Chair and Vice Chair of the panel in conjunction with the Director of Finance to arrange an extra meeting of the panel to consider the draft budget and medium-term financial strategy proposals and to consider making recommendations to Cabinet as appropriate about the improving the scrutiny process of the draft budget.

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Customer Services Journey

Andy Moran, Director of Commercial Services, gave a short presentation about the performance of the customer services and the changes made to the service. The Director of Commercial Services advised the panel that Lisa Taylor, had recently been appointed to the post of Head of Customer Services as part the new strategy. The Director of Commercial Services gave an update on the proposed customer services operating model designed to respond to concerns about the performance. The Director of Commercial Services advised that the panel that the new system would categorise customer enquiries which can be fulfilled through self-service and those more complex enquiries would be dealt with separately. The panel were advised that the council receive 50,000 calls a month and that the current model was not sustainable in the long term in managing this level of customer contact.

The Director of Commercial Services advised the panel of a range of process changes made to support the new operating model, for example, re-organising the customer services team and also future changes, for example, the potential for using Skype to deal with planning enquiries more quickly.

The Director of Commercial Services advised the panel that an important part of the process is to have a single record for every customer rather than multiple records for the same person held by different service areas, relating to other enquiries.

The Director of Commercial Services commented on the technology being introduced to support this change, which would allow the customer to check progress and reduce the number of calls to the Council. The new customer system would help to avoid unnecessary duplication of similar types of enquiries and reduce the number of enquiries in the new process. The system would be provided with new functionality and supported by a reduction in the current number of 1700 web pages. The content on council web pages is being reviewed to further support this work.

The panel were advised that work is being done to get more people to deal with telephone enquiries in response to the difficulties highlighted in the report.

The panel commented that the current call back system is not working and gave examples of complaints received from residents. The Director of Commercial Services accepted the frustration experienced by customers and explained that work was being done to introduce changes from April 2019 to the telephone system which would provide a better response.

The panel criticised the poor performance of the customer services as detailed in the report in terms of the length of time taken to answer calls and the number of calls not answered. The panel commented that previous assurances given to them that planned changes would provide a better customer service experience had not been delivered, despite considerable investment over many years.

The Director of Commercial Services accepted the criticism of the previous changes but added that it was necessary to install the base systems in order to deliver a better service that can work together more efficiently.

The panel discussed the previous performance standard that telephone calls to the Council would be answered within five rings and suggested that this should be re-introduced. The panel commented about the lengthy wait was unacceptable for residents trying to get help with their enquiries.

The panel commented on their own experiences and those from residents of lengthy wait on the phone when trying to contact the Council and were concerned that despite previous investment that waits of 40 minutes for answer continue. The Director of Commercial Services accepted the criticism of the telephone service and commented that efforts were aimed on reducing the 50,000 calls, which are much higher level of caller volume compared to other authorities. The situation will be improved when the number of calls is reduced significantly.

The panel commented on the poor experience of the automated telephone payment system and reported advice given to a resident who was unable to use the system. The Director of Commercial Services agreed to follow up this as the information given by the adviser to the resident as a solution was incorrect.

The panel queried when a full roll out of the new system would be completed. The Director of Commercial Services advised the system would be operational from April 2019 and other features rolled out over this period.

The panel queried if there were sufficient number of customer service advisers to deal with current demand. The Director of Commercial Services advised that the numbers of advisers have not changed but the service has been re-organised to respond to demands.

The panel queried current expenditure of the Council's Digital Transformation Programme. The Director of Commercial Services advised the panel that the capital budget for the programme is £3 million.

The panel queried the feasibility of reducing operating costs by £850,000 as stated in the report and details of how this would be achieved. The Director of Commercial Services responded that technology is not well organised in the contact centre and investment in the new technology would support the delivery of the programme aims.

The panel expressed concerns about residents who either don't have bank accounts or not comfortable with using new technology and how they will be supported. The panel wanted reassurance that the needs of specific groups would be considered, and suitable alternatives provided.

The panel discussed the level of preparedness for the exit of the UK from the EU in March 2019 and any consideration given to the impact on the planned introduction of the new customer services system. The Director of Commercial Services advised the panel of the interim measures being planned to reduce the risk of any possible disruption.

Louise Miles, Cabinet Member for Resources, accepted that the performance of the customer services was deeply unsatisfactory and when appointed to the Cabinet a commitment was made to be open about the problems with the service. The Cabinet Member commented on action taken in response to concerns expressed about the service and gave an assurance that advice given to the public about the automated payment system would not be repeated.

The Head of Customer Services advised that transfer of customer services contact centre from Wolverhampton Homes to the Council has been put on hold temporarily.

The panel thanked the Director of Commercial Services for the report and presentation.

Resolved:

1. The panel comments on the current service performance and the proposed customer services operating model to be considered by the Head of Customer Services.
2. The working group to be established to review progress of plans to manage simple and complex customer enquiries. A date to be agreed with members.
3. The findings of the working group to be reported to the panel meeting on 10 April 2019.

8 **Strategic Procurement Update - briefing paper**

Allison Robertson, Head of Procurement, gave an update on the work of the service and to manage issues relating to the impact and risks arising from Brexit. The Head of Procurement commented on the work done to maximise the impact of money spent with third parties that benefit the local economy.

The Head of Procurement gave examples of work being done to give local people employment and training opportunities through the contract tendering process.

The Head of Procurement briefed the panel on the contingency arrangements made to minimise any possible distribution. The Head of Procurement added that the suppliers were being asked to provide details of their contingency arrangements and how they plan to manage risks.

The panel welcomed the report and the work being done with other strategic partners to deliver better social value when commissioning services and the benefits to local business and residents.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the progress.

9 Print and Design Service (report to follow)

Gail Rider, Head of ICT, gave a short presentation about the changes introduced to Digital Print Solutions (DPS) since 2017 to the service and a summary of the earlier tour of the area that was arranged before the meeting for members of the panel.

The Head of ICT gave a summary of the progress made since a report proposing a series of the changes to the service was presented to the Cabinet (Resources) Panel in 2017.

The Head of ICT recommended that the panel support the proposal that all print requirements are directed to the internal DPS team first before considering using an outside contractor.

The Head of ICT reported that based on analysis an estimated £116,000 has been spent with external suppliers in the last 12 months and there was a view that a high percentage of this spend could have been completed by DPS.

The Head of ICT commented on the positive response from the employees in the section to the changes that have been introduced. The panel expressed concerns about the poor state of the rest room area and the wanted to improvements to the facilities.

The panel thanked the Head of ICT for the report and presentation and the excellent progress since being appointed. The panel discussed the legality of the service undertaking printing work for third party organisations. The panel discussed that this could be possible if the service was acting as a trading company but accepted that there were legal requirements and other financial considerations that would have to be met before progress could be made.

The panel queried the reference made in the report about third parties paying enhanced charges and considered that this was unlikely to be achieved and further details were needed about how this could be done in such a competitive market.

The panel thanked the Head of ICT for the presentation.

Resolved:

1. The Head of ICT to present a report to panel meeting on 6 February 2018 about the feasibility of establishing DPS as a trading company and recommendations.
2. The Head of ICT to lead work to undertake detailed market research about the competitiveness of the current service and use of external printing services and report the findings to panel meeting on 10 April 2018.
3. The Director of Finance to discuss with Cabinet a refurbishment of the employee rest area in the DPS and report findings to a panel meeting on 10 April 2019.