

Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 6 February 2019

Attendance

Members of the Confident, Capable Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Alan Bolshaw
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
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

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Chris East	Head of Service - Facilities
Lisa Taylor	Head of Service Improvement
Claire Nye	Director of Finance
Mark Taylor	Strategic Director - People

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

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

Cllr Payal Bedi-Chada
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.
- 3 Minutes of previous meeting (28.11.18)**
The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.
- 4 Matters arising**
Agenda Item 9: Digital Print Progress Report

The panel queried progress of recommendations agreed at the discussion. The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel that the drafting of the report about the feasibility

of establishing DPS as a trading company and recommendations had been delayed. The report will be presented by the Head of ICT to the panel meeting on 10 April 2019.

The Director of People advised the panel that it has been agreed for the necessary work on the refurbishment of the employee kitchen rest area in the DPS to be completed.

5 **City of Wolverhampton Council Plan 2019-2024**

Mark Taylor, Deputy Managing Director, introduced the report and outlined the consultation on the draft Council Plan 2019-24. The Deputy Managing Director commented that the draft was based on consultation feedback from different groups and welcomed comments from the panel on the priorities and expected outcomes detailed in the document.

The Deputy Managing Director outlined the background to the development of the Council Plan and advised the panel that the consultation period ends on 20 February 2019. A final draft will be presented to Cabinet in March before the final report is sent to Council in April 2019. The panel were invited to comment on the draft plan.

The panel discussed the main differences between the current plan and the previous plan. The Deputy Managing Director advised that the document is fundamentally the same as the previous draft but includes a reference to the building stronger relationships with different communities and how the Council engages and supports them to do this.

The panel commented that the stated that vision did not flow through the Council Plan in way which clear. The Deputy Managing Director responded that the vision for future of Wolverhampton is set out in the Council Plan. The document covers a longer period than the previous draft to allow more time to deliver. There are clear measures and outcomes in the draft Council Plan with a strong focus on delivery. The Deputy Managing Director added that there is a 'golden thread' which links all the different elements detailed in the Council Plan.

The panel discussed the extent to which the six strategic outcomes detailed in the report were deliverable and whether they were sufficiently challenging and ambitious. The Deputy Managing Director responded that the Directors will be responsible for delivering of outcomes in the Council Plan and held accountable when it is approved by Council.

The panel discussed the vision in the document and range of views expressed about whether it is clear and links to other previously published documents. The panel suggested previous strategic documents should be removed such as the City Strategy from publication to avoid any possible confusion about the strategic priorities and expected outcomes. The panel wanted greater clarity about what will be different about the City over time and supported the need to develop a unique vision.

The panel commented that the need for a vision would depend on the interests of the intended audience give but added that being ambitious for the City was more than just doing more of the same thing, careful thought needs to be given to this issue.

The Deputy Managing Director commented on the good progress made in areas such as school performance but added that some of the outcomes, such as giving children and young people the best possible start in life, will be achieved over a generation.

The Deputy Managing Director apologised for the delay in sending panel members a copy of the Council Plan document and agreed to include to consider changes to the modern.gov so that two documents could be viewed at the same time.

The panel welcomed the focus in the Council Plan to achieving the outcome of better homes for all and the commitment to build more affordable homes across the City. The panel expressed concerns about the levels of homelessness and discussed the importance of preventative measures to help people. The panel welcomed the focus on working with local organisations to make best use of capital assets and to work more collaboratively to support the delivery of this outcome. The panel commented on the opportunities presented by the introduction of 5G (fifth generation mobile networks) to support the aims detailed in the Council Plan.

The panel discussed the need to have a clear USP for Wolverhampton and this should be reflected in the Council Plan document. The panel commented that the vision statement has not sufficiently articulated to show how Wolverhampton's offer is different to that of neighbouring authorities. The Deputy Managing Director advised the panel that Head of Communications is leading on the work on developing the cultural offer and agreed to pass on the comments.

The panel discussed the performance measures and queried that more appropriate and useful measures were needed for the strategic outcome of wanting to create a vibrant, green city.

The panel expressed some concern on the reliance on partner organisations for contributing to the delivery of the strategic objectives detailed in the Council Plan. The panel discussed issues highlighted during the review of building fire safety and the need to be clear about the responsibilities and where the gaps are.

The panel welcomed the report

Resolved:

The panel comments on the draft Our Council Plan 2019-24 to be included in responses to the consultation.

6

Universal Credit Update

Heather Clarke, Service Development Manager, introduced the report which outlined the approach taken to mitigate the negative impacts arising from the transition onto Universal Credit to claimants living in Wolverhampton.

The Service Development Manager introduced Helen Winfield, Head of Community Financial Support, to comment specifically on the work done by members of the Welfare Rights Team and other organisations to reduce the financial impact on residents when moving onto Universal Credit.

The Head of Community Financial Support outlined the background to the introduction of Universal Credit and the timetable for migrating of claimants to the benefit. The target is that all legacy benefit claimants will have been moved to Universal Credit by December 2023. The Head of Community Financial Support outlined the new changes to making a claim and the detailed conditions that have to be met, for example, the requirement for people to manage their account online to record actions and to update the DWP of any changes in circumstances.

The Head of Community Financial Support commented on the potential financial impact of not following the requirements and the subsequent increased demand of public services as a result of payment being suspended for a period.

The Head of Community Financial Support outlined the challenges facing residents in the transition to Universal Credit and the work being done to ensure that residents have access to the correct information and support. The Head of Community Financial Support commented on the challenge residents likely to face in dealing with the five week wait for the first payment, at a time when it is estimated that 20% of residents are in debt. In addition, a further challenge is the high number of claimants who lack the confidence to set up and manage their account online. A lot of work is being done to support people who are digitally excluded and may need help with personal budgeting. The work will be supported in the future from advisers based at Wolverhampton CAB.

The Head of Community Financial Support updated the panel on the work being done with Wolverhampton Homes to reduce rental arrears and highlighted the importance of working with tenants. Wolverhampton Homes staff are based in DWP offices to provide financial checks to support Universal Credit claimants.

Wolverhampton Homes is reported as performing better than other housing providers in this area. The current average arrears are £430 for Wolverhampton Homes compared to £780 nationally.

The Head of Community Financial Support advised the panel of future developments in the rollout of Universal Credit from July 2019 to 2023 and the likely financial implications of the changes for Wolverhampton residents; who will have to comply with new rules. The Head of Community Financial Support highlighted the importance of having a correct email address when claimants making a claim and also the difficulties experienced by some people in dealing with a complex set of rules and regulations.

The Head of Community Financial Support commented that the services is supporting people who have difficulty in managing their money, some with literacy issues and others working short-term contracts are the likely to be affected most by the changes. In particular, when failing to notify the DWP of changes in their financial situation. The Head of Community Financial Support commented that people they are helping can struggle to understand official letters sent to them and the concern was that people did not seek help earlier enough which has led to serious debt problems.

The panel congratulated both presenters on excellent report and detailed briefing on the work being done to mitigate the financial impact on people moving to Universal Credit.

The panel expressed their views that the policy and introduction of Universal Credit had been poorly conceived and led to a lot of financial hardship. Furthermore, the criticisms expressed at the time about the impact on families had been ignored and that local authorities had been forced to provide services to help people in very difficult financial circumstances.

The Head of Community Financial Support commented on the requirement on claimants to manage their universal credit journals and a failure to do so could lead to the payment being stopped. A number of claimants have reported difficulties in completing the document and they have had to be supported in these circumstances.

The panel discussed the impact of the 1-week gap for rent tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and the financial implications for claimants and also Wolverhampton Homes, where their arrears are likely to increase. The panel suggested that letters should be sent to tenants to advise them of the shortfall in their income and to think about how they can avoid getting in arrears.

The panel discussed the work done to educate children and young people about personal budgeting. The panel discussed the importance of giving students good financial education that also includes helping them to understand the requirements of Universal Credit.

The panel suggested the experience of University of Wolverhampton graduates who currently offer legal advice should be used to support claimants with their appeals and suggested this option should be pursued.

The panel discussed the impact of a full rollout of Universal Credit and suggested work should be done to assess this and consider what extra resources are needed to mitigate the impact. Based on current experience there is likely to be an increase in homelessness and demand for support from services, for example local foodbanks and debt advice.

The Service Development Manager advised the panel that there is a plan to produce a booklet with details of location of foodbanks and other sources of help and advice in anticipation of an expected increase in evictions following the rollout of Universal Credit.

The panel welcomed the report and thanked the presenters.

Resolved:

1. The panel fully support the approach being taken to supporting new Universal Credit claimants and also to residents that will be claiming the benefit during the transition period.
2. The Service Development Manager to investigate and report back on the suggestion of University of Wolverhampton graduates providing an advocacy resource to help claimants with their appeals.
3. The Service Development Manager to consider drafting a letter to alert tenants of the impact of the one-week gap for rent tenants in receipt of Universal Credit and to offer advice on how this shortfall could be mitigated.

7 Treasury Management

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, introduced the report and gave an overview of the key areas for panel members to consider about the financial activity taken during Quarter 2 of 2018-19. The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The panel queried whether the Council could achieve a better interest rate return on surplus balances than the figure quoted in the report. The Director of Finance explained the Council follows best practice and works with financial advisers to maximise the return on investments and surplus balances. The Director of Finance added that there is also a need to consider the risks when transferring funds. The Director of Finance referred to Appendix 6 which detailed the list of investment holdings among a range of financial institutions. The Director of Finance advised the panel that consideration will be given to long-term options for increasing return, while at the same time an assessment will be made about the level of risk.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the findings of the treasury management activity monitoring report that had been reported to Cabinet on 21 November 2019.

8 Specific Reserves Working Group 11.12.18 - Draft Minutes

Claire Nye, Director of Finance, introduced the minutes of the specific reserves working group meeting on 11 December 2018. The panel discussed the management of the Development Reserve and school deficit budget balances. The Director of Finance advised that the Council 'passports' the money direct to academies who are responsible for managing the budget. Local authority schools are responsible to ensure that balances are in credit.

The panel approved the draft minutes.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the actions from the minutes.

9 Visitor Process - Update for Confident, Capable, Council Scrutiny Panel

Lisa Taylor, Head of Customer Services and Chris East, Head of Facilities, presented an update on the report to the meeting on 26 September 2018 about changes made to the management of visitors to the Civic Centre.

The Head of Customer Services briefed the panel on progress made following the completion of the Futurespace project and details of specific changes made to respond to a number of issues highlighted during the meeting.

The Head of Customer Services advised that changes to access arrangements will be introduced from April 2019. The Head of Facilities briefed the panel the pass key is no longer needed for members of the public wanted to access the toilets area on the third floor of Civic Centre.

The panel were invited to comment on the report. The panel shared concerns about the length of time taken to resolve some of the issues which were at the start of the Futurespaces project. The panel repeated ongoing concerns about the managing public access to the Civic Centre who may want to attend a meeting.

The Head of Facilities commented on the work done to provide a balance between providing security and ensuring easy access to rooms. The panel suggested a meeting be held to consider outstanding issues about visitor access to the Civic Centre.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the progress made to improve visitor access to the Civic Centre.

10

Confident Capable Council Panel - Draft Work Programme 2018 19

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, presented the work programme report and invited panel members to comment. The scrutiny officer advised the panel of changes to the work programme.

The panel agreed to change the date of the next meeting on 10 April 2019 to an earlier date. The Scrutiny Officer agreed to notify panel members when a new date was agreed.

Resolved:

The date of the next panel meeting to be changed at the request of members.

The meeting closed at 19:45