

Our Council Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 2 November 2021

Attendance

Members of the Our Council Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Chris Burden
Cllr Jonathan Crofts
Cllr Zee Russell (Chair)
Cllr Clare Simm
Cllr Udey Singh (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Tersaim Singh

Members of Our Council Scrutiny Panel that attended via Teams

Councillor Milkinder Jaspal
Councillor Jaspreet Jaspal
Councillor Paul Appleby

Employees

Charlotte Johns
Mark Taylor
Earl Piggott-Smith

Director of Strategy
Deputy Chief Executive
Scrutiny Officer

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 being live streamed to the press and public. A recording of the meeting would be available for viewing on the Council's website.
- 2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Zee Russell explained the protocol to be followed during the meeting for asking questions and reminded everyone that microphones should be muted and cameras off, unless have been invited to speak by the Chair.
- 3 **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following Cllrs:
 - Cllr John Reynolds
 - Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
 - Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
- 4 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Relighting Our Council**

Charlotte Johns, Director of Strategy, introduced the report for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Director of Strategy advised the panel that the Relighting Our Council strategy document sets out at a high level the approach of the Council to developing a flexible and agile operating model to best meet the needs of the City and which also responds to the learning from the global pandemic.

The Director of Strategy commented that the pandemic has led to changes in the ways of working and has shown how technology used more effectively can help to improve productivity and efficiency, reduce the carbon footprint of the Council, and support improved staff health and well-being.

The Director of Strategy outlined the background to the development of the strategy, the guiding principles that informed the approach and the benefits to the Council. The Director of Strategy gave details of the key areas of focus for future work in the development of the Relighting Our Council approach.

The Director of Strategy gave details of the initial performance data and the funding to deliver the revised Relighting Our Council programme plan to the panel.

The Director of Strategy advised the panel that Mark Taylor, Deputy Chief Executive, was also in attendance to answer any questions about the draft report. The draft report will be presented to Cabinet on 17 November 2021 for approval. The panel were invited to comment on the draft strategy report.

The panel supported the principle of flexible working and the approach to developing a new flexible and agile operating model detailed in Relighting Our Council vision and strategy draft document.

The panel suggested that consideration should be given to the tools and strategies that would be used to collect information and help the Council to understand what productivity and performance looked like for employees working remotely. The panel understood that a key part of the approach was performance management and noted that some initial performance information was included in the report.

The panel suggested that consideration is given to providing productivity and performance data at departmental level to allow for comparison across the Council. The panel understood that the initial performance data already provided would continue to be built on and requested that departmental and work pattern information be provided when available.

The panel welcomed the assurance from the Director of Strategy that a key part of the approach would be to continuously assess how and if processes were working, through ongoing engagement with employees and key stakeholders, and that if something was not working then changes would be made to the strategy.

The panel highlighted the reduction in the number of respondents who took part in the first life in lockdown survey compared to the second survey and queried the reasons for this.

The Director of Strategy reassured the panel that in addition to the lockdown survey data there had also been a range of other employee engagement activities and consultation exercises, including continuous dialogue with employees, trade unions and other key stakeholders to gather their views during this period. The strategy document is a product of that ongoing and continuous conversation with employees, trade unions and other groups about how the Council works going forward.

The panel suggested that consideration is given to finding the reasons behind the reduction in sickness absence and whether data from previous years could also be included to allow a better understanding of the trend. The Director of Strategy advised the panel that there had been a 16 per cent reduction in sickness absence excluding COVID during 2021 and that this equates to a reduction 4645 days of absence.

The Director of Strategy commented on the increase in the number of mental health reasons as a factor for employee absence and added that further information is available about the different categories of sickness absence.

The panel discussed the definition of sickness absence and a scenario where an employee who reports they are ill but can continue to work remotely. The Director of Strategy advised the panel that in such circumstances an employee should not be working and gave details of the range of initiatives and sources of information on offer to support employee's health and wellbeing. The work was done in direct response to employee feedback in relation to working in a more agile and flexible way. The Director of Strategy gave examples of the activities offered to employees throughout the pandemic and assured the panel that this work will continue in the future to help individuals to manage their health and well-being in the future.

The panel queried the reasons for the reduction in the call abandonment rate to customer services and suggested that this should be further investigated. The Director of Strategy commented that colleagues in customer services would be willing to present information in response to the enquiry and give more details at a future panel meeting.

The panel discussed the publication of details about Council owned assets and how any surplus assets were promoted to community and voluntary groups who may be interested in submitting a bid.

Mark Taylor, Deputy Chief Executive, advised the panel that information about all Council owned assets was available on the Council's website and the information was updated monthly. The Deputy Chief Executive shared relevant links to the website with the members of the panel.

The Deputy Chief Executive also commented that where an asset is expected to provide a significant commercial return then the Council will seek to sell it, although that would only happen after consultation with colleagues across the Council as to any other potential use. At the end of the process consideration would be given to the benefits to the community of transferring the asset to a community or voluntary group, where this was considered a viable option such organisations would be able to submit a bid to secure the asset (a Community Asset Transfer (CAT)).

The Deputy Chief Executive added that the Council agreed a new CAT Strategy in 2020 and provided a link to that strategy and the webpage where assets of this nature were publicised as being available to voluntary and community sector organisations to bid for.

The panel queried the process when an employee challenges the allocation to one of the three assigned job 'work styles' – fixed, flexible and field in the strategy. The Director of Strategy advised the panel that no complaints have been received from an employee about their allocation and if one was received then the established HR process would be followed to resolve the matter.

The panel discussed the issue of the home working allowance raised and understood that this would be considered as part of broader employee discussions over the coming months.

The Director of Strategy advised the panel that the issue of a homeworking allowance had been raised by the trade unions and the Council would continue to engage with them.

The panel noted the full breakdown of financial implications and the associated resource costs included in the report and understood that there would be continued transparent reporting in relation to this moving forwards.

The panel noted that that there had been and will continue to be ongoing engagement with trade unions in relation to proposed changes to the current terms and conditions.

The panel discussed how managers were supporting members of their team who were working remotely.

The Director of Strategy advised that meetings such as professional conversations, health and wellbeing conversations and risk assessments were being used to make sure that employees, managers, and supervisors felt they were being properly supported.

The panel discussed the insights gained from the employee survey in relation to recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction and how this would inform matters going forward. The Director of Strategy commented that the impact of the proposed changes would be monitored, and the information used to provide a detailed understanding about recruitment and retention trends in the future.

The panel queried the feedback from partner organisations about the plans and were reassured by the Director of Strategy that positive comments had been received from key partners. The panel commented on the letting of space to partners in the Civic Offices and the benefits of co-locating were highlighted.

The panel welcomed the inclusion of a menopause policy in the strategy which had been endorsed by the Council in 2019 and was a good example of the work of the Gender, Maternity and Paternity Staff Equality Forum.

The panel supported the principle of flexible working and the approach proposed in the Relighting Our Council strategy document.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the report and support the recommendations detailed.
2. The Cabinet to consider the comments from the panel and additional information requested.
3. The specific information requested by the panel to be included in the response to Cabinet and considered when presented at the Cabinet meeting on 17.11.21.