

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission held at County Hall, Glenfield on Wednesday, 13 March 2024.

PRESENT

Mr. M. T. Mullaney CC (in the Chair)

Mr. T. Barkley CC  
Mr. M. Frisby CC  
Mrs. H. J. Fryer CC  
Mr. S. J. Galton CC  
Mr. T. Gillard CC

Mrs. A. J. Hack CC  
Mr. D. Harrison CC  
Mr. J. Morgan CC  
Mrs. R. Page CC  
Mr J. Poland CC

56. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2024 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

57. Question Time.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 34.

58. Questions asked by members under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

59. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

60. Declarations of interest.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations were made.

61. Declarations of the Party Whip in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 16.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

62. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 35.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 35.

63. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2024 - 2028

The Commission considered a report of the Chief Executive, the purpose of which was to seek its views on the draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy for 2024-2029 as part of an ongoing public consultation on the Strategy. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- (i) Members welcomed the proposal to adopt those with lived care experience as a 'protected characteristic'.
- (ii) Members were pleased to see that 93% of staff had provided positive feedback to the staff survey held in 2023 and agreed that the Council was committed to equality, diversity and inclusion. This demonstrated that many staff were treating others with decency and respect and suggested that the culture of the Authority as an organisation was largely good. For individual instances where this was not the case, it was important to ensure managers were equipped to respond and address such behaviour quickly. It was noted that the Council had been robust and clear in its response to some recent incidents which demonstrated its zero tolerance to hate and any member of staff affected would be supported.
- (iii) Members were assured that the information collected through staff surveys was broken down to head of service level which ensured anonymity of staff.
- (iv) The Council sought to ensure decisions were based on evidence and not perception. A data driven approach would therefore be adopted and this would include both quantitative and qualitative data. It was suggested that the Council needed to be clearer about the data it used and provide context where appropriate. For example, a Member suggested that the Stonewall workforce equalities index did not include all councils. Whilst therefore the Council was ranked as the highest performing local authority, which was to be welcomed, it should be made clearer out of how many councils it was being measured against.
- (v) Staff were being encouraged to report characteristics to better understand the Authority's staff profile and to enable it to consider any potential trends around complaints, recruitment and promotions. This would also support the Council's aim to create a representative workforce which would in turn enable it to better meet the needs of the communities it served.
- (vi) A Member commented that it would be important to ensure that the Council's increased digital approach did not inadvertently increase the barriers faced by some residents accessing either employment with the Authority or its services. As an example, it was suggested that the Council's recruitment portal was not easily accessible for those with a learning disability or who might have English as a second language. The Chief Executive provided reassurance that following concerns being raised, the Council's recruitment portal had now been updated to include a telephone option to make the process for requesting a paper version

much easier. This was welcomed by all Members.

- (vii) It was suggested that digitisation had both advantages and disadvantages. A Member commented that as the County's aging population increased there was a risk of people being left behind and so this needed to be approached with care and with EDI at the heart of the process.
- (viii) Members suggested that whilst deprivation was recognised within the draft Strategy, more emphasis was needed to capture hidden deprivation too. Reference to Gypsies and travellers should also include reference to Showmen and Boatmen. A Member further suggested that the Strategy was too text heavy and the inclusion of case studies would help make the document more accessible and relatable. It was also suggested that reference to members should be included within the Strategy to reflect their role as community representatives.

The Lead Member for Communities encouraged everyone to respond to the consultation as this provided a wealth of information to help the Council better understand how residents were affected in their daily lives and what barriers they faced. This helped the Council better shape the delivery of its services to address such issues.

#### RESOLVED:

- (a) That the draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for 2024-28 be noted and welcomed;
- (b) That the Chief Executive be requested to take account of the comments now made by the Scrutiny Commission as part of the consultation.

#### 64. Leicestershire County Council's Customer Programme and Approach to Automation

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources, the purpose of which was to provide an update on progress made in the delivery of the Council's Customer Programme, including the current approach being taken and the successes so far. The report also set out the Council's proposed approach to automation as an enabler for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of Council services. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

In introducing the report, the Director provided a presentation which included examples of some of the work undertaken. A copy of the presentation slides is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- (i) The Council had over 3,000 separate service routes through which customers could access Council services. It received over 400,000 contacts per month (excluding web page visits). This was therefore a major programme of work which would cut across all departments. Members commented that with so many ways to contact the Council it would be important to ensure the Programme did not overcomplicate this by adding even more channels. Variety was important but there was a risk that too many options could add complexity and confusion.
- (ii) The two key drivers behind the Programme were the worsening financial position of the Authority and the change in customer behaviour and expectations, accelerated

by the Covid-19 Pandemic. There had been a sharp increase in those seeking access to services and information through digital channels. A Member commented, however, that approximately 28% of people were not digitally enabled and so there was still a large proportion of people that would require access through traditional channels.

- (iii) Members raised concerns that digital options could alienate some residents, particularly those most vulnerable and in need of support. The Director confirmed that accessibility was paramount, and the Programme was not seeking to remove any of the current means of contacting the Council. However, as the Programme progressed some might cease or be adapted if they were found not to be operating well. All channels would be analysed in detail and reviewed end to end to ensure these were not wasteful and inefficient. Members were reassured that those non-digital channels that worked well and were being utilised by residents would always remain for those that needed them.
- (iv) Members noted that the Programme was in its early stages, but that good progress was being made and the forecasted savings target within the MTF5 was expected to be met this year and next. In response to questions raised, the Director confirmed that these were real savings, taking account of all project delivery costs, that would be delivered year on year. The budget of service areas achieving customer efficiencies including the Customer Service Centre (CSC) would therefore be a permanent reduction.
- (v) Members noted that, at present, the Programme was focused on ensuring online options were available and worked well for those that wanted to use them. A key aim would be to drive out wasteful processes that were no longer appropriate for a modern organisation and which were time and resource intensive. This would allow more time for face to face and telephone contact for those that needed this most. Self-service options had been developed, for example, for blue badge applications. These had been well received by residents and significantly reduced the number of contacts made to the Council.
- (vi) Regarding the blue badge online application process, Members noted that an appointment option had been established and customers that struggled with the online form could book a dedicated timeslot with an officer who could talk through and complete the form with them. The reduction in unnecessary contact with the CSC meant there was more time to provide this dedicated level of support. Members noted, however, that of those that contacted the CSC for advice about the online service, only a quarter went on to require a dedicated appointment. The feedback provided was that with some initial support, many would prefer to use the online option.
- (vii) Members noted that the reduction in demand for those contacting the Council by telephone had resulted in call queue times being reduced from an average of 24 minutes to 3 minutes. Whilst welcomed, a Member suggested that in some areas, call waiting times were still too long and that this continued to be a cause of frustration for residents. A Member challenged if this reduction in demand was genuine, or if there was an element of people being fearful of digital options and so abandoning contact altogether. The Director clarified that demand was not reducing but there had been a shift in the channels accessed. Demand for blue badges had therefore remained constant, but most contact was now made via the online self-service application form. Similarly for school admissions, improved digital

processes had reduced the volume of calls received.

- (viii) A Member suggested that the terminology in the report was not entirely reflective of the purpose of the Programme. For example, introducing self-service options was not to reduce customer contact per se, but to provide an alternative route for such contacts. This was therefore more about enhancing and improving the quality of access provided.
- (ix) A Member questioned if consideration had been given to the development of a Council mobile app. The Director confirmed that this had been looked at and was being kept under review. There were both benefits and disbenefits to this option. The development of an app would be costly both to at the outset and in ensuring this was kept up to date. Also, most residents that interacted with the Council did so on an irregular basis and so would be unlikely to download and use it. Therefore, priority had been given to the mobile optimisation of the website.
- (x) Members commented that their contact with the CSC was good, with enquires being acknowledged, numbered, and feedback provided in a timely way. However, issues arose when matters were then referred to departments for response. A lack of response (or update) from departments often resulted in frustration and repeat contacts and complaints. Members agreed that communication was key, as was a clear expectation around response times. Members noted that so far, the Programme had focused on the CSC, but that the intention would be to reach out into departments to make sure the end-to-end process for customer and member contacts worked well. Members suggested that a clear protocol with timescales that extended to departments was necessary to better manage expectations and avoid what was a common area of dissatisfaction. The Director undertook to consider this further and to look at how current processes could be improved to address this as part of the Programme.
- (xi) A Member challenged if new hybrid working arrangements could be having an impact on customer and member contact, causing delays within departments. Another Member commented that staff working from home were still working and that this needed to be made clear. However, the Council was operating with reduced resources, and so had to target these where they would be most effective.
- (xii) Members agreed that this was a far-reaching programme, and that progress would need to be monitored. The Commission requested that more detailed updates be provided as the Programme was progressed including case studies of the changes made to demonstrate how well this was working, the challenges faced and how these were being mitigated.
- (xiii) It was suggested that as the Programme was rolled out to departments, consideration should also be given to updating the relevant departmental overview and scrutiny committees. Furthermore, as all Members were a key point of contact for residents, it would be important that they were kept informed of changes and able to provide feedback. It was suggested that an all member briefing on the Programme would be beneficial.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) That the update on progress being made in the delivery of the Council's Customer Programme and the proposed approach to automation be noted;

- (b) That a further, detailed update on progress be provided to a future meeting of the Commission including case studies of the changes made to demonstrate how well this was working, the challenges faced and how these were being mitigated;
- (c) That the Director of Corporate Resources be requested to:
  - (i) Consider the comments now made regarding the need for improvement when CSC contacts were passed on to departments;
  - (ii) Consider providing an update to the relevant departmental overview and scrutiny committees as the programme was rolled out into individual departments;
  - (iii) Provide an all member briefing on the Programme given that elected Members were a key point of contact for residents, and through whom many contacts with the Council were made.

65. 2023/23 Medium Term Financial Strategy Monitoring (Period 10)

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources, the purpose of which was provide an update on the 2023/24 revenue budget and capital programme monitoring position as at the end of period 10 (the end of January 2024). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 10' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- (i) Notwithstanding the longer-term financial deficit faced by the Authority, a Member commented that officers should be congratulated for getting this year's deficit down to £3.2m since the previous quarter. Service budgets had shown improvement which suggested the actions being taken, which included the introduction of spending controls, were having the required impact. The improvement in cost inflation was also to be welcomed.
- (ii) Members recognised that cost pressures in children's and adult's social care and SEN transport continued unabated. Demand continued to rise but funding was not increased nationally to accommodate this. A Member raised concern that locally the Authority could not address this and that change at a national level was needed urgently.
- (iii) Members were pleased to see an increase in forecasted business rates income for 2023/24. It was noted that the additional income of £12.2m was largely made up of growth in the business rate base, which was more than had been accounted for in the MTFs, and an extra allocation from the Leicester and Leicestershire Business Rates Pool. It was not yet known what future business rates income would be, as such income could be volatile from year to year. Also, a government reset of the business rates retention system was overdue. Though not expected to take place until before 2025/26, this would result in a reduction to business rate growth retained. A prudent approach each year would be taken given such uncertainty. Essentially, current growth above the baseline had to be treated with some degree of caution when setting the Council's MTFs.
- (iv) Members noted that the tender process for works to Zouch bridge had been completed. Officers were currently undertaking the valuation process. The Director confirmed that the contract for the works should therefore be awarded shortly.

- (v) Whilst there had been slippage (i.e. a delay in delivery) in expenditure for the Ways of Working Programme this did not mean it would become overspent. Savings were therefore still on target to be delivered. A Member suggested that this had not been made clear in the report and requested that in future reports more context be provided.
- (vi) Noting the slippage and forecasted increase in costs for the Melton Mowbray Distributor Road NE, a Member questioned if risks had been adequately transferred to the contractor. Members were assured that standard industry contracts had been used and that the increase in costs had stemmed from unforeseen weather events and archaeological issues which were outside the scope of such contracts.
- (vii) Members noted that following the recent announcement of Network North Funding allocated by the Government following the cancellation of phase 2b of HS2, the Council would receive £238m under the Local Transport Fund element of that funding. However, this would be received over a period of 7 years from 2025/26. The annual allocations had not yet been confirmed and guidance was still awaited. This was expected at the end of March following which the Council would develop a schedule of priority projects which would be subject to engagement with members, and MPs and other stakeholders.
- (viii) In response to a question raised, the Director advised that slippage in projects in the capital programme did not have any revenue impacts.
- (ix) The Investing in Leicestershire Programme (IILP) held investments in both property and not direct property investments, such as pooled infrastructure funds and pooled bank risk sharing funds. The latter added diversity to the Programme. Members noted the Leicestershire Local Government Pension Fund held similar investments and these were therefore known to have stability and a good track record. The Director explained that income earned from the IILP had started lower due to initial investment costs made but that returns would increase year on year.

RESOLVED:

That the update on the 2023/24 revenue budget and capital programme monitoring position as at the end of period 10 (the end of January 2024) be noted.

66. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Commission would be held on 10 April 2024 at 10.00am

Tim 10.00am - 12.39pm  
13 March 2024

CHAIRMAN