

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission held at County Hall, Glenfield on Wednesday, 6 November 2024.

PRESENT

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

Mr. N. D. Bannister CC
Mr. T. Barkley CC
Mr. M. Frisby CC
Mrs. H. J. Fryer CC
Mr. S. J. Galton CC

Mr. M. Hunt CC
Mr. P. King CC
Mr. J. Morgan CC
Mrs. R. Page CC
Mr. T. J. Richardson CC

30. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 4th September 2024 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

31. Question Time.

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

32. 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).

33. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

34. 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.

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

There were no declarations of the party whip.

36. Presentation of Petitions under Standing Order 35.

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

37. Leicestershire County Council Community Safety Annual Update.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Children and Family Services, the purpose of which was to set out the work being undertaken by the Council's Community Safety Team to deliver the Council's Community Safety Strategy 2022 – 2026, and in undertaking the duties placed on the Authority in relation to crime and disorder in partnership with other statutory responsible agencies. The report was presented to the Commission in its capacity as the County Council's designated crime and disorder committee. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 8', is filed with these minutes.

In response to questions raised it was noted that domestic abuse services for men and women were separated due to their differing needs and the specific support required. Support provided to men and women from the LGBTQ+, Gypsy/Traveller, and Black, Asian and Multi Ethnic backgrounds was also separated to meet individuals needs.

A Member commented that good relations between the County Council, the City Council and district community safety partnerships involving the police and other partners had helped to ensure good community cohesion across Leicester and Leicestershire. It was suggested that this was one of the reasons Leicester and Leicestershire had not seen any rioting like that seen elsewhere in July and August of this year. It was noted that the County Council worked closely with the police and its counter terrorism unit and that there was good communication with community leaders and communities in general which meant they felt supported when incidents occurred.

RESOLVED:

That the update on work being carried out by the Council's Community Safety Team to deliver the Council's Community Safety Strategy 2022-2026 and in undertaking the duties placed on the Authority in relation to crime and disorder, be noted.

38. Leicestershire County Council's Customer Experience Strategy Consultation.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources the purpose which was to seek its views on the draft Customer Experience Strategy, together with plans for consultation and timelines. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 9' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- i. The Customer Service Centre (CSC) operated a sophisticated management tool which allowed it to collect data on all call response times and assess across each week how call volumes fluctuated. The Service could then adapt staffing to accommodate this as far as possible. A Member commented that residents sometimes suggested it was more difficult to get through to the CSC on Mondays and Fridays and the Director confirmed that these were the two busiest days when most calls were received which did affect response times. Call numbers were also affected by other issues such as seasonality.
- ii. There were several email streams into the CSC and the aim was to respond to these within three to five working days. The Service also dealt with social media enquiries for which similar response times applied.

- iii. A Member commented that whilst call response times had been included within the report, email response times had not. It was suggested that including such information might be helpful given that some calls might be received to follow up on emails not responded to within these timescales. The Director undertook to provide more information on email response times to members after the meeting.
- iv. It was noted that the Council had multiple access points across each service area and that different service areas operated different customer service systems, not all of which included an email option. For example, residents mostly contacted Adult Social Care via telephone or through the use of online forms. This and the current systems limited capability to track across the different contact channels limited the Services ability to monitor multiple contacts received from individual customers. It was noted that the new Strategy aimed to introduce greater consistency across the different customer service systems which members welcomed.
- v. Members raised concerns that residents often commented that the Council's website was confusing and difficult to navigate and suggested that this might hinder delivery of the Strategy. The Commission agreed that if residents could not make good use of the website, they would be more likely to telephone the CSC which would be counterproductive to delivery of the Strategy. Members were reassured that work was taking place with the Communications team to improve the website and that this formed part of the Council's overall plan to improve the customer experience.
- vi. A member questioned whether the County Council had undertaken research into the potential benefits of a joint web presence involving other partner organisations. It was acknowledged that many residents did not appreciate the distinction, for example, between the County and district councils, or the NHS and Adult Social Care services. The Director advised that there had been discussions with NHS partners but that its processes and data systems were incredibly complex which made a joint approach difficult. Joint working with district councils faced similar issues and would also be challenging given the varied political landscape.
- vii. A Member challenged why the Council had not pursued the use of mobile applications in the same way as some other authorities, particularly for matters such as reporting potholes that required fixing. It was noted that the Council had looked at the use of 'Apps' but that the benefits had not been shown to warrant the high level of cost involved in developing this. As technology improved, however, this would be kept under review.
- viii. The Lead Member for Resources emphasised that as the lowest funded County Council in the country, the development of bespoke mobile application was hindered by a lack of resources when compared to other authorities.
- ix. The use of text messaging had proved to be very successful in reducing demand on the CSC. Proactively contacting people to keep them updated on matters often prevented them needing to telephone the Council in the first place. The Director explained that the Council was using a SMS tool launched by the government but advised that this was still very much in its early stages. It was suggested that increased use of WhatsApp should also be considered and encouraged.

- x. A reduction in complaints was one area against which the success of the Strategy could be measured. Members were advised that trends regarding the reasons for complaints would be considered so that those that related to the customer experience could be addressed. However, often complaints related to, or were combined with, wider concerns regarding a service. Separating the issues out was therefore not always straightforward.
- xi. Members welcomed the use of SMS text messaging as part of the consultation which had generated a higher response rate compared to other consultation routes. It was suggested that this might be an area used more frequently in other consultations undertaken by the Council.
- xii. A Member suggested that despite this, the overall number of consultation responses was not very high when compared to the number of contacts received each day by the CSC. It was questioned whether the responses could therefore be treated as truly representative of people's experiences when contacting the Council and a Member argued that some degree of caution might be needed when relying on this data. The Director advised that the consultation formed only part of the information captured to guide the development of the Strategy and much had been done to analyse and track customer journeys across a range of service areas. This and informal engagement undertaken with customers had also provided good insight to support of the proposed approach.
- xiii. Overall, the Commission welcomed the new Strategy but commented that despite the drive towards digital options, a personalised approach to its customers would always be important across all contact channels. A member also commented on the need to ensure online channels were clear and concise and did not use complicated language or acronyms wherever possible to avoid confusion.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the proposed Customer Service Experience Strategy be noted and welcomed and that the comments now made be shared with the Cabinet for consideration;
- (b) That the Director be requested to more information on email response times to members after the meeting.

39. Investing in Leicestershire Programme Annual Performance Update.

The Commission considered a report of the Director of Corporate Resources the purpose of which was to set out the performance for the Investing in Leicestershire Programme in 2023/24. A copy of the report marked agenda item 10 is filed with these minutes.

- i. A Member commented that if not for the increase in value of the Council's rural estate, the Programme showed an overall reduction of approximately £8m. The Director emphasised that this was a long-term investment portfolio and all properties and other assets within this were subject to fluctuations in value over time.
- ii. A member challenged what appeared to be a 338% increase in the value of the Council's rural estate. The Director explained that this had resulted from a change in CIPFA guidelines and factors now required to be taken into account when carrying out such valuations. Previously this had been based on the rental stream

generated by a property. Now, account had to be taken of the length of any farm tenancy and the capital value of the land once vacant position was received. These and other such factors had significantly increased recent valuations for all local authorities holding such assets.

- iii. Concerns were raised regarding past management of the Council's rural estate and members sought reassurance that this was now being addressed. The Director confirmed that an action plan had been put in place and support provided by Savill's, a leading land agent. Additional resources had also been allocated to support this work.
- iv. A Member questioned why such improvements had not been made sooner, particularly in light of the incident at Firs Farm previously reported to the Commission. The Director reassured Members that the rural estate had always been managed but focus given to maximising capital returns from the estate and not to how it could contribute more widely. It had been acknowledged, however, that a change in approach and improvement in management practices were now needed and this would include some ongoing external professional support.
- v. A member commented that farms were usually passed down to family members and the introduction of the Council's rural estate many years ago had been to help and support those that did not have those connections but wanted to get into farming. This had served the Council and the local farming sector very well. A member further commented that the Council had a responsibility to its farm tenants, and this included helping them address rent arrears. Allowing these to accrue did not benefit the tenant or the Council.
- vi. The rural estate did not just generate an income but offered much more in achieving the Council's wider priorities, for example, around delivery of net zero targets and improving biodiversity net gains. A lot of work had been done to compare the Council's approach with that of other local authorities and external support would continue to be employed to ensure improvements were being made in line with current best practice.
- vii. A member commented that the new Government's approach to housing delivery had resulted in slippage in the delivery of many district council local plans, and in respect of the M69 Junction 2 Stoney Stanton development this had been the reason for the forecasted delay by Blaby District Council as referenced within the report. It was acknowledged that the timetable included within the report was only an estimate and still needed to be agreed through the District Council's governance processes. The Director undertook to amend the report to ensure this adequately reflected the reasons for delay.
- viii. In response to questions raised, it was noted that the returns included within the report were all net of costs. All property appraisals took account of initial and ongoing costs and market fluctuations when forecasting the returns expected from all direct and non-direct property investments within the Programme.
- ix. A member suggested that it was not always clear how much the Council had invested into a project compared to the returns now being achieved, nor the time it took to see a return on the Council's investment which was in some cases not expected for many years.

- x. A total commitment of £260m had been included within the Council's MTFs and to date approximately £220m had been spent. This left room for a further £40m of investment within the Programme. A member challenged if given current spending pressures faced by the Council this would be better invested elsewhere. Particularly as some of the projects within the programme gave rise to commercial risk, returns being subject to external factors such as the grant of planning permission, the agreement of local plans, and negotiations with developers.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the update provided be noted;
- (b) That a further report be provided at a future meeting regarding the County Council's future strategy for managing its rural estate and clarifying why the Council held these assets and their benefits for the Council and wider Leicestershire.

40. Medium Term Financial Strategy Monitoring.

The Commission considered a report provided by the Director of Corporate Resources, the purpose of which was to provide an update on the 2024/25 revenue budget and capital programme monitoring position as at the end of Period 6 (the end of September 2024). A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 11' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- i. Whilst in year pressures had been managed well, there was still uncertainty around how the long-term gap, approaching £100m by 2027/28 in the current MTFs would be addressed. The Capital Programme had been revised in June 2024 and current projections suggested this was still on track. However, an emerging risk of a possible overspend of £3m on highways maintenance was a concern.
- ii. The delivery of savings and demand management in Adult Social Care was welcomed. These had helped the Council's current overall budget position.
- iii. The biggest risk facing the Council continued to be the growing deficit on the High Needs Block element of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). Whilst there had been a commitment made by the new Government to look at this further, no detail and no timelines had been confirmed.
- iv. Though not yet confirmed, it was expected that the statutory override that allowed local authorities to carry a deficit on its DSG grant budget without requiring a Section 114 notice would be extended. A Member questioned what would happen if this was not so extended. The Director advised that many authorities would be forced to declare themselves bankrupt. The County Council, whilst in a better position than many other authorities, would need to allocate a large proportion of its reserves which were set aside to cover various items, to offset the HNB deficit. This would then impact on future financial resilience.
- v. The new Government had announced as part of its budget an extra £1 billion in high needs funding to help address SEND deficits across all local authorities. This formed part of the overall £2.3 billion planned increase in school funding for 2025-

26. It was not yet clear how this funding would be allocated and whether this would be targeted towards those authorities with the greatest deficit. It was not therefore known how this might benefit Leicestershire.

- vi. Children's social care residential provision was an area of increasing concern given the high costs involved for a relatively small number of children. A member commented that the market was clearly failing in this area with companies profiting from local authorities. It was noted that the Social Care Investment Partnership (SCIP) transformation programme aimed to deliver a number of children's residential care homes which the County Council would operate. Two such units were now operational and several more should be operational over the coming year. The Director emphasised that there would always be a need for a mixed approach given the complexity and varying needs of some children that required specialised support.
- vii. It was noted factors outside the Council's control hindered delivery of the SCIP programme. The Director explained that planning permission first needed to be obtained in respect of an identified property, the home then completed ready for occupation and a manager recruited before this could be inspected and certified for use by Ofsted. Only once this process had been completed could the Council begin to hire the staff needed to operate the home.
- viii. The Chair of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee provided assurance that this Committee received regular updates on transformation work taking place within the Department to address both SEND pressures and regarding delivery of the SCIP programme. It was suggested, however, that despite the recent announcement of further funding, without a full, national review of the SEND system, it was unlikely that budget pressures would be resolved in the foreseeable future.
- ix. A Member questioned if the Council had done robust research into possible alternatives to section 20 care orders (an order requiring the Council to provide accommodation for children in need in their area) and if so, whether, given the costs involved, this should be further revisited. The Director undertook to liaise with the Department and to provide a detailed response to this suggestion after the meeting.
- x. Members were reassured that the £2.5m acceleration payment to the contractor in respect of the Melton Mowbray distributor road was not additional spend over budget. This was simply bringing forward works to ensure progress following previous delays caused by poor weather earlier in the year. The Director reassured Members that officers were in regular contact with the contractor to ensure the project remained on budget so far as possible. However, project costs were based on a number of assumptions and there would therefore always be an element of risk.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the update on the 2024/25 revenue budget and capital programme monitoring position as at the end of period 6 (the end of September 2024) be noted;

- (b) That the Director be requested to liaise with the Children and Family Services Department regarding research undertaken into possible alternatives to section 20 care orders (an order requiring the Council to provide accommodation for children in need in their area) and whether there was merit in this being further revisited.

41. Annual Delivery Report and Performance Compendium 2024.

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive the purpose of which was to present the draft Annual Delivery Report and Performance Compendium for 2024 and which set out the Council's progress and performance over the past year. A copy of the report marked 'Agenda Item 12' is filed with these minutes.

Arising from discussion, the following points were made:

- i. Members welcomed the report and commented that this provided a useful overview of the Council's performance providing a wide range of statistical data that would be helpful when considering scrutiny topics for the future.
- ii. Members noted the progress being made in delivering the Council's Strategic Outcomes Framework and service improvements during the year, such as the excellent Ofsted rating for Children's Social Care.
- iii. Leicestershire was still toward the very bottom of the core spending power per head league table, despite considerable efforts to achieve fairer funding over recent years. Members supported the need to continue to make the Council's case to the new Government, as a new Council funding approach would likely be considered for future years. It would be important for local cost of living pressures, the costs of service delivery in rural areas, local pockets of deprivation and low levels of core funding power, as well as considerable service demands, to be recognised in any new settlement.
- iv. Low funding and generally strong outcome performance meant the Council was ranked as being cost effective, but it was suggested that this made further savings harder to achieve. The Committee recognised there were a range of areas under service delivery pressure and that its low level funding meant it faced an accelerated level of risk in trying to address these.
- v. The Committee noted the financial, demand and service pressures related to children's social care and SEND and the work underway to seek to mitigate those pressures. It also noted that adult social care performed well in relation to a range of operational metrics but less well on some survey-based satisfaction ratings. The Committee commented that this was linked to the Council's low level of funding which restricted its ability to provide the same level of service as those provided by other, better funded authorities. This was still, however, an area the Department would focus on. It was highlighted that the Council was also due a CQC Inspection in the coming months and that this would highlight any further areas for improvement, as well as areas of good practice.

RESOLVED:

That the Annual Delivery Report and Performance Compendium for 2024 be noted and welcomed.

42. Date of next meeting.

RESOLVED:

It was noted that the next meeting of the Commission would be held on 27th January 2025 at 10.00am.

10.00 am - 12.25 pm
06 November 2024

CHAIRMAN