

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 7 December 2022 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Cllr Phil Awford (Chair)	Cllr Terry Hale
Cllr Matt Babbage	Cllr Colin Hay
Cllr John Bloxsom	Cllr Jeremy Hilton
Cllr Ben Evans	Cllr Vernon Smith
Cllr Stephan Fifield	Cllr Lisa Spivey
Cllr Andrew Gravells MBE	Cllr Chloe Turner

In attendance virtually: Cllr Stephan Fifield

Substitutes: Cllr Susan Williams

Officers in attendance: Rob Ayliffe, Paul Blacker and Mandy Quayle

Apologies: Cllr Andrew Miller and Steve Mawson

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the meeting held on 25 May 2022 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

Members requested an action log be produced and added to the minutes going forward to enable them to keep track of outstanding actions.

ACTION: Democratic Services

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations were received.

4. WORK PLAN

Looking forward the next meeting of this Committee, budget scrutiny in January, a member raised that officers and Cabinet Members should be prepared to present and respond to questions on commissioning intentions, as well as budget allocations.

For their February 2023 meeting, members requested a summary of the budget and commissioning intentions agreed at the full Council budget meeting, in order to help the Committee better plan for next year's meetings.

ACTION: Democratic Services

5. STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE REPORT 2ND QUARTER

- 5.1 Rob Ayliffe presented the report which provided an overview of performance at the end of Quarter 2 2022-23.
- 5.2 Members noted that in certain cases, risks can be made worse by external factors, despite the efforts implemented to mitigate them (as in the case of rising ICT security risk). In some cases, there was also a requirement for a period of change before the risk levels began to be affected by measures or strategies implemented.
- 5.3 It was questioned what other strategies were ongoing in the council that had mitigating effects on climate change (beyond just attempting to slow it down through carbon reductions etc.). The officer explained that there were a series of adaptation plans that were at various stages of implementation. This included things such as; improving buildings on the council estate to better handle extreme heat and cold, flood resilience and alleviation plans, public health campaigns over the summer and business continuity plans.
- 5.4 A member raised concern that even though social placements and care packages were being implemented successfully, this wasn't resulting in an improved situation in emergency departments by freeing up hospital beds. It was explained that whilst care provision can affect the flow of patients out of hospital, it was not the only factor involved. In many cases, a discharge from hospital is reliant on other parts of the health system, rather than social care. As the government has discontinued the collection and publication of data, but we continue to track local measures in order to ensure that brokerage are enabling timely hospital discharges.
- 5.5 In response to a question on the impact of financial assessment delays on 'bed-blocking' it was explained that the delay affected the decision-making process for families who were having to decide on care provisions without knowing the full financial assessment. Officers were investigating ways to improve this process such as by moving to paperless solutions.
- 5.6 Another question was raised over the status of funding for the previously EU funded GEM project. It was explained that the EU GEM funding was due to end regardless of Brexit and was due to be replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in 2024. This new fund would have a different mechanism for access but will provide the same amount of money overall.
- 5.7 Several members expressed concern over staffing issues, particularly within social care. Members queried whether exit interviews were being used to their full potential to understand more about the reasons behind staff turnover. It was explained that both online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews were offered to staff leaving employment. These interviews were then reviewed and key issues analysed. At the moment, the main reasons given by staff for leaving were workload and supervision. 1 in 5 leavers

report ICT problems as a side frustration but not as their core reason for wanting to leave.

- 5.8 From an ICT perspective this was an improvement from last year where it was cited much more frequently as a core issue. The sense from reviewing these exit interviews was that staff satisfaction was improving from a period that had been very difficult. It was also explained that whilst skeleton staffing was in operation for adult social care over weekends, there was sufficient support in place. A member added they were concerned to understand that care workers were not paid for time spent travelling.
- 5.9 The Committee agreed to recommend the possibility of a Scrutiny Task Group to the Adult Social Care and Communities Scrutiny Committee to look at social care staff shortages and retention. This was subject to understanding whether such work was already ongoing within the Committee's work plan.

ACTION: Democratic Services

- 5.10 In response to questions about staffing for buses, it was explained that the response to the immediate issue of replacing lost bus routes had been effective and that attention could then turn to long-term staff shortages.
- 5.11 Members raised concern over tree planting targets, noting that a significant number of those already planted died over the summer due to a lack of watering and extreme temperatures, and how this would affect future targets. It was explained that current targets only measured the planting of trees, it was therefore unknown how many trees had died. It was proposed that this should be referred to the Environment Scrutiny Committee, and the Lead Cabinet Member, for further investigation.

ACTION: Democratic Services

- 5.12 Noting the level of risk around child Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments, it was explained that the Ombudsman complaints procedure was leading to fines being imposed on Councils both nationally and in our case for loss of education due to delays in the process. Officers were currently working to understand what staffing improvements were needed to help resolve these issues.
- 5.13 The risk around the implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy had been considered at length by scrutiny recently, and it remained a significant issue for the Council. It was accepted that the only way forward was to work in close partnership with district colleagues but it was also legitimate for GCC to first understand its legal position to help support these discussions.
- 5.14 A member raised concern that only 34% of staff were receiving regular appraisals. It was explained that the recent staff survey reported that 85% of

staff had received an annual appraisal so there was some inconsistency with reporting that was being investigated. The Committee stressed that managers needed to be encouraged to perform 100% of appraisals without fail. The officer confirmed they would take away the Committee's comments and concerns.

- 5.15 Members thanked officers for the report and answers to their questions, as well as for working with the Committee on improving the accessibility of this report over the past few years. Members were very pleased with the result.

6. CORPORATE RESOURCES PERFORMANCE REPORT

- 6.1 Rob Ayliffe presented the attached report, which members took as read and the Chair opened up for questions.
- 6.2 A member questioned how performance targets were set. Officers shared that it varied depending on the measure. Some goals were set externally, by the Information Commissioner for example, whilst some were based on benchmarking against counties of similar make-up.
- 6.3 Multiple members raised concern over the fact that complaints were shown to be increasing, as well as similar complaints recurring. It was queried how the council was analysing and learning from complaints. It was explained that whilst similar themes did arise, this was not due to a lack of understanding and learning.
- 6.4 The detailed circumstances of individual complaints tended to be very specific to that situation, which meant there were limits to what changes could be made more generally. Nevertheless, where more general patterns are identified, the complaints team work within the service area to develop improvements. In comparison to complaint numbers in other similar councils it was reported that GCC compared well and that whilst there would always be complaints that reoccur, patterns amongst complaints were looked for and acted on where possible.
- 6.5 A member asked specifically about the Local Transport Plan and what was being done about the fact that numerous indicators were not on target. It was explained that this was a subset of metrics that were being measured and many indicators that were on target were not presented in this report.
- 6.6 There were also concerns raised by multiple members about agile working plans. Concerns over what the exact policy was, how policy could vary depending on department and grade, and how this would affect aspects of council work such as in-person meetings, developing council culture and maintaining standards, particularly after quite a significant investment into Shire Hall buildings.
- 6.7 It was explained that across the council people were working roughly 2 days a week in Shire Hall. There was a clear awareness that different roles and

different departments had different needs. For some, it was much more important to be on premise, for others it was not.

- 6.8 At the moment, officers were trying to map out policies to be applied across different service areas such that agile working could be leveraged as a benefit to working for the council from a recruitment perspective and maximising productivity. This would take the form of an agile toolkit for each team. It was added that particular teams (the example given being social care workers) would spend almost no time on council premises so whilst the average was around 2 days a week, this was likely being brought down by those whose job role required them to be out in the county. It was confirmed that relocation packages were still available for certain jobs if required.

7. FINANCE UPDATE

- 7.1 Paul Blacker presented the attached report which provided an update on the County Council's Revenue & Capital Forecast Outturn Position for 2022/23.
- 7.2 Concern was raised again over the overspend on Children's Services, the number of children in care and being placed out of county and whether proposed increased staff salaries had been incorporated in the budget proposals. It was also queried whether a preventative approach would be more appropriate in these circumstances.
- 7.3 It was stressed that this was a very difficult budget to predict, notwithstanding that it had to be set 18 months in advance. The process for agreeing the budget started with it being set at the lower end of prediction, and then ensuring reserve funds were built in and available, should the actual spend end up higher. Members noted that the main difference between Gloucestershire and its neighbouring county councils was the length of time our children were spending in care, not the numbers. This was where future focus would be concentrated.
- 7.4 It was a legal obligation to balance the budget and across the council the budget set each February has been very closely stuck to throughout that financial year. The Children's Services budget had been increased by around £12-14 million each year, the overspend had resulted due to the demand and unit cost of placements increasing significantly, alongside the expected level of service going up too. Whilst a £10 million overspend can seem like a significant amount, it was reminded that it represented less than 2% of the total budget and balanced out with underspends elsewhere. It was added that the budget did take account the proposed 4% salary increase.
- 7.5 Officers added that there was a major focus on prevention, particularly for those children at risk of being referred into care. Councils were also beginning to explore setting up 'in-house' facilities to reduce the need to refer to private care services, but it would take time before this led to any tangible changes in overall demand.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

- 7.6 In response to a question over the Dedicated School Grant, the officer explained that the deficit in the grant was around £20 million and that an overspend of £6.4million was forecast specifically for high needs. This was unfortunately a national problem and one that the Department of Education was currently working with local authorities to fix. There had been an initial review and audit into the grant and it showed that the current demand far outpaced expectations on a national level.
- 7.7 There was a discussion about the underspend on health services and how this was being addressed. Members noted that the underspend was linked to lower public take-up in particular services. There was a lot of effort going into proactive engagement with the public to make the most of available provisions, but any underspend was also put directly back into the public health fund.

8. ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT

Members welcomed the opportunity to receive this draft report prior to it being considered by full Council. The following amendments were requested:

- Outcome summaries to added to all sections
- A section to be added around this Committee's review of performance data and how the accessibility of the data had been improved over the previous two years.

They noted that the vast majority of pre-scrutiny items had been considered at Environment Scrutiny, and this may be something they would want to consider recommending to other scrutiny committees in the New Year.

9. BUDGET SCRUTINY PROCESS

Member were content with the proposed running order for the 4 January 2023 budget scrutiny session.

It was requested that officers were clear they needed to reference both the budget and the commissioning intentions for their directorates throughout the day.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 12:55