

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Friday 9 June 2023 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT:

Cllr Matt Babbage	Cllr Alan Preest (Chair)
Cllr Andrew Gravells MBE	Cllr Wendy Thomas (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Terry Hale	Cllr Chloe Turner
Cllr Dr Andrew Miller	

Substitutes: Cllr Stephen Hirst

Apologies: Cllr Ben Evans, Cllr Colin Hay, Cllr Jeremy Hilton, Cllr Nick Housden, Cllr Lisa Spivey and Cllr Kathy Williams

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the meeting held on 19 April 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

4. CONSULTATION PROCESS

4.1 Adam Barnes, Head of Communications, presented this item. Members noted the following points:

- Engagement and consultation were two complementary processes but were very different in terms of their legal standing. Engagement was more about developing thinking and ideas, whereas consultation was a formal process to provide data to help inform decision makers.
- There were 4 main circumstances where a duty to consult may arise which included a legal requirement (e.g., the planning process) and where obvious unfairness would result if not carried out.
- The Gunning principles outline 4 key requirements against which a legal challenge would be assessed. In addition, the Chartered Institute for Consultation outline 7 best practise principles to follow when carrying out public consultation.
- GCC used a multichannel approach, tailored to the specific stakeholders group/s, to raising awareness of consultations such as: local media, multiple social media platforms, an E-newsletter portal, as well as more traditional methods such as library advertisement, face to face meetings and letters.

- GCC is a member of The Consultation Institute where advice and support could be sought on any consultation to ensure the right approach was being taken.
 - There was currently a review underway of the Charter between GCC and Town and Parish Councils – a key area of development here was to extend its reach to those areas in Gloucestershire which were unparished, linking in instead with key local organisations to help improve engagement and response rates.
 - GCC would also be adopting the Local Government Association's [guide](#) to engagement which offered more support in terms of case law, guides, templates, and future thinking to continue to improve the Council's approach and processes.
 - Ideas from members were welcome on how GCC could better communicate and raise awareness within their communities. Some engagement would be carried out in the coming months.
- 4.2 A member raised concern that a lot of GCC's consultation could not be said to be carried out at a formative stage of the decision-making process. Although strictly speaking the decision had not been made, it was unlikely much, if anything, would change as a result of the consultation and the Council should consider doing some consultations earlier. An example was given of the Council budget.
- 4.3 In relation to integrity and disclosure, a member felt that the consultation questions were not always as open as they should be, and often did not raise the issues residents actually wanted to engage on. Questions could also be very leading, rather than asking residents to give their opinion on different options, for example, 'do you think it's a good idea we plan to spend money on X', rather than asking 'what do you think we should spend money on'.
- 4.4 Officers recognised that this could not be disputed at times, but there were also times where consultation was very good and maybe these examples were less visible. The feedback was helpful and noted for further development.
- 4.5 Another member supported comments that the general public perception of most consultation was the decision had already been made and it was difficult for councillors to encourage participation. It was asked whether there were any examples of a consultation which had led to a change which could be shared with residents who had this view.
- 4.6 The comment was understood and noted to take away, but it was highlighted that consultation was one element of the decision-making process and therefore there was not always a clear link. It was confirmed that the new website would bring much better accessibility for residents on different devices, acknowledging that most would want to engage via their mobile phones.

- 4.7 Noting that one of the Public Participation Task Group's recommendations was to carry out a review of the Consultation process, and that no process to date had been established, a member asked when this would be happening. It was advised that Officers felt that as the council was only now beginning implementation of a new approach to consultation and engagement it would be more appropriate to engage members on matters that would help embed the new approach and what support and tools might help them in their efforts to raise awareness of GCC activity in their divisions..

ACTION: Adam Barnes

- 4.8 A Member asked whether it was possible to target specific groups on consultation to ensure those most affected, for example, had their chance to engage. Members noted there were a variety of ways to engage with specific groups, and this would be taken on a case-by-case basis. Social media could target on a number of areas for example, 'Next Door' could target specific geographical areas. The Council would also work with different organisations/services where it was important to engage with a particular customer or client group. During Covid there was more use of 'on the ground' engagement to those who did not have access to technology.
- 4.9 It was raised that technology issues can sometimes be a barrier for people completing consultation exercises. Officers agreed to explore whether they can see responses that were 'in process' and had potentially been abandoned due to technical issues.

5. STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE REPORT - QUARTER 4 2022/23

- 5.1 Rob Ayliffe presented this report and members noted the following:
- There had been a recent recruitment to key positions within the Climate Change team which would help to mitigate the risk around capacity to deliver and were really crucial in continuing good progress to date.
 - There remained a strong performance on highways safety defect repairs, and this had been sustained over a good period of time. It was noted that a lot of the dissatisfaction expressed in communities was in relation to 'other' defects that were not safety related. There was an Improvement Programme in place to look at how focus could be rebalanced to ensure the 'other' defect repair rate could better meet the community expectation.
 - Road safety in the county continued to be a concern, the KSI rate for the last quarter remained high. There was ongoing work to produce a more coordinated programme, looking at all aspects and tackling root cause.
 - GCC had secured £0.5m revenue funding from Active Travel England to drive on completion of the Gloucestershire Cycle Spin, progress on the M5 Junction 10 project remained on track and officers were progressing on a business case for a Mass Rapid Transit scheme in Gloucestershire.

- Children's Services would be undergoing a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) over three weeks which was a joint response to safeguarding across organisations. Once the Inspection was complete, members would be updated on its outcomes. The performance data was showing healthy signs in terms of quality of social work where repeat child protection plans had reduced significantly. Challenges remained around volume of activity and retention of staff. Contact to the front door remained extremely high but the overall picture was heading in the right direction.
- Significant pressure remained around SEND assessment delays, which was resulting in an unprecedented level of complaints and Ombudsman referrals. The Council was responding with significant in-year investment and had an improvement plan in place. By next month there would be 11 new case workers and a Peer Review was undertaken in April to help identify what else could be done.
- GFRS were experiencing an increase in their attendance time to accidental dwelling fires. This was a risk of having a rural county and a high level of retain fire fighters, which was an effective way of delivering a fire service in a rural county.
- Challenge remained on recruitment and retention of staff across the council but there was a clear plan in place to address this. Completion of PDRs was improving quarter on quarter with 71% completed on time across the council. The Corporate Peer Review had been delayed due to the JTAI but would be rescheduled when possible.

5.2 A briefing note would be provided on the Mass Rapid Transit proposal.

ACTION: Rob Ayliffe

- 5.3 In response to a question, it was advised that the risk register brought to Corporate Scrutiny reflected a director level view of where the Council was performing against its priorities, these reports were quality assured through Corporate Leadership Team and the Lead Cabinet Member to ensure they were a balanced view. The data and narrative on Council performance were in the public domain via this meeting's papers.
- 5.4 A member raised concern regarding the steady decline in average response times to accidental dwelling fires, stating this was the fundamental function of a fire service. It was advised in response that, although an incredibly important function, in reality, attending fires was a small proportion of what the fire service did, and the data must be understood within the context of preventative work. As the numbers in this dataset were so small, they were very volatile and a location of a fire in any given quarter could have a massive impact. Members were right to challenge this, and officers would be monitoring the trend closely but there was nothing as yet to suggest a bigger underlying problem. The number of deaths reported from accidental dwelling fires remained extremely low and thus the service response remained

effective, if not within strict time parameters. This discussion would be highlighted with the Fire Scrutiny Committee to monitor going forward.

ACTION: Democratic Services

- 5.5 It was noted that a number of small group sessions with members would be taking place over the coming weeks for officers to gain a better understanding of what a member's IT training programme needed to cover. This would then result in a structured programme to deliver to all councillors.

6. CORPORATE RESOURCES PERFORMANCE REPORT

6.1 Rob Ayliffe presented this report and members noted the following:

- The PDR completion rate for Corporate Resources had improved to 94.4%. With recruitment and retention continuing to be a challenge, this was one way to show staff that they are valued.
- There continued to be a high reliance on Locum and Agency within Legal Services and Strategic Procurement. Members were reminded of the 'grow our own' programme within legal which would have its first cohort of trained children's lawyers holding their own caseloads by September. The new Head of Service for Procurement was due to start at the end of August and similar conversations would be had to seek to address the same issue in this service area.
- Continuing work on agile working had identified the need for a Lone Working Policy to support colleagues who worked alone on a daily basis and to ensure their safety when doing so.
- There had been an increasing number of referrals to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman due to the backlog issues with SEND and Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs), and an increasing number of appeals being upheld. This reflected a growing national trend both locally and nationally, and while this remains a concern, the rate of complaints upheld against Gloucestershire appeared similar to that of other Councils. Without these, complaint referrals had never been lower across other services.
- There had been a slight increase in the time taken to respond to Freedom of Information Requests, but this was being managed effectively.

6.2 It was noted that feedback from staff was generally positive in terms of the new working environment and improved equipment. The IT survey was due to close the day of the meeting which would provide further feedback on IT challenges for staff and then there would be a more general employee survey at the end of the year.

6.3 Officers advised that when there was sufficient data on the rollout and embedding of the National TOMS procurement framework, its progress

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

would be tracked in the Performance and Risk Report for Corporate Resources. It was noted that it had taken better in departments where the core social value was within the contract itself, but it was more challenging where the value was as a result of the action taken within the contract. It was compulsory for contracts over a certain value.

7. WORK PLAN

A member requested the future item on cyber security be scheduled as a priority.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 11:40.