

# **CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 29 May 2024 at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

**PRESENT:**

Cllr Andrew Gravells MBE	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller
Cllr Tim Harman	Cllr Alan Preest (Chair)
Cllr Colin Hay	Cllr Lisa Spivey
Cllr Jeremy Hilton	Cllr Roger Whyborn

Substitutes: Cllr Beki Hoyland  
Cllr Mark Mackenzie-Charrington  
Cllr Kathy Williams

Virtual attendance: Cllr Wendy Thomas

Apologies: Cllrs Alastair Chambers, Chloe Turner, Paul McLain and Matt Babbage

## **2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes from the meeting held on 24 April 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

## **3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were received.

## **4. BUDGET AMENDMENT UPDATE**

- 4.1 The update report was taken as read and members were advised that the budget allocation figures for the 2024/25 amendments would be added to the report and republished.
- 4.2 There were a number of questions that required input from the lead Director for the relevant department. Cllr Stowe agreed to provide a written response, and these would be provided via the action sheet for this meeting.
- 4.3 Raising concerns of recent news reports around the fire risk for some electric vehicle batteries, a member urged for caution when purchasing equipment for the E Bike Hire Scheme.
- 4.4 Noting that the Youth Fund for Councillors had been extended for 2024/25, it was advised that this money was now available for members to submit bids on behalf of their communities, and any unspent monies from 2023/24 would be rolled over for use. It was noted that given this was the final year before the next Council election, the Cabinet Member would consider whether any unspent monies for 2024/25 could be put into a wider pot for members to access as a whole.

- 4.5 There was discussion about the allocation of the £150,000 towards additional resource for the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) team and whether this had made a material difference. The Cabinet Member confirmed he would ask for further information on the allocation of this budget amendment and the Chair confirmed that a Scrutiny Task Group was currently being scoped for members to review the current issues within TRO process.
- 4.6 It was advised that if members were aware of a particular school, they believed would benefit from action resulting from Budget Amendment 3 for 2024/25, they should raise this with the relevant Director.

## **5. RESPONSE TO THE RURAL ESTATE TASK GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 Cllr Stowe introduced the report by extending his thanks to the Task Group, supporting officers and stakeholders for their contribution to the Group's research task. He stated that the response from Cabinet to the recommendations reinforced the work already being done as a county council to encourage and improve productivity for its tenant farmers.
- 5.2 He thanked the officer team at GCC for being very proactive in supporting and encouraging tenant farmers to be forward looking in terms of environmental improvements and productivity. He summarised by advising that Cabinet were not able to agree with every recommendation but there was always an opportunity for members to put forward budget proposals for further work in this area.
- 5.3 Cllr Mackenzie-Charrington chaired the Task Group and welcomed the response from Cabinet. He emphasised that the Group were particularly keen to avoid further reduction of the Estate and took a long time to try and find a formula for retaining some of the sale proceeds for reinvestment into the Estate. He therefore welcomed the response to Recommendation 8. He also paid thanks to the officer team at GCC who he described as 'brilliant' and a wealth of personal knowledge. Cllr Mackenzie-Charrington reemphasised the recommendation in the report about succession planning and capacity for the department.
- 5.4 There was a discussion about the increasing awareness of the mental health pressures on farmers and questions around GCC's wider reasonability to our tenant farmers. Cllr Stowe was aware that organisations such as the NFU provided support mechanisms for farmers and the Chair of the Task Group added the immense support the officer team at GCC provided to tenant farmers, often building long-term, quality relationships. In addition, Cllr Stowe had asked the department to review the length of tenancy GCC was providing as he was aware this could often heighten anxiety in terms of longer-term planning for tenants.
- 5.5 Some members were disappointed that Cabinet would not revert to an 'acre for acre' policy (re-purchasing land when other land is sold), they felt that the

Council should be going further to invest and re-establish the size of the Estate, noting the extreme importance of land in tackling climate change and addressing food security.

- 5.6 In response, the Cabinet Member recognised the incredibly important work farmers gave to the county and did not see that tenant farmers were any more productive/environmental sensitive than the rest of Gloucestershire's farmers. He did not see the requirement of councils to subsidise this level of farming when the industry was more than capable to deliver it.
- 5.7 Whilst he understood the comments around reinvestment into the Estate, he stressed that all councils were under increasing financial pressure and that their focus had to be on delivering their statutory responsibilities (social care etc.), having a rural estate was a choice for the Council, not a responsibility. Land was also incredibly expensive to purchase, especially land with development potential and the revenue income from a rural estate farm was minimal in comparison. Cabinet were keen to use available monies to invest in the existing Estate for productivity and environmental management.
- 5.8 Whilst members recognised the competing financial challenges faced, they emphasised the future benefit that increased investment in land purchases could have for the council, be that for climate/biodiversity/food security or future capital receipts.

## **6. PERFORMANCE TARGET SETTING FOR 2024/25**

- 6.1 The information provided in the papers was taken as read and the following points were highlighted:
- It was good timing for this report as it explained the process behind the Quarter 4 outturn data and performance benchmarking report which was due at the Committee's next meeting.
  - Slide 4 showed the key principles that a head of service would need to consider when setting performance targets. The benchmarking aspect allowed the council to understand where it was performing in comparison to its statistical neighbours and inform decisions on increasing or reducing spend in that area.
  - There were two general principles around ensuring the target allowed for continuing improvement, but which also remained within the department's investment capacity. The targets went through various levels of challenge before being agreed, tested, and fed back on annually.
  - Members were reminded that the performance scorecards they received at scrutiny did not include every indicator across the council, as this would be a huge report, but if they required further detail on a particular area or project, the team would be able to assist.
- 6.2 It was advised that when it came to benchmarking, it would depend on the indicator being measured. Officers would always try to measure against a nationally recognised set of indicators, but these were not always available

and when they were, not all councils necessarily used them in the same way. This made it more difficult to provide credible benchmarking in some areas. The team would always do what they could to work with comparative authorities to standardise what they were measuring against, but some services often carried differing opinions on what measurement showed the true picture. This was particularly so in social care, for example, where it was particularly difficult to use numbers when referring to vulnerable people.

- 6.3 A member raised the lack of performance indicators longer-term, measuring success of the council's strategic priorities. In response, officers explained that next year the council Strategy was due for review, and this was something the performance teams would be working towards.
- 6.4 It was advised that some priorities when reported to the relevant scrutiny committee did not have targets against them as this was not always appropriate. The example was given of Freedom of Information requests, these were measured in terms of volume but did not carry a target number the Council was aiming to receive. What was measured however was how many of those received were completed on time, so having an idea of the volume received was useful in understanding if there was particular pressure on this area. There was however a very small number that did not carry an associated target.
- 6.5 A member commented that they were really pleased to hear the team were aware of the 'human element' to performance monitoring and not just focusing on numbers. Many indicators need to have the human context to be truly understood.
- 6.6 There was a request for the team to look at how they might include more customer feedback surveys to give a more rounded view to the statistics collected.

**ACTION: Darren Skinner**

## **7. IT IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE**

- 7.1 Mandy Quayle, supported by Sherril Holder, Assistant Director of Digital & ICT, updated members on the IT Improvement Plan. The PowerPoint was noted, and the following points were highlighted:
- Officers were pleased to report that today's update marked a significant move in the right direction for the IT improvement journey. They reiterated that this had started from a very complex place but overtime the gradual improvements had resulted in a much more stable infrastructure.
  - It was reflected that there were three main reasons why officers felt this update signified a milestone in the journey, which were:
    - All underlying 'building blocks', the core servers in the network had now been replaced.

- This had led to a much better understanding of the IT estate, making major projects much more predictable when being rolled out.
  - Implementation of a wider user support framework which was beginning to have very positive results for staff.
  - As always, officers were not suggesting the journey had finished, there were still some significant projects underway but the risks around the estate being fit for purpose and secure were now starting to reduce from being consistently high for a long period.
  - Slide 4 included multiple sets of performance measurements which all showed an improving trend of stabilisation since April 2021.
  - Slides 5 and 6 shared data and customer feedback of the new Digital Help Hub which had been a particular success for the team and had landed very well with staff.
  - Slide 7 explained that the current End User Support contract was due to expire in September, officers emphasised that the improvement journey to date would not have been possible without the current contactor, but the journey was now moving in a different direction and therefore the timing of contract renewal provided a real opportunity to take that next step.
- 7.2 Members thanked officers and their teams for the very noticeable improvement which had taken place over the past few years, finding the system to now be much more stable and accessible.
- 7.3 A member asked whether IT issues remained a consistent concern raised during staff exit interviews, particularly within social care. It was advised that there were still some comments from staff leaving around the historical issues with IT, which would be expected, but there was a clear reduction in IT being the main or current reason for staff leaving. HR had also implemented a 6-month new starter catch up with social workers to ensure any issues were dealt with early on.
- 7.4 Concern was raised that there was not enough project management experience within the council to support the efficient rollout of the IT major projects. It was suggested that had this been in place, the adverse impacts that had been experienced from recent projects would have been foreseen. This was particularly so in terms of staff feeling overwhelmed with the level of change being implemented and the need for more training support. Officers accepted this comment but reassured that there were more and more examples now of better project management, giving a recent example of the telephony switch over.
- 7.5 A member commented that they would like to see more of a culture in IT of continuous improvement. Now the systems were more stable, the next phase needed to be focusing on changes that would improve the customer experience, be that members of the public or staff/councillors. Officers gave some examples of programmes which were being explored to do exactly this, which was exactly what the next stage of the journey would focus on.

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

- 7.6 Officers reassured that they recognised the need to balance security with accessibility of systems. With technological advances continually coming forward, officers reassured that there were strict checks and balances in place before any new system was rolled out to ensure they were secure, managed data correctly but continued to be useable and protected staff's personal liberties. Things like Artificial Intelligence were constantly being reviewed and discussed, it was a very complex area.

## **8. WORK PLAN**

- 8.1 Reviewing the Committee's work plan, members made the following amendments:

- Allocate the future item on 'Contract Management' to the September meeting.
- Add a tentative item to December to receive an update on the 2023 Staff Survey Action Plan.
- Add future items on any legislative impact from the new Government post 4 July election and an update on the Council Estate improvements, including the school estate.

## **CHAIR**

Meeting concluded at 12:15

For a full overview of this meeting, please use the following link to access the recording <https://gloucestershire.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>