

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 26 July 2023 at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester

PRESENT:

Cllr Ben Evans	Cllr Dr Andrew Miller
Cllr Andrew Gravells MBE	Cllr Alan Preest (Chair)
Cllr Colin Hay	Cllr Wendy Thomas (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Nick Housden	

Virtual Attendance: Cllr Matt Babbage

Apologies: Cllr Terry Hale, Cllr Jeremy Hilton, Cllr Lisa Spivey, Cllr Chloe Turner and Cllr Kathy Williams

2. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes from the meeting held on 9 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

An update was given in relation to Action 1: *A survey is currently in development to gather feedback from Cllrs on GCC's current approach to consultation and engagement. It is planned for the survey to be circulated by the end of September.*

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

6. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

6.1 The order of agenda items was changed, and this item was taken first. George Grigg and Sean Bundy, Senior Project Managers in Digital & ICT, gave the presentation included in the report pack. The following information supplemented that included in the presentation slides:

- In relation to Slide 5 it was noted that the nature of a call can change the wait time quite dramatically, as well as the particular service arrangements for fielding and answering calls according to certain prioritisation. In this vein, the team were looking at different ways of targeting wait times, which were appropriate for individual services. This would also include looking at the quality of answer provided, using data such as resolving an issue on first contact, for example.
- The Council Strategy had identified the need to review available training for staff in relation to customer contact, Slide 8 showed a list of common themes where training needs had been identified. Training would mainly be online delivery where possible in order to reach as many staff as possible.

- To date 3 courses had been complete and were now available to GCC staff which included Introduction to Service at GCC, De-escalation and Assertiveness and Emotional Contacts, Resilience and Wellbeing, with another 3 soon to be made available.
- The Floods Communication Review was aimed at providing clarity for residents on which organisation was responsible for each area of flood response and where to get help during a flood scenario. This would also include improving communications with the public during a flood scenario, through the use of an extended Common Information Picture, as well as more timely updates on road closures for example. The team were also looking to improve proactive communications outside of a flood scenario for example, information being readily available at libraries located in flood risk areas.
- A new management system had been secured for the front facing Council website, with an aim to improving functionality, security, and accessibility. The team were currently migrating the existing website over to the new site and were on track for a 'go live' date of 4 September 2023.
- The 9 service areas selected for the project would be sent a summary of suggested updates to their web content, and a similar report would be put together for use by all other service areas to update their pages and bring consistency across the Council.
- It was added by the lead Executive Director that the team were doing a fantastic job on this project and were regularly feeding back to the four Lead Cabinet Members. The point was made that as a County Council, dissimilar to district councils, residents would very rarely contact GCC and want to access more than one service. It would therefore not be suitable to consider investing in one big Customer Relationship Management system that all contacts fed into. This project was more about seeking out best practice and implementing this across the board.

Questions

- 6.2 In response to questions concerning calls into Children's Social Care (MASH) it was noted that overall, the queue time was longer due to the more complex management of calls coming into the service. These calls could range from safeguarding concerns to general queries, and they could be from residents, case workers, different organisation etc. Colleagues answering these calls are trained social care staff, the exact role of staff answering calls will change depending on the nature of the call. The management of calls would mean urgent or high priority calls such as safeguarding would not have the level of wait time depicted in the presentation.
- 6.3 Noting the urgent need to increase foster carer capacity, members heard that one of the main concerns was that potential carers were being put off due to the complexity of the website. Once the migration onto the new platform was complete, the team would be working with the service to

consider future improvement changes, be this to the existing website or a new standalone site. It was added that the new platform also came with improved 'Search Engine Optimisation' tools which enabled GCC links to be prioritised and have better visibility on search engines.

- 6.4 A member stressed the importance of volunteer testing and interaction with the new website to ensure its usability for a wide range of different users and its suitability for the public. It was advised that there would be internal testing through the different service areas to ensure everything worked, and they would raise the comment about usability testing with the Communication team. It was added that the advantage of improved google analytics with the new website meant improvements could be made if data showed that certain issues were repeating themselves.
- 6.5 In terms of benchmarking with other local authorities on customer experience, this was one of the first research tasks undertaken when embarking on the improvement journey. It was highlighted however the quality of the data was not completely reliable due to the lack of universal customer experience standards to measure against. In addition, the team also looked at other local authorities who had improvement plans in place and had discussions about the barriers that they had needed to overcome to glean some peer learning in this area.
- 6.6 In response to a question around digital isolation, it was acknowledged that there were residents who were harder to reach cases in terms of customer experience as they were unable or potentially unwilling to use online services. It remained an important part of the improvement journey to ensure services remained accessible to all, but this was a complex issue to solve with no single way to address it. The teams continued to work hard to find solutions.
- 6.7 It was questioned what could be done to better integrate the new website with district council websites and provide a more holistic approach for residents. A central CRM system approach across all 7 local authorities in Gloucestershire was not a possibility due to the level of investment it would require at this time. There were currently 3 different systems used across the 6 district councils plus GCCs and there were ongoing discussions about how these could be better integrated. It was hoped that the revised Gloucestershire Community Charter would be a starting point to strengthening these links and relationships between councils. There was also the opportunity with the migration to Office 365 of in-house development to link processes together at least internally for now, which would make the customer experience easier when accessing certain services.
- 6.8 The Committee congratulated the team on their work done to date, thanked them for their very good and informative presentation today and wished them luck for the remainder of this project.

4. PERFORMANCE BENCHMARKING

- 4.1 Rob Ayliffe, Director for Policy, Performance & Governance, gave the presentation included in the report pack. The following points were noted:
- Members were reminded that this presentation was brought once a year to give a broad view of around 150 performance indicators and asks the question whether GCC was performing well compared with other local authorities.
 - It was hoped that this data would give members reassurance around GCC's performance, that services were setting the right targets and also gave early sight on areas where the council may need to consider making improvements ahead of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) setting process.
 - Each of the 150 indicators had a family group which in some cases was set by CIPFA or in others by the regulator for that set of services e.g., Ofsted. The methodology used looked at each indicator within its Group and measured how GCC was performing compared to all other councils and rated this within quartiles.
 - Due to the simplicity of the methodology, there were a few caveats that members needed to be aware of. As the data was presented within quartiles, this had the ability to exaggerate very slight differences in performance. For example, where a service was heavily regulated, benchmarking would expect to see most, if not all, local authorities clustered around high performance, a very slight reduction in performance could be exaggerated in the quartiles.
 - It was advised that the group of 'Good management and services' related to performance such as staff PDRs etc.
 - Members also noted that the nature of benchmarking data was that it took a while to filter through the system and therefore many of the indicators would be different now. This was particularly in relation to Children's Services as the benchmarked data was for 2021/22 which was within the height of the pandemic and GCC was much further back in its improvement journey. In a years' time officers would expect to see significant improvements in their measures.
 - Slide 3 gave an overview of the movement of indicators within each service area since the previous year's benchmarking.
 - Slide 4 gave a summary of areas where GCC was performing significantly better than its peer group and Slide 5 where it appeared significantly worse.
 - There was a caveat on the measure of whole-time firefighters. The makeup of the county's fire services reflected the need of the service and the characterises of the area, which meant there was purposefully a higher percentage of retain as opposed to whole-time firefighters. There was no link between response times and the numbers of retain or whole-time firefighters. It was therefore felt inappropriate to see a higher proportion as signifying good performance.

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

- For children's mental health admissions, further clarification was sought, and this difference in performance was as a result of the way the service was designed in Gloucestershire. For many other areas, hospital admission was done after a mental health assessment had been completed, whereas in Gloucestershire a young person would be admitted on arrival and assessed after.
- The percentage of agency social workers had improved since the benchmarking data and the latest data showed GCC as being average.
- Members would not be surprised to see the wait time for EHCP assessments listed as this was undoubtedly extremely challenging for GCC at the moment. The volume had increased dramatically and as a result, the wait time for completion had exceeded national guidelines. Additional resource had already been put into this service and there was a second tranche due to improve capacity further.
- The number of children being taken into care remained high but officers saw this more as a systematic result of a system under pressure, rather than a reflection of poor performance. The Ofsted inspections had confirmed the right children were coming into the system, but the rate remained high due to historical issues.

Questions

- 4.2 Members discussed the potential link between the significantly worse performance measures within Children's Services, and their impact on the budget overspend within this service. It was agreed this was an area for Children and Families Scrutiny to explore in further detail.

ACTION: Democratic Services

- 4.3 Officers advised that they do receive more routine and regular benchmarking data, but it was less complete, which is why a yearly report was brought to Committee once all areas were available and the appropriate analysis could be done. Although out of date by the time it was considered at this Committee, it was still a useful prompt of any performance areas that needed attention, and usually but this point, officers were able to give reassurance that these had been picked up and acted on.
- 4.4 An example was given of a discussion at Fire Scrutiny earlier in the month on the positive and negative impacts of Gloucestershire having a higher percentage of retain firefighters. This was obviously something the benchmarking data had flagged today, but it had already been picked up and was actively being discussed elsewhere in the Council and via scrutiny.
- 4.5 Members were in agreement that it was for the individual scrutiny committees to delve into the detail and have further discussions around any issues raised through the performance data.

- 4.6 A member raised that they were aware of the pressure the EHCP service was under at the moment but questioned why, if all other local authorities were experiencing the same increase in applications, Gloucestershire remained an outlier in terms of performance. It was advised that all areas were seeing an increase, but Gloucestershire was seeing an even higher increase overall. It was understood that there were particularly proactive parent and carer groups in the county who were helping parents assert their rights in this area. Whilst this was a positive for parent support, it may also mean issues were rising to the surface more readily in Gloucestershire as opposed to other areas. There were also improvements in process that had been identified to enable teams to address the right things in a more timely manner.

5. FINANCE OUTTURN

- 5.1 Paul Blacker, Finance Director, gave a brief summary of the report included in the report pack. Members noted the following points:
- This report reflected the 2022/23 financial years outturn position.
 - For revenue, there was an underspend of £910,000 which was a very good final position considering there had been a forecasted overspend of around £10m 6 months previous. The underspend was transferred into general reserves.
 - There was a large overspend in Children's Services of £12.6m which was offset by various savings, including a £1.4m underspend in Economy, Environment, and Infrastructure and £9.6m in Technical and Countywide - £3.9m of this was due to increased return on interest rates and £3.1m due to slippage in the capital programme.
 - There was an underspend of £1.7m on the Covid grant which was carried forward into this financial year and ring-fenced for any cost resulting from the impact of the pandemic e.g., economic recovery.
 - The savings programme for 2022/23 was £11m of which 85% was achieved and the rest would be achieved during this financial year.
 - No Council was obligated to include the Dedicated Schools Grant (a ring-fenced grant allocated to local authorities by the Government to support a range of education related services) within their outturn position but for many, including GCC, this was an increasingly worrying position. Last year there was an overspend of £17m, mainly in the high needs block. Making a cumulative deficit of £28.6m at the end of 2022/23.
 - The Capital Budget for 2022/23 was £149m, of which £123m was spent resulting in a slippage of £26m – the vast majority of this will be spent in this financial year.

Questions

- 5.2 In relation to the increasing deficit within the DSG, members noted that this was not something local authorities as a sector were losing sight of, it was

regularly raised in discussions with Treasury and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities about how this will be addressed. It was not just an issue in terms of having a deficit but also the underfunding, particularly within high needs.

- 5.3 A member raised the overspend within home to school transport. Officers advised that this issue was actively being looked at by the project team. It was a complex situation in that the current solution was highly customer focused but there was need for a more efficient approach to tackle an increase in demand, and to ensure no family ended up with a worse solution. The 2023/24 budget had also allocated more funding for this area.
- 5.4 Officers advised that there were active discussions around how some of the ring-fenced Public Health grant could be spent to relieve up and coming pressures for the service. Members were reminded that some of the grant had been carried over through recent years due to Covid impacts on service delivery and because time limited Covid grants being used to cover Public Health activity instead. Members were concerned that the grant was not just repeatedly carried over.
- 5.5 Members heard that the 'Invest to Save' reserve was available for service areas to bid with proposals that would make a saving in the long term, this saving would then be kept by the service for their benefit. When the reserve was beginning to run down, a discussion would be had at the end of the financial year as to whether it needed topping up from general reserves/other funds.
- 5.6 In terms of reserves in general, these were reviewed each quarter and External Audit provided an annual check where the Council would be required to give justifications behind the logic and decision on reserved funds.
- 5.7 A member questioned the list of written off debt in Annex 4 of the report, particularly within Adult Social Care and in relation to salaries. It was advised that when older people went into care, they were required to make a financial contribution towards that care. The vast majority of resident paid that contribution, but some did not, but the council was still legally obligated to continue to deliver that care regardless. All means available to the council to recover the debt would be explored, including via probate. Processes had been improved to minimise these situations but unfortunately sometimes the money simply could not be recovered. In relation to salaries, sometimes when colleagues leave payroll is not updated quickly enough, again most repay the money but sometimes people refused to repay the overpayment and recovery action becomes uneconomical, or the council loses contact with them. In both cases where debt was unrecoverable, the Council may take the decision to write it off.
- 5.8 Following on from this, a member asked if there was any benchmarking data available to understand how GCC compared to other local authorities both in

relation to Adult Social Care debt and the level of debt written off. Officers highlighted that the outstanding debt at the end of 2022/23 was £13.9m, £513,000 of which had been written off. It was stressed that this was a very low amount in relation to the overall debt, the rest of which was being actively recovered.

- 5.9 There was no useful or meaningful comparison that could be done with other local authorities in relation to written off debt as it was completely down to the choice of each council how much and when they decided to write off debt. Officers confirmed however they could provide some benchmarking data on the level of debt carried within Adult Social Care.

ACTION: Paul Blacker

- 5.10 A member asked for further information around the significant increases in Gloucester and Stroud in relation to Physical Disabilities External Care as stated on page 4 of the report.

ACTION: Paul Blacker

7. WORK PLAN

- 7.1 Members were advised that the items showing in red on the work plan were items that had been on the Committees future item list, and had been scheduled for potential dates during the recent Lead Members meeting.
- 7.2 Noting there were a lot of potential items for both September and December, the following suggestions were made:
- A report on Councillor Communications confirmed for September.
 - An update on recruitment and retention would be included in the September Corporate Resources report.
 - The December meeting would be extended to allow the inclusion of a progress report on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, the Social Value Portal, IT Improvement and an exempt item on Cyber Security.
- 7.3 A member raised they had a potential Task Group suggestion to discuss with Democratic Services on nutrition and health.

ACTION: Democratic Services

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 12:30