

PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 17 June 2022 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.01 pm

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Michael O'Connor (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Donna Ford
Councillor Damian Haywood
Councillor Ian Middleton
Councillor Jane Murphy
Councillor Andrew Coles
Councillor Nigel Champken-Woods (Substitute Member for Councillor Ian Corkin)

Other Members in Attendance:

Cllr Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
Cllr Callum Miller, Cabinet Member for Finance

Officers:

Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Organisational Development & Resources
Time Spiers, Director – IT and Digital
Susannah Wintersgill, Director – Communications, Strategy & Insight
Jo Hatfield, Delivering the Future Together Lead
Robin Rodgers, Programme Director for Partnerships & Delivery
Ben Awkal, interim Scrutiny Officer

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

12/22 ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR 2022/23 MUNICIPAL YEAR
(Agenda No. 1)

That Councillor Eddie Reeves be appointed Chair for the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

13/22 ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR FOR 2022/23 MUNICIPAL YEAR
(Agenda No. 2)

That Councillor Michael O'Connor be appointed Chair for the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

14/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 3)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Baines (Councillor Coles substituting), Councillor Corkin (Councillor Champken-Woods substituting), Councillor Fawcett, Councillor Johnson and Councillor Reeves (Councillor Murphy substituting).

15/22 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 5)

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

16/22 ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AGILE AND IT

(Agenda No. 7)

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Corporate Director introduced the report, which brought together three work streams: the refresh of the IT, Digital and Innovation Strategy; a framework for agile working; and the organisational development and employee engagement programme ('Delivering the Future Together' (DTFT)).

The three programmes were interlinked as good, efficient IT enabled agile working and an organisational development strategy was required to deliver agile working by enabling engagement with staff around the council's direction of travel as an employer and ensuring that that an agile workforce remained productive, efficient, effective and content.

The Committee heard that:

- a. The council had good IT capability. During lockdown, most staff had laptops and were able to transition to remote working; the challenge was in respect of enabling staff to use IT in a way which supports agile working – e.g. to work flexibly and collaborate in different online spaces. The agile framework represented a shift to long-term planning in respect of defining workforce agility and how flexibility and personal responsibility and accountability would operate in different cases; it was intended to support managers to develop ways of working which enabled them to deliver their services.
- b. Significant engagement had been undertaken with staff in respect of the agile framework and DTFT. Trade unions were regularly engaged with in respect of other matters; union representatives had been lightly engaged in respect of the development of the strategies, as their focus was more on employee relations and HR policy. There were no immediate plans to introduce home-based contracts; the council was part of the national terms and conditions framework and would follow what was agreed at that level.
- c. IT solutions were being, and human resources (HR) policy solutions were to be, developed around four agile work types. The work types were to enable the development such solutions, rather than pigeonhole staff.

- d. The labour market had recently become significantly more challenging and agile working was part of becoming an employer of choice.
- e. Corporate services adopted a business partnering model to make services, including procurement, more integrated. The agile framework was coproduced with staff champions and workshops had been held to avoid siloes and inform its development, and that of the property strategy. However, the differences between services were recognised and welcomed and the council was not to apply a 'one size fits all' approach to services in respect of agile and IT.
- f. Workforce reporting had recently improved, but HR metrics were not yet of the desired standard. Productivity measures were to be developed as part of a new HR strategy. There was an expectation of staff meeting in person from time to time under agile working. 12-3-2 – an appraisal, performance and management programme – had been reinstated.

In respect of IT specifically, the Committee heard that:

- a. The strategy was designed for the IT service rather than staff; the focus in respect of staff was working with them to improve user experience. The IT service had been redesigned in 2021 and had introduced a customer engagement team to better meet services' needs, work with staff in respect of user acceptability of change, and communicate changes with them more effectively.
- b. The 2019-2022 strategy was subject to annual reviews and had been initially developed with Member input. It was not reviewed in 2020 and 2021 due to the covid-19 pandemic. Following a review in 2022, only marginal changes were to be made as the strategy already included becoming more agile, aiming to modernise delivery, improve working and reduce costs. Digital innovation had been added to create a more holistic approach to technology. Digital infrastructure for the county, including broadband had also been added. The focus on cyber security had been increased due to increased risk.
- c. During the covid-19 pandemic, the council had procured a new printing service which reduced the number of printers on the estate. The Director – IT & Digital stated that reducing printing ('paper light') was the council's intention for cost and climate reasons. The transition would require management to maintain the support of staff and Members.
- d. The strategy delivered approximately £0.5 million in savings in 2021/22.
- e. The council's physical data centres were based in Birmingham and its virtual data centres were also based in the UK; the Director – IT & Digital was certain that no council data was stored outside of the UK. A Member noted that the council's virtual data centres were only carbon neutral due to offsetting.
- f. The IT & Digital Service was ensuring that the council's buildings had the necessary connections to enable the Zero Trust model. The council did not have all the required levers to alleviate the county's digital connectivity issues

but was doing what it could to improve the county's infrastructure. Generally, staff had been able to work remotely with success.

- g. The Director was confident in the capabilities of the Service, which had a proactive apprenticeship scheme to enable succession and was providing digital T Levels to students from the Institute for Technology.
- h. A programme board with representation from across the directorates was responsible for approving IT purchases and the council aimed to procure solutions which were as standard as possible to avoid additional costs. An efficiency programme was in place to remove redundant capabilities.
- i. An upgrade of the council's contact centre under the strategy had improved residents' experience of engaging with the council, including its responsiveness to contacts. Work remained to be done on improving digital engagement, particularly the council's website and certain external portals.

In respect of agile working specifically, the Committee heard that:

- a. The Corporate Director was cautious about introducing remote contracts before the organisation had developed clarity on when those were appropriate or before the organisation had capability to support them. They did not consider that this would impact recruitment and retention as the council was already flexible and agile and some roles could be performed exclusively remotely. The council had recently initiated a strategic review of its employee offer and 'employer of choice' branding, which included IT options around improving recruitment workflow.
- b. There was an equity issue in respect of whether staff who worked from home should be reimbursed for costs incurred therefrom, when staff who commute would not be reimbursed for travel. Providing sufficient resource to deliver services was a greater priority than reimbursing home working costs at present. The health and safety risks associated with home working required consideration.
- c. The council was focused on employee wellbeing and appreciated the benefits of a shared culture and employee engagement. Occupational health support such as mindfulness was available. Relationships between staff and their managers were key – leadership and management development was to be recommissioned under DTFT. The employee champions network was central to enabling staff to provide feedback for escalation to the relevant people and on the employee experience.
- d. Consistency in relation to flexible working was managed through HR policy and advice to managers when staff requested flexible working arrangements under their statutory right to do so. Such arrangements balanced service and employee needs. The council aimed to avoid disputes in the first place, but they were addressed between employees and line managers in the first instance, followed by grievance procedures.

- e. The council's property portfolio was based on its pre-pandemic needs but it was not rushing to conclusions regarding its future needs. The developing property strategy was likely to include how the council would determine its property needs and include descriptions of the different properties that were relevant to that consideration. In the short-term, the council had buildings which were suitable to be used as pilot work hubs, but this would not involve mandating that staff transition to hub-based working.

In respect DTFT specifically, the Committee heard that:

- a. The council used a multi-channel approach to communicating the strategy and receiving feedback: employee champions; line managers; staff forums; and wider communications. The council's adopted a strengths-based approach to conversations with employees.
- b. It was recognised that the council had not previously been good at recognising staff performance. An online platform had been introduced to enable staff to receive recognition for their work. In-person employee awards were provided.
- c. An organisation-wide staff survey had been delivered and 600 staff participated in focus groups during the commissioning of DTFT. Employer accreditation in relation to staff satisfaction was being explored; benchmarked satisfaction would further the council's aim of being an employer of choice. The importance of responding to data on satisfaction was highlighted.

ACTIONS –

- 1. The Director – IT & Digital to provide the Committee with the cost to date and total anticipated cost of the IT, Digital & Innovation Strategy and the savings delivered to date and to be delivered by the Strategy under the Medium-Term Financial Plan.
- 2. The Director – IT & Digital to include 'paper light' processes in the IT, Digital & Innovation Strategy.
- 3. The Scrutiny Officer and Corporate Director – Customers, Organisational Development & Resources to discuss timing of bringing an update to the Committee on the implementation of Delivering the Future Together.

17/22 EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ACTION PLAN 2022-23 (Agenda No. 8)

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services introduced the report and its contents, highlighting that tackling inequalities was one of the council's strategic priorities. The council was committed to equality in all it did; the report drew together how that was embedded in services.

The broad range of actions produced for the 22/23 municipal year reflected a number of other strategies, had been developed so as to be more specific, measurable and time-specific than previously and reflected staff feedback. The council was working more closely with directorates to embed equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Achievements in the previous municipal year included improving key human resources policies to make it easier to tackle bullying, harassment and discrimination.

The council had recruited a senior policy officer with responsibility for inequalities, who worked within staff networks to enable the development of policy which reflects lived experience.

The Committee heard that:

- a. The framework and action plan were not required by law.
- b. The council had outcome measures specific to activities, some of which were harder to define measures for than others. It was important to consider peoples' views, particular staff networks'. The council had consulted staff communities when introducing the EDI framework. External evaluation and validation were also useful indicators of performance: the council had received a Stonewall Bronze Award for its work with trans communities and been shortlisted by the Local Government Chronical for embedding EDI in its work. While the framework was broader than human resources, human resources casework – e.g. staff experiencing discrimination in the course of their work – was a useful indicator of performance in relation to EDI.
- c. The 22/23 action plan was more ambitious, specific and embedded in council services than its predecessor and had been coproduced with services. For example, service plans were now subject to equality impact assessments.
- d. The framework and action plan were a key but small element of delivering the council's strategic priority of tackling inequality. Achieving equity in educational attainment and addressing the rising cost of living, for example, were outside the scope of the action plan but key to delivering the council's priority. The development of a broader strategy around inequality could follow from the plan.
- e. The council's apprenticeship team worked to provide career opportunities for people from under-represented backgrounds. Staff at lower grades were being supported to complete English and maths qualifications to enable career progression. It was suggested that apprenticeships be added to an overview & scrutiny work programme.
- f. The council's social value policy supported EDI as well as other priorities, such as the environment and sustainability.
- g. The Head of Insight and Corporate Performance was delivering an action to identify how the council's various strategies interfaced.

The Committee observed that it would be useful to have a single document with performance measures drawing together all of the council's work in relation to the strategic priority of tackling inequalities.

RESOLVED – That approval be given to the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee, to agree draft recommendations via email in consultation with the Committee.

18/22 PRESENTATION: RESPONDING TO THE UKRAINE CRISIS
(Agenda No. 9)

The Programme Director for Partnerships & Delivery gave a presentation on the council's response to the 'Ukraine crisis'.

The Committee heard that:

- a. The council's response comprised two main schemes – 'Homes for Ukraine' and 'Friends & Family' – although there were other relevant pre-existing schemes and statutory duties, such as in respect of homelessness, access to education and safeguarding. The council's main additional duties were in relation to Homes for Ukraine.
- b. The county began receiving refugees within weeks of the programmes being announced.
- c. The government set local authorities' duties in relation to Ukrainian refugees and provided significant funding. Leading a whole-system approach, the council had worked with lower-tier authorities to apportion responsibilities based on who was best placed to deliver them, as national guidance was unclear on the delineation of responsibilities between local authorities in two-tier areas. Further to its pre-existing duties, the council was responsible for conducting checks on the suitability of accommodation and safeguarding which included a Disclosure and Barring Service check on hosts, providing information and guidance, support with community integration, and administering funding to hosts, guests and partner organisations.
- d. The system was developing further support for refugees, including rematching capabilities, seeking to streamline processes and providing a regular information bulletin to hosts.
- e. Things which had gone well to date included that the council was able to rapidly implement an effective multi-agency response following the county's response to the covid-19 pandemic; the council's leadership and delivery of programme management, data management and customer services functions while recognising the specialities and capabilities of lower-tier authorities had been critical; joint leadership of the response by senior county council and lower-tier officers ensured shared ownership and accountability; joint communications and stakeholder engagement had enable clear and consistent messaging which helped maintain confidence; and early involvement of the voluntary and community sector had been highly beneficial.
- f. Key reflections included that new and different requirements on the local system are expected and government viewed local government as a trusted and capable area of delivery – however, this required the council to maintain

response capacity and adaptability for medium- to long-term situations; practical data, systems and technology capabilities which enabled faster data sharing would benefit joint capacity to respond to events; and it had been challenging to manage public expectations when government announcements preceded the issuing of guidance and direction.

- g. A tracking tool enabled the council and partners to monitor people's progress through the resettlement process. There was not a significant issue in respect of refugees going missing.
- h. The number of visa applicants had stabilised, the number of Ukrainian refugees in Oxfordshire was not so significant as to overburden public services in the medium to long term, and national feedback indicated that refugees largely wished to return home once possible. Meeting refugees needs upon arrival was the greater challenge, although there were concerns in respect of social and health service capacity to support them in the longer term.
- i. The council's response had resulted in additional pressures on services, despite the provision of additional resource. Social services, for example, were diverting resources away from lower-priority work to meet the needs of refugees.
- j. There had not been a significant number of placement breakdowns, although there had been cases where accommodation was not deemed suitable once a refugee was already on the way to the UK. A process to address such issues – rematching capability – was being developed under the leadership of Oxford City Council. A Member highlighted that residents had told them that better public transport services in rural areas could alleviate pressures on placements; the Programme Director was to escalate this.
- k. Housing, employment and English language tuition were issues to be addressed to enable refugees to transition to independent living should the war in Ukraine continue in the medium term.
- l. There was sufficient capacity within the education system within the county; however, there was insufficient capacity in certain areas and in certain year groups.
- m. Earlier in the year, the Programme Director had led work to conserve institutional learning. The council should develop capability to respond to new emergencies and an overview & scrutiny committee may wish to review this.

The Deputy Chair suggested that in the future the Committee may wish to consider rematching, school placements, the impact of refugees on service capacity and finances, and emergency preparedness.

A Member highlighted that it could be useful for the council to maintain a register of the staff with emergency management capabilities.

ACTIONS –

The Programme Director for Partnerships and Delivery to raise with the Community Team the potential benefits of providing transport solutions to Ukrainian refugees accommodated in rural areas.

RESOLVED – That approval be given to the Chair and Deputy Chair agreeing draft recommendations via email, in consultation with the Committee.

19/22 DEVELOPING THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY FUNCTION

(Agenda No. 10)

RESOLVED – That the draft protocols be received via email in due course and feedback be received via email.

20/22 DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23 AND CABINET FORWARD PLAN

(Agenda No. 11)

It was noted that an additional meeting had been called by the Chair for September 2022.

RESOLVED – (1) That the Committee’s work programme for the 2022/23 municipal year be agreed.

(2) That the Committee noted that the work programme is a document that is subject to change and Members can add, subtract and defer items as necessary.

(3) That the work programme be considered at each meeting of the Committee over the course of the municipal year alongside the council’s Forward Plan.

(4) That further engagement be undertaken with the relevant Cabinet Members and Senior Officers to refine the work programme.

21/22 ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 12)

RESOLVED – That the Committee noted that the action and recommendation tracker which was to be used to monitor the implementation of formally agreed actions and recommendations.

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Date of signing 200