

SCRUTINY PANEL

11 DECEMBER 2018

Present: - Councillor Davies (Chairman), Councillor Bentley,
Councillor Coleman, Councillor Hayter, Councillor Luxford
Vaughan, Councillor Scordis, Councillor Wood

Substitutions None

Also present:- Councillor King, Councillor T. Young

193. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

194. Central Support Futures Review

Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Resources, and Dan Gascoyne, Assistant Director Policy and Corporate, introduced the report setting out the proposed changes to the Policy and Corporate service area and associated savings, following a review of the Council's Central Support Services.

Councillor King highlighted that whilst one of the drivers behind the review was to identify savings, it was also looking ensure a more efficient and effective organisation. A particular issue that had been highlighted during the course of the review was to build the resilience of the service. It was also important that Council officers felt ownership of the final outcome. The recommendations were not for radical change and the changes proposed were comparatively small in scope. This partly because the degree of flexibility was small but he was satisfied that the proposals were manageable and deliverable.

Dan Gascoyne explained the main features of the review and in particular highlighted the following points:-

- The review had a savings requirement of £200,000 per annum with a 'stretch' target of an additional £50,000 in order to deliver a sustainable budget for Policy and Corporate going forward

- There had been a process of staff consultation and engagement, and consultation with other services, who were the service's key customers. This had identified a number of themes, which had been combined into a proposed vision for the review:-

“The Central Services Futures Review will provide greater Workforce Resilience, make us more Customer Focussed and Financially Sustainable, and facilitate a Digital by Default approach, so we continue to be Transformation Enabling for the whole Council.”

- The proposals were currently out for consultation with officers and other stakeholders.
- Building resilience was a key issue. Policy and Corporate was already a lean set of services, with little spare capacity and there were existing workload issues. One of the aims of the review was to find a way of alleviating some of the pressures felt by officers and ensuring work was done at the appropriate level.
- The review needed to cover the true costs of the service. Whilst the service did generate some income, the income levels couldn't necessarily be guaranteed.

The Chairman thanked Dan Gascoyne for the clarity and quality of the report submitted to the Panel.

In discussion some questions were raised about the proposals around Change and Performance. In response, it was stressed that change management needed to be led by senior management and was the responsibility of managers across the organisation. This did necessitate a cultural change across the organisation, which was underway. The Panel accepted these arguments but stressed the need for managers to be provided with appropriate training on change management issues. The Panel also explored issues around the resilience of the service.

The Panel also suggested that it would be able to provide more effective scrutiny and better value if it saw proposals for service reviews at an earlier stage, and before formal proposals were made. Whilst it was appreciated that the details were often confidential at an early stage, it could exclude the public if necessary. It was explained that the proposals were currently out for consultation and the Panel's views would be considered as part of the consultation. In addition, the proposals were due to be submitted to Cabinet at its meeting on 30 January 2019 and the Panel could make a recommendation to Cabinet in respect of the proposals, if it saw fit.

A member of the Panel noted the changes proposed to the ICT team and sought a reassurance that the Council had sufficient resources to deal with the ever-changing ICT environment. In response it was explained that the Business Partner model had not worked

particularly well in ICT so there was a move away from that and towards the use of ICT advisors. Sharepoint and Office 365 should be fully embedded by March 2019, and this should free up additional resource, although support would still be provided for legacy systems. In addition, the revenue requirements for the next stage in the ICT Strategy were being met through the proposed structure in this review.

RESOLVED that:-

(a) The proposed changes in the Central Support Services Review were scrutinised and the Panel's comments be considered when the proposals were referred to Cabinet;

(b) The financial savings proposed in the Central Support Services Review were scrutinised.

195. Half Year 2018-2019 Performance Report including progress on the 2018-2019 Strategic Plan Action Plan

Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Resources, and Dan Gascoyne, Assistant Director Policy and Corporate, introduced the report setting out the performance for the 2018-10 half year, and an update on the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

Councillor King explained that the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) had been reviewed in view of the Panel's previous comments that some were insufficiently rigorous. The targets in respect of the time taken to process housing benefit claims and changes, and the time taken for local council tax support assessments had been made more challenging. He thanked the Panel for their comments which had proved beneficial. The presentation of the information about the KPIs had also been changed. It was now presented in graph form showing year to date performance and the previous year's performance and target. It also retained the narrative used in previous reports. This would make it easier for the Panel to identify and review trends in performance.

Dan Gascoyne highlighted the Key Performance Indicators where the performance was amber:-

- Processing of major planning applications: There were a comparatively small number of 'major' planning applications, so a small amount missing their target had a disproportionate impact. It was anticipated that performance against the target would improve and it was noted that performance in respect of processing of 'minor' and 'other' applications, which involved a far greater number of applications, was meeting its target.
- Residual waste per household: Notwithstanding that the performance was amber, performance against the target had improved dramatically. It was felt that the target may need to be amended slightly, but he was satisfied that performance was good and at a consistent level.
- Number of missed collections: Performance against this target was improving and it was anticipated that by year end it would be on track.

The only KPI where performance was red was in respect of sickness rates. Whilst rates of short term sickness were reducing, long term sickness was increasing. This was a matter of concern which was being taken very seriously within the Council. Each case was being looked at and case conferences being held to ensure that the necessary support was in place to facilitate a return to work, and where a return to work was unlikely addressing whether there were better options for the individual and the Council. The trends were not consistent across all the Council service groups and the organisation was looking at those areas where the issues were the most pronounced.

Councillor King stressed the seriousness with which this issue was taken. He was satisfied that the right approach was being taken. It would be difficult to bring the numbers down quickly or easily, in part because the figures were calculated on 12 month rolling period so it takes time for improved performance to be reflected in the figures. The level of change within the organisation and the consequent pressures being put upon staff were likely to be contributing factors. It was important that managers showed empathy and compassion and maintained relationships with those staff who were away from the office because of long term sickness issues and a briefing was being held for managers to reinforce these messages.

The Panel also expressed concern about presenteeism, particularly by those suffering with with mental health, and sought clarification about what training was available to managers to help identify and deal with this. Dan Gascoyne explained that whilst the Council was aware of presenteeism as a potential issue, he did not think it was a major problem partly as a consequence of the Council's flexible working practices. However, the Council was very much aware of the issue of mental health. The Staff Survey was currently being conducted which would provide helpful information about the views and morale of staff.

In discussion on the Strategic Plan Action Plan the Panel raised the following issues:-

- How the information in the report was assessed, amalgamated and reviewed and whether the structure of the report, in concentrating on particular actions, led to an incomplete picture being presented in respect of some issues.
- The timescale for the Economic Strategy Strategic Plan Action Plan report. It was also suggested that that this would be a useful item for pre-scrutiny. Councillor King undertook to provide further information to the Panel about the timescales.
- In respect of theme O5, whether the Council had the ambition to convert all Council vehicles to electric only by a set date, and to make them available to staff via a car share system. It was explained that the conversion of the fleet was being looked at, although it might be more difficult to convert waste collection vehicles.
- In respect of theme W5, why did the Diabetes Support Programme events at Leisure World have a low attendance and whether the Council was pushing health organisations to address diabetes. Pam Donnelly, Strategic Director for Customers and Partnerships, suggested that there may be some benefit in inviting the North Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance to present their work to the Panel in the next municipal year.
- In theme R4, clarification was needed about the legal powers referred to and how these related to the legislation specified in the commentary.
- In theme G4, it was suggested the wording of this needed to include a caveat reflecting recent developments in respect of the Local Plan.
- In respect of theme O2, whether the charging points in Priory Street were being pursued given that it was understood that Priory Street would not continue as a car park. There should be a planning policy requiring the installation of charging policies as part of new developments. Councillor King indicated that he would look into these issues.
- In terms of the trial closure of the High Street mentioned at theme O3, the hours of closure were being looked at? Councillor King indicated that he would investigate and respond.

RESOLVED that:-

- (i) The performance set out in the Strategic Plan Action Plan Half Year report April – September 2018, the KPI Half Year report covering April – September 2018 and the Awards and other Performance News be noted.
- (ii) The Reporting Timetable covering 2018-19, specifically the dates for setting KPI targets for 2019-20, be noted.

196. Work Programme 2018-19

Richard Clifford, Democratic Services Officer, introduced the Scrutiny Panel Work Programme for 2018-19.

It was reported that the meeting on 19 March 2019, which was due to scrutinise the Arts Organisations, would be held at the Mercury Theatre. In addition an item relating to the North Essex Garden Communities would be added to the work programme for that meeting. An additional Crime and Disorder meeting had been scheduled for 26 February 2019. There was also a suggestion that the Scrutiny Panel also meet on that date, in order to consider the BID. However, it was noted that the BID were also due to present to the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel, and that the Chairs of the Committee would liaise over the arrangements.

In terms of items for the 2019-20 municipal year, following a suggestion from the Chair, the Panel agreed that it should scrutinise Colchester market, to ensure that it was fit for purpose and was delivering on its objectives. The Panel also welcomed the suggestion that the Panel invite the North Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance to present to the Panel in the 2019-20 municipal year. It was suggested that it might also be appropriate to host this at an alternative venue away from the Town Hall, in order to encourage interested parties and members of the public to attend. The Chair explained that she would continue to contact the Deputy Police and Fire Commissioner so that the Panel could look at the Essex Fire Plan.

RESOLVED that the contents of the 2018-19 Scrutiny Panel Work Programme be noted.