

SCRUTINY BOARD (STRATEGY AND RESOURCES)

MONDAY, 26TH SEPTEMBER, 2022

PRESENT: Councillor A Scopes in the Chair

Councillors G Almass, S Burke, P Carlill,
D Chapman, B Flynn, M France-Mir,
L Richards, K Ritchie and E Taylor

27 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection documents.

28 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no items excluded from the public domain.

29 Late Items

There were no late items.

30 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

31 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from the following Board members:

Cllr Caroline Gruen (Cllr Eileen Taylor attended as a substitute)
Cllr Sam Firth (Cllr Linda Richards attended as a substitute)

The following invitees also asked that apologies be noted:

Cllr James Lewis
Neil Evans

32 Minutes - 25 July 2022

The minutes of the meeting of 25 July were noted.

The Principal Scrutiny Advisor provided an update in relation to information requested in relation to minutes 21, 22 and 24.

RESOLVED:

33 The minutes of the meeting of 25 July were noted. Electoral Services Update

The following were in attendance for this item:

Cllr D Coupar - Executive Member
John Mulcahy - Chief Officer Elections and Regulatory
Susanna Benton - Head of Electoral Services

John Mulcahy and Susanna Benton presented a paper to the Scrutiny Board summarising voter behaviour in the May 2022 local elections and the progress of the Parliamentary Boundary Review 2023.

Susanna confirmed that in May 2022 the number of postal voters in Leeds was 186,367, which equates to 31.87% of the electorate. 62.27% of all votes received were cast via post and it is anticipated this trend in voting behaviour will be a long-lasting legacy of arrangements put in place during the covid-19 pandemic.

Susanna highlighted the actions taken to address the number of postal votes rejected from the number returned, noting a decrease from 3.22% in May 2021 to 2.11% in May 2022. This included introducing a second manual check of rejected postal votes.

It was noted that given the change in voter behaviour the number of polling stations required, and the location of those polling stations, will remain under review.

Members requested further information about any anticipated reductions in the number of polling stations in Leeds. In response officers noted that significant reductions are not anticipated given changes that were previously implemented during the pandemic period.

Members sought clarification about why some wards record a higher number of rejected postal votes than others. In response officers advised members that they have identified some errors occurring in homes where multiple people are registered to vote – and in such cases they advise those individuals that this has been the reason for a rejection.

The Head of Electoral Services agreed to review the wording contained in voter packs that sets out the options for depositing a postal vote at a polling station.

Members of the Board queried whether further information could be included in the packs provided to postal voters to assist in instances where language barriers may create a disincentive to vote.

The Board discussed the accessibility of electoral services for residents who need to collect a replacement pack in cases where their voting pack has not been delivered.

Members requested further information about the support provided to those voters with visual impairments and those in care settings. It was noted that tactile devices are already available in polling stations.

It was noted that the Elections Act will require a higher level of support to be provided in future to those who may require assistance to cast their vote.

The benefit of information services provided via third sector organisations such as RNIB were discussed.

Concern was expressed about proposals for new constituency boundaries set out by the Boundary Commission for England.

The Scrutiny Board was informed that the Boundary Commission for England is reviewing the responses received in relation to first and secondary stages of consultation on proposed new constituency boundaries.

Cllr Coupar put on record her thanks for the work of the elections team.

RESOLVED:

Members of the Scrutiny Board agreed:

- To note the report.
- The Head of Electoral Services will review the wording contained in voter packs that sets out the options for depositing a postal vote at a polling station.
- The Head of Electoral Services will review whether a link to information in other languages can be provided within the postal voting pack.

34 Annual Corporate Risk Management Report

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Cllr D Coupar – Executive Member
- Tim Rollett – Intelligence and Policy Manager
- Andy Dodman – Chief Officer Human Resources
- Polly Cook – Chief Officer Sustainable Energy and Air Quality

Tim Rollett introduced the Annual Corporate Risk Management report, which updates members on the most significant risks currently on the Council's corporate risk register and the controls in place to manage them.

Tim noted that the Annual Corporate Risk Report was reviewed by the Executive Board at its meeting on 27 July 2022. The report includes internal, organisational risks and external risks such as flooding.

Members were asked to note that due to the changing nature of the Council's risk environment, the rating for some risks – such as the corporate risk on workforce planning - have increased since July.

In the context of the financial management risks, the Chair welcomed the fact that the majority of Scrutiny Board members have now attended additional training on the current challenge.

Members of the Board requested further information about how the corporate risk map is developed. It was noted that insufficient school places and housing growth are included as 'medium risks.' However, members suggested that due to the impact of these factors on citizens and communities they could be regarded as high risk.

It was further suggested that the number of people currently allocated Band A on the housing register could provide evidence that a lack of affordable, quality housing is already a high risk for residents in some communities.

Similarly, members sought to understand how probability is determined on the corporate risk map - noting climate change is categorised as 'possible' rather than 'probable.'

In response, officers noted that impact and probability scores are affected by the level of controls in place to manage risk. For example, the level of planned development impacts upon the categorisation of the risk of insufficient housing growth.

External risks were explored including the way in which intelligence from partners such as the police might influence the Council's assessment of progress towards the KPIs linked to the Best City Ambition.

Members asked for an update on progress towards the target of halving the carbon footprint from council operations to net zero by 2025.

Polly Cook responded by assuring members the Council is on track to meet the 2025 target. She provided a brief update on activity designed to decarbonise energy supplies – for example, through developing solar farms and transitioning to an electric fleet. She noted that progress to move away from gas is more challenging.

It was agreed that the Principal Scrutiny Advisor would circulate the Annual Climate Emergency Advisory Committee report, which was considered by Council in March 2022 to provide further detail about ongoing activity.

Members requested assurance that the Council is working with colleges to ensure training in construction skills reflects demands for modern methods of building.

The Chief Officer for Human Resources was invited to outline the support in place for employees affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Specifically, he was asked if the link between financial exclusion and mental health may be considered as part of the management of absence.

Andy Dodman outlined the support already in place for employees, noting that the Council's financial wellbeing toolkit and video have also been adopted by several other anchor institutions. He noted the availability to of the employee assistance programme and an ongoing consideration of the impact of social and financial exclusion on staff.

The role of Neighbourhood Improvement Boards and Community Committees was highlighted as part of the discussion around managing a risk of escalating poverty. The Board considered whether community committees should be encouraged to target more of their available funding at those in the greatest need.

It was agreed that Cllr Scopes would write to Cllr Harland as the Executive member to reflect the Scrutiny Board's view that community committees may want to consider a specific element of their funding being dedicated to supporting those impacted by the current cost-of-living crisis. It was suggested committees could adopt a similar model to that used during the covid-19 pandemic.

RESOLVED:

Members agreed that:

- The report be noted.
- Cllr Scopes will write to Cllr Harland to reflect the Scrutiny Board's view that community committees may want to consider a specific element of their funding being dedicated to supporting those impacted by the current cost-of-living crisis – potentially by adopting a similar model to that used during the covid-19 pandemic.
- The Principal Scrutiny Advisor will circulate the last annual report of the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee to Board members.

35 Customer Contact Update

Those present for this item were:

Cllr D Coupar	– Executive Member
Polly Cook	– Chief officer Sustainable Energy and Air Quality
Sonia Macdonald	– Head of Shared Services
Andrew Byrom	– Head of Cloud and Platforms

Polly Cook introduced the item setting out the progress of the programme of transformation within the contact centre since the last report to the Scrutiny Board in February 2022. She highlighted that the report provided to members included an overview of work volumes and performance in the contact centre.

Key areas of interest included customer satisfaction, staffing levels, digital improvements, and the anticipated benefits of a Council Tax automation project.

The Scrutiny Board explored the outcomes of an improved digital offer for residents who wish to self-serve online. The use of new online forms in areas such as refuse, reduce calls to the contact centre and release capacity within the team. It is hoped this will help reduce overall waiting times.

The Board was informed that significant benefits are also being realised from the introduction of online forms for registrar services and to capture information required from landlords in relation to a third-party change of address.

An update was provided about progress with a project to automate several council tax processes to reduce calls to the contact centre.

The Board noted the need for the contact centre to be agile enough to respond to spikes in demand relating to factors outside of the Council's control – for example, a recent increase in cases relating to welfare support.

The Chair asked that it be noted that the Board welcomed the openness with which performance has been discussed since 2021, and he reiterated the support of members for the transformation programme.

Assurances were sought about the way in which calls are handled which highlight an adult safeguarding concern. Polly confirmed that calls relating to Adult Social Care are treated as a high priority and should be answered in 2 minutes. She also informed members that the staff handling those calls are highly trained and have direct routes into the service.

Polly Cook was asked to circulate a summary of call volumes and waiting times for Adult Social Care for the period April – August 2022, via the Principal Scrutiny Advisor.

Concern was expressed about the potential time taken to relay messages about the refuse service via the contact centre to the operatives who can take action to collect missed bins.

In response, officers noted that where services are using legacy systems not all functions can be integrated. Further improvements will follow as systems are updated.

The Scrutiny Board queried whether it is possible to trace whether a case has been resolved, particularly where a legacy system is in place.

Members recommended that further consideration be given as to how evidence of customer satisfaction can be produced in the context of the increased use of online forms.

Officers updated the Board on work with the Communications and Marketing Team on the corporate approach to mass communications issued by the Council. It is anticipated that clearer, more accessible communication could reduce avoidable contact coming into the contact centre.

Cllr Coupar reiterated that there is a focus on increasing digital self-service options for customers. However, she assured Board members the option to call the contact centre would also remain in place.

Board members sought assurances that elected members would retain a priority contact system to assist with case work. Cllr Coupar noted that dedicated member inboxes should be in place for all services.

Members discussed staffing levels in the contact centre given the recruitment freeze announced in response to the current budget challenge.

The Board considered the development of Chatbot technology, PowerApps and the procurement of a cloud-based phone system. It was confirmed that future rollouts would all be compatible with mobile technology.

Members sought and received reassurance that IDS regard the contact centre transformation as an organisational priority.

RESOLVED:

Members agreed that:

- The report be noted.
- Polly Cook / Sonia Macdonald to share chart summarising call volumes and waiting times for Adult Social Care in the period April – August 2022.

Cllr France-Mir left the meeting at the end of this item.

36 Work Schedule

The work programme for 2022/23 was considered and agreed.

It was requested that the Principal Scrutiny Advisor liaise with the Chief Officer Financial Services to take all financial papers as one item in November.

It was confirmed that 'Business as Usual' savings would be presented to scrutiny boards as part of this year's budget consultation.

The Chair provided an update to colleagues about a decision regarding the city's bid to host the Eurovision Song Contest, which was taken by him on 26 August 2022 in his capacity as Scrutiny Board Chair and in accordance with 'special urgency' provisions.

The minutes of the Executive Board meeting at which the decision was discussed are attached to the work programme.

RESOLVED:

- That the work programme be noted subject to the amendments to the programme for November 2022 detailed above.

37 Date and Time of Next Meeting

RESOLVED:

The next public meeting of the Board will take place on **11 November** at **10.00am**. A pre-meet will take place for Board members at **9.45am**