



Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber at The Forum, Moat Lane, Towcester, NN12 6AD on Monday 15 May 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Ian McCord (Chair)
Councillor Andrew Grant (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Paul Clark
Councillor Maggie Clubley
Councillor Rupert Frost
Councillor Mark Hughes
Councillor David James
Councillor Colin Morgan
Councillor Ken Pritchard
Councillor Azizur Rahman

Also Present:

Councillor Malcolm Longley – Cabinet Member for Finance

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor Jamal Alwahabi
Councillor Sally Beardsworth
Councillor Keith Holland-Delamere
Councillor Koulla Jolley
Councillor Richard Solesbury-Timms
Councillor Danielle Stone

Officers:

Martin Henry, Executive Director - Finance (Section 151 Officer)
Simon Bowers, Assistant Director - Assets and Environment
James Aldridge, Group Asset Manager
Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Richard Woods, Democratic Services Officer

55. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

56. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 6 March 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

57. **Chair's Announcements**

As this was the final meeting of the Committee prior to the restructure of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function, the Chair thanked all Members who had served on the Committee for their hard work since the formation of West Northamptonshire Council in April 2021, especially in the work undertaken to scrutinise the Council's budget setting process against the backdrop of significant financial challenges.

58. **Asset Strategy**

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director – Assets and Environment and the Head of Property Strategy and Estates which set out the current position on the Council's Asset Strategy and the disposal of assets.

In introducing the presentation, the Head of Property Strategy and Estates advised that the Council had approximately 979 assets, with a total market valuation of just over £1.5bn.

In response to questions from the Committee regarding the staffing structure and current staffing levels across the Assets and Environment Team, the Assistant Director – Assets and Environment explained that approximately 32% of the posts within the team were vacant, and that there had been a reliance on agency staff to cover some of these posts, with an associated increase in costs of agency staff of approximately 15% in the 2022-23 financial year. Members of the Committee asked further questions as to why there was such a reliance on agency staff, and in response to this, the Assistant Director – Assets and Environment advised that the recruitment market for individuals with the required expertise was highly competitive, and that market forces dictated that the Council was in direct competition with the private sector, which could offer greater remuneration than the Council could currently offer, however discussions had taken place with Human Resources regarding the feasibility of using market factor supplements for up to five years in order to make the Council more competitive in the recruitment market, thereby assisting in the longer-term vision to fill vacant posts and recruit and retain expertise.

The Head of Property Strategy and Estates also provided an overview of the ongoing transformation work that was taking place within the Property and Estates Team, with the centralisation of data from the four legacy Councils now underway within a single system, with the K2 system formerly in use with Northamptonshire County Council the chosen system. In response to questions from the Committee regarding the pace of transformation, the Head of Property and Estates added that the main barriers to transformation had been staffing, resources, and delays in moving data from the legacy Councils across to the new system.

In discussing future updates on the Asset Strategy, the Committee requested that a further comprehensive update on the progress of the Asset Strategy and of transformation across the Assets and Environment service be provided to the Committee before the end of the 2023-24 municipal year, with members of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be kept informed of monthly meetings between the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Assistant Director – Assets and Environment.

Resolved

- (1) That the contents of the presentation be noted.
- (2) That a further update on the progress of the Asset Strategy and transformation across the Assets and Environment service be provided to the Committee before the end of the 2023-24 municipal year.

59. **Modernising Systems Spotlight Review**

The Committee received the draft report of the Modernising Systems Spotlight Review, which detailed the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.

The draft report set out the key lines of inquiry followed by the Task and Finish Group, which were to identify what good systems looked like before any potential investments can be made, to consider both the capital and revenue expenditure for modernising systems, to examine how transformation from services were joined up, to understand the financial consequence of not progressing with the modernisation of the Council's systems, to recognise the benefits associated with the impact of modernising systems, for example, freeing up staff time and there no longer being the need to chase up data if automated.

Overall, the conclusions and key findings of the report focussed on the progress of transformational change within the DTI service, the Council's ICT systems and functions, the architecture of systems, information security and organisational risk.

Members of the Committee also passed their additional thanks to Councillor Mike Hallam – Cabinet Member for HR and Corporate Services, Chris Wales – Chief Information Officer and Sarah Reed – Executive Director, Corporate Services for the assistance they gave to ensuring that information was readily available for the Spotlight Review to consider.

Resolved

- (1) That the draft report of the Modernising Systems Spotlight Review be approved.

60. **Draft Annual Report 2022-23 - Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee considered the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee Draft Annual Report for the 2022-23 municipal year, for presentation to Full Council.

The Annual Report highlighted some of the key pieces of work that Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had undertaken during its second year of operation, and what issues the Committee would focus on in the upcoming year.

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work throughout the 2022-23 municipal year had focussed on a number of key areas, including budget and revenue monitoring, the Medium Term Financial Strategy, corporate performance, the transformation and performance of the Revenues and Benefits service, the ongoing pay and grading project, the annual review letter for 2021-22 issued by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Service, fees and charges, the capital programme, local area partnerships, ongoing transformation projects, and scrutiny of the Council's budget setting process.

The report also highlighted the Committee's work on the robustness of budgets in the care sector, namely in children's services and adult social care. This work focussed on the significant increase in the budget requirements for each service, which formed part of a wider national picture of demand-led pressures and sought assurances from the leadership of each service on how they would mitigate budget pressures, transform service delivery, and seek to alleviate the risk that demand-led pressures posed to the Council's budget for 2023-24.

Members of the Committee also thanked officers for their efforts in enabling the Committee to deliver robust and transparent scrutiny work during the 2022-23 municipal year.

Resolved

(1) That the Draft Annual Report 2022-23 be approved for presentation to Full Council.

61. **Review of Committee Work Plan**

The Chair advised that, as this was the final meeting of the 2022-23 municipal year, a Work Programme would be drafted and circulated and brought before the Committee's pre-meeting on 17 July 2023 for consideration, and that further information would also be circulated on the timetable for the Committee's Budget Scrutiny work for 2023-24.

62. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 7.18 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____