



REPORT TO: Cabinet 4 September 2019
FROM: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain, Chairman, Scrutiny and Overview Committee
Councillor Brian Milnes, Vice Chairman, Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Update from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee Chairman

1. Purpose

1.1 This report is to inform Cabinet of the discussions of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at its meeting of 20 August 2019, which Cabinet is asked to take into account in its decision making.

2. 2019-20 Performance Reporting Arrangements and Quarter 1 Operational Key Performance Indicator Results

2.1 The Committee considered the proposed performance reporting arrangements for the 2019-20 financial year and reviewed the Council's Quarter 1 position regarding its operational key performance indicators. Members also were advised of the revised approach to be adopted for performance reporting for the 2019/20 financial year.

Development Management

2.2 With respect to planning performance, the Committee had an in depth discussion on the decision of the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development to bring in additional capacity to support the processing of minor household planning applications. The Joint Director reminded the Committee that insufficient people resources and skills had been identified as a risk within the Strategic Risk Register and referred to the challenges faced in recruiting appropriately qualified planning officers, drawing attention to the high level of vacancies in the service. He reported that it was also difficult to engage agency staff, noting that such an option was in any event more costly to the Council. The option of entering into a contract to provide additional capacity to assist in the validation stage for household applications, for subsequent review by the case officer, had therefore been pursued. The Joint Director commented that a similar option had been pursued in 2014 when external resources had been used to support a range of functions within the service. The Committee was advised of the following drivers for the proposal:-

2.1.1. A national shortage of qualified planning professionals was causing recruitment difficulties for all local authorities. A campaign was under way to recruit staff. Officers who were appointed into the new shared service structure would shortly move to new job descriptions and increased investment in ICT would promote more efficient working, but, at present, some officers were carrying workloads 50% above the national average.

- 2.1.2. Staff were having to engage in difficult and complex decision making which was exacerbated by the high case loads, with associated implications for staff well being.
 - 2.1.3. Despite the service meeting its targets for determining applications (as indicated in the Q1 performance report before the Committee), complaints were being received concerning the performance of the service and communication with customers and residents. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development had sent an email to Members in the previous week outlining a series of measures designed to improve the customer/applicant experience and address growing workloads amongst staff.
- 2.2. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development confirmed that a formal tendering process had been followed and a contract with the successful service provider could be managed within existing budgets. The cost was competitive and cheaper than using the equivalent of agency staff. The contract would provide capacity for validation and assessment of simple applications, but the Committee was assured that decision making would remain with managers in the service. The contract was for four months and the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development outlined the nature of the monitoring that would take place in respect of the contract. The decision to secure additional validation and application assessment capacity from a service provider fell within the remit of operational management under the Council's officer scheme of delegation.
- 2.3. A range of views were expressed by Members of the Committee. Some Members were concerned that the service would be delivered by an external service provider which did not have knowledge and understanding of the local area and might not be available to respond to customers' enquiries. Concerns were also expressed that the decision to place the work externally had been taken by the Director without prior consultation or discussion with Members, most notably members of the Planning Committee, and that it was unsatisfactory to be notified about the decision by email after the decision had been made. Other Members acknowledged that it was important to take action to address the challenges currently being faced by the Planning Service, to improve service delivery and to seek to try to achieve reasonable individual officer caseloads.
- 2.4. The Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development responded to a number of questions raised by Members and assured the Committee that:-
 - Liaison would take place with the external service provider regarding the opportunity for engagement with customers in relation to their applications;
 - The external provider would be appropriately briefed on relevant South Cambridgeshire and local issues, background and context;
 - Consultation would take place with the Lead Cabinet member, and if appropriate, Cabinet, before any decision was taken to extend the four month contract.
 - There was capacity and capability within the Planning Service to deliver an effective and efficient client monitoring function in respect of the contract.
- 2.5. Whilst recognising the drivers behind the Director's decision and having noted the assurances given to Members, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee nonetheless emphasised the importance of proper monitoring and management of the contract to ensure that service of an appropriate standard is delivered to the Council's customers. The Committee is due to receive a report on the Planning Service in November which will present Scrutiny and Overview Committee Members with the opportunity further to review this aspect of the service is operating.

Housing Advice

- 2.6. In respect of Performance Indicator AH215 - % of successful homeless preventions as a proportion of all homeless prevention/relief cases closed, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee was informed that the data initially used for the completion of the report presented in their agenda packs, was inaccurate. Members were advised that the data had been reviewed and an updated document, which explained the methodology for obtaining the data, was tabled at the meeting. The Committee was pleased to note that, based on the revised data, the performance against the indicator was now rated as “green”.
- 2.7. With reference to Performance Indicator AH212, the Chairman of the Committee questioned why the spending on bed and breakfast accommodate appeared to have risen so sharply in June. However no response was available at the meeting and Cabinet may therefore wish to consider further the reason for this apparent marked increase.

Corporate Services/Shared Waste Service

- 2.8. The Committee sought to establish further information on the data behind Performance Indicator FS125 – Staff sickness days per FTE excluding Shared Waste Services Staff and Performance Indicator SF786a – Staff sickness days per FTE – Shared Waste Service, noting, in particular, that in the latter case, the majority of the sickness figures were attributed to musculo skeletal causes. The Interim Corporate Services Director provided further details to the Committee on the actions being taken to support managers at the depot to manage sickness absence and referrals to occupational health. Scrutiny and Overview Committee members have again asked for variance data to be provided as part of the performance monitoring results reporting, noting, for example, that results on sickness absence could be skewed significantly by instances of long term sickness.

3. Strategic Risk Register

- 3.1. The Committee reviewed the Strategic Risk Register and a number of questions were raised by Members. Given the Committee’s recent focus on ICT resilience and governance, Members were particularly keen to review the risk control measures relating to Risk Ref. G – Infrastructure Failure and received an update from the Lead Cabinet Member for Finance. The Chairman noted that, at its previous meeting, the Committee had learned from the Head of 3C ICT that many of the recent ICT problems experienced at the Council had related to the telephony system that required replacing and sought an assurance that work to address this risk would be progressed expeditiously. The Committee was informed that officers were working with 3C ICT to commission a project to progress the replacement of the telephony. Members were also updated on progress with roll out of the Council Anywhere project and noted that a wi fi audit had recently been undertaken. In terms of governance of shared services (Risk Ref. H), the Committee has welcomed the proposal to consider establishing a shared Scrutiny Committee for shared services.
- 3.2. With reference to the risk relating to Housing delivery and maintaining a 5 year housing supply (Risk Ref. C1), following questioning on whether annual monitoring of delivery against the housing trajectory was sufficient, the Committee was informed of a proposal to move to quarterly monitoring once new IT systems are in place.

4. Value for Money Strategy

- 4.1. The Committee reviewed the draft Value for Money Strategy. Members acknowledged the value of the strategy in demonstrating how the Council would seek to ensure that it was achieving value for money through the use of its resources. This was recognised to be particularly important in the context of the increasing emphasis towards efficiency savings, invest to save initiatives, income generation opportunities and in determining key investment priorities.
- 4.2. Noting the aim to reduce the cost of services without reducing the level of outcome or to increase the level of outcome for the same cost, as referred to in paragraph 4.6.1 of the strategy, Members felt it was important to be clear in advance about what monitoring mechanisms would be used to ensure that outcomes were not worse for customers and suggested that perhaps this should be clearer in the strategy. There was also a concern that the Council should not assume that capacity was available in the community or voluntary sector to pick up services the Council was no longer able to deliver. With reference to paragraph 4.9.1 of the strategy, Committee Members were mindful of the difficult judgments that would need to be made in balancing economic considerations with the need for environmental and social outcomes. The Interim Director of Finance advised the Committee that in any process of service change, a full review and risk analysis would need to be completed so that decisions could be made informed by an awareness of all relevant considerations. Additionally, as indicated in paragraph 4.5.1 of the strategy, monitoring mechanisms would need to be in place to ensure that desired outcomes were realised. The Chairman summarised that the aim should be to ensure that that reductions in the cost of services did not result in deterioration in the level of service received by customers and the Interim Director of Finance confirmed that the Value for Money Strategy should enable the Council to achieve that goal.
- 4.3. On a more general note, Committee members asked that a more considered analysis of the environmental implications of proposals be included in the relevant section of each committee report, noting that at present, very standardised responses tended to be included in this section.

5. Housing Revenue Account: Purchase of Affordable Homes and Review of Executive Scheme of Delegation

- 5.1. The Committee's feedback in respect of the above report has been circulated separately as the report to Cabinet contains exempt information by virtue of paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.