

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING Tuesday, 16th November 2021

PRESENT: Councillor Holly (in the Chair); Councillors Anstee, Hartley (substituting for Councillor Joinson); O'Neill, and Donna Williams.

OFFICERS: N. Thornton (Director of Resources), J. Rooney (Assistant Director – Customers and Communities), S. Smith (Deputy Chief Finance Officer), S. Knowles (Head of Internal Audit), N. Hine, H. Walton (Neighbourhoods Directorate), M. Nixon, K. Smith, M. Taylor and P. Thompson (Resources Directorate).

22 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bamford, Brett, Joinson, Nolan, Rana, Robinson and Wraighte.

23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interests.

24 URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

There were no urgent items of business for the Committee to consider at this meeting.

25 MINUTES

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held 14th September 2021 be approved as a correct record and that the actions list appended thereto be noted.

26 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Resolved:

That the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business, in accordance with the provisions of Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended.

Reason for the resolution:

Should the press and public remain during debate on this item there may be a disclosure of information that is deemed to be exempt under Parts 1 and 4 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

27 INSURANCE CLAIMS REPORT 2020/21

The Committee scrutinised a report of the Chief Finance Officer which provided members with insurance statistics and highlighted insurance claim trends. The main points included: the total claims cost mitigation amount achieved by the Insurance team during the period June 2020 – May 2021; the five year total for Liability claims paid/outstanding; a comparison to the equivalent statistics for 2019/2020 and in doing so the Committee noted that the number of claims had decreased significantly.

The report contained confidential data and trends in relation to the Council's insurance claims and informed Members of the impact on potential costs from the work of the Insurance Team and was intended to increase awareness of trends in claims over recent years but with particular regard to 2020/2021.

The Committee were advised that the vast majority of claims that have to be determined in Court are successfully defended by the Council.

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted and welcomed.
2. The Committee requests that future reports on this matter, include details of associated claims cost mitigation to the authority.

N.B. the press and public were readmitted to the meeting at the conclusion of this item.

28 CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2021/2022

Members considered the Committee's Work Programme for 2021/2022, which outlined a programme of reports to be presented at meetings during the 2021/2022 municipal year.

Resolved:

That the Committee's Work Programme 2021/2022 be noted.

29 DIGITAL STRATEGY

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Neighbourhoods that outlined a draft Digital Strategy for the authority. An extensive consultation on the proposals had been carried out including council employees, staff from the Council's partner agencies (such as Your Trust and Rochdale Boroughwide Housing), Council members and the public.

In formulating a Strategy, the Committee was advised that it would be necessary to be mindful of any recommendations, underpinning the entire exercise is the recognition that a proportion of the population in Rochdale is digitally excluded, through lack of access to technology, wi-fi or lack of skills. The reasons for digital exclusion were predominantly associated with low income, age, disabilities, learning difficulties, ethnic origin, location, culture, language and lack of capability.

As council services become more prevalent online, significant numbers of people may miss out because they can't or don't have the motivation to engage digitally. Digital exclusion is not new but the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that it is a barrier for some people.

The Committee was advised that Equality Impact Assessments are required. The initial screening document highlighted the need for a Strategy to address digital exclusion and the scope for certain digital solutions (such as AI and machine learning) to exacerbate existing inequalities. A full Equality Impact

Assessment will be undertaken in conjunction with consultation around the supporting Delivery Plan to the Strategy.

Work on the development of the Strategy has been taken up by the Policy, Performance and Improvement Team, within the Neighbourhoods Directorate. A broad internally facing consultation exercise within Council Directorates and NHS CCG around the draft Strategy, has been undertaken over the past few months. This has resulted in little deviation from the original draft and the incorporation of further achievements and progress. It has reinforced the fact that digital inclusion must be the top priority. An Internally facing Digital Strategy Working Group has been reconvened and widened. The initial focus of the Working Group will be the formulation of a linked Delivery Plan. It will also drive forward the engagement and consultation work around the delivery plan in the borough.

In terms of future developments the Committee were informed that the Digital Working Group was planning to host two workshops in the near future. The workshops will centre on the formulation of the Delivery Plan, which is linked to the Strategy. The workshops will provide specific focus on the resources required – both financial and staffing, to deliver the Strategy.

A further key area of focus will be the delivery of consultation with the public around the Delivery Plan and Digital Exclusion and there is a pressing need to establish an external facing Digital Partnership with other key Stakeholders in the borough to achieve the ambitions of the Digital Strategy.

The Committee was advised that this presentation was due to be submitted to the Cabinet in January 2022.

Resolved:

1. That the presentation outlining a draft Digital Strategy for the Council be noted, welcomed and supported.
2. That the Committee request the receipt of further update reports on this matter at future meetings.

30 RESOURCES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS DIRECTORATE PLANS 2021/2022: QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE UPDATE

The Committee scrutinised a joint report of the Director of Resources and the Director of Neighbourhoods detailing the progress at the end of Quarter 2 2021/2022 (30th September 2021) towards achievements of targets contained in the Resources Directorate Plan 2021/2022 and in the Neighbourhoods Directorate Plan 2021/2022.

In considering the report, Members were updated on the actions that were still outstanding at 30th September 2021 and which had received an 'amber' rating.

Resolved:

That the Resources and Neighbourhoods Directorate Plans 2021/2022 - Quarter 2 Performance (July – September 2021), be noted.

31 LOCAL GOVERNMENT & SOCIAL CARE OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL REVIEW 2020/2021

The Assistant Director (Information, Customers and Communities) provided Members with a report on the Annual Review of complaints made to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) about Rochdale Borough Council in the year ending 31st March 2021.

The Annual Review letter provided local authorities with the LGSCO's assessment of the Council's performance in complaint handling for the previous financial year. In addition, the review provides a general update on developments affecting the LGSCO and it also included details of the Council's compliance rate with the Ombudsman's recommended remedies.

The review showed that a relatively small number of complaints had been received against Rochdale Council by the Ombudsman during 2020/2021. In total 39 complaints and enquiries were received which was a decrease on the 51 complaints and enquiries that were received in respect of 2019/2020. The number of decisions made by the LGSCO differed from the number of complaints and enquiries received, as complaints may be received and decided upon in different financial years. To allow authorities to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, the LGSSCO did not accept new complaints and stopped investigating existing cases between March and June 2020. This reduced the number of complaints received and determined during 2020/2021.

Of 31 decisions made during 2020/2021, only six complaints were subject to detailed investigation. Seven complaints were referred back to the Council as premature to be considered under the Council's own complaints procedure, 14 complaints were closed after initial enquiries, two complaints were incomplete/invalid and advice was given on a further two complaints.

Of the 6 complaints that were investigated, all (100%) were found to be upheld. This compared to an average of 72% in similar authorities. The LGSCO recommended remedies for all of the upheld complaints, which were accepted and implemented by the Council.

The Committee was informed that with effect from the 21st December 2021 this Annual Report would also be presented to the Council's Audit and Governance Committee for their consideration.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.