

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

WEDNESDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2019

PRESENT: Councillors Geoff Hill, Julian Sharpe, Chris Targowski (Chair), Leo Walters (Vice-Chairman) and Simon Werner

Officers: Mark Beeley, David Cook, Nikki Craig, Catherine Hickman, Steve Mappley and Duncan Sharkey

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jones, Councillor Hill attended as a substitute.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th July 2019 were approved as a correct and true record, subject to the following amendments:

- That Councillor Jones requested a Task and Finish group for contract outsourcing and that this would take place alongside the Audit Work Programme that was focussing on the highways contract.

INTERNAL AUDIT REVIEW - HIGHWAYS CONTRACT PERFORMANCE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel considered the draft terms of reference for the Internal Audit review of the Commissioned Services Highways Contract Performance.

The Chairman informed that at the last meeting a review of commissioned services was added to the Panel's work programme with a focus on the highways contract. As Internal Audit were also undertaking a review he questioned if the Panel's work should wait until after internal audit had completed their work or to hold a separate Task and Finish Group. He was mindful of not duplicating work but also for the need for independent scrutiny.

Cllr Sharpe reported that as long as we had sight of the contract performance we should allow auditors to do their review and report back their findings.

Councillor Hill was keen on holding a task and finish group as it would allow for clear scrutiny of the contract in question, its original purpose whilst also considering whether outsourcing the Highways contract was still the right thing to do and how we approach outsourcing in the future.

Councillor Werner supported the idea of a task and finish group as members could draw down into any issues. He argued that according to reports, outsourcing was originally a method of saving, but this was now no longer true. He highlighted that it was important that RBWM was still gaining significant benefits from outsourcing, and should amend the agreement if this was not the case. This was agreed by Councillors Sharpe and Hill.

The Chairman mentioned that this panel should concentrate its efforts looking at the contractual arrangements only if there were operational issues these would fall into the remit of the Infrastructure O&S Panel.

Cllr Hill said that one of the consequences of outsourcing the highways function was that members could no longer come into the Town Hall to discuss and report issues with officers as they were now located in Slough. Cllr Walters agreed that it was more difficult to speak directly with officers.

Cllr Sharpe said that during the 1980's and 1990's there had been huge benefits to outsourcing but now we needed to look at how we operated such agreements and it was important that the council retained core skills so it could be an intelligent customer to extract the benefits from contracts. There were benefits such as economies of scale that the council did not have. There needed to be clear benefits and reasons to bringing services back in house.

Cllr Hill said that the council was the highways authority and should retain core expertise. The obligations of the contract may be met but anything outside its scope cost the council additional money.

The Chairman invited Duncan Sharkey (Managing Director) for his comments, to which he encouraged Members to use the 'Report It' function and only by receiving feedback can the contractors improve. The contract was currently delivering good value for money, and that they would often go above and beyond expectations. However, Duncan Sharkey admitted that they would need to improve their communication for example explaining when a fix was temporary. He said this item tonight was about the proposed terms of reference of the internal audit review, if the Panel wished to set up a task and finish group members would have to be clear on their objectives and have time to undertake a review.

The Chairman said that there were two issues the details of the highways contract and wider issues of how we act as a commissioning authority in the future. The audit terms of reference looked at the contract. The Managing Director informed that the proposal was for the audit review to be undertaken and feed into a potential task and finish group.

Councillor Werner agreed that the findings of the audit review should feed into the task and finish group. He said the task and finish group should be looking at how the council should award contracts in the future or if services should be kept in-house. Councillor Sharpe argued that the Panel should look at a set of guidelines or framework for how to arrive at a decision on future contracts.

The Managing Director said that the Director of Adults, Health and Commissioning was producing a commissioning strategy and that the Panel may wish to review an initial draft.

Councillor Hill believed that the council had outsourced many of its services recently, but that it was about delivering the best service possible to the public, with the outcome being the most important thing. We had to decide if we were to be a commissioning authority or to maintain core competencies in house.

The Panel noted the internal audits terms of reference and agreed that Panel members would consider how they wished to proceed with their task and finish group.

Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Panel considered the latest quarter one performance report detailing those indicators that fall under their remit.

The Managing Director informed members that the performance was in a good place. He drew attention to data on page 31, which showed that all but two of the targets were 'green', which was on target.

The Chairman commented that he was pleased with the staff surveys and that it was good to see comparison data comparing RBWM with other local authorities. He then questioned the Benefit Assessment Team, and the issues that they were facing when recruiting. The Managing Director informed that although performance was off target it was still high, however there remained challenges when attracting experienced benefit officers. The Head of HR informed the Panel that they had been making use of salary bands and 'The Gateway', an initiative to allow employees to move up to the next salary band, to attract and retain staff.

Councillor Sharpe questioned what a different authority would make of the report and whether there were national parameters that every local authority worked towards. The Managing Director responded that it is often hard to benchmark against other authorities as not all parts of the report were comparable. It would also be misleading to compare against neighbouring authorities which may have different data sets.

Councillor Werner referenced that Council's used to have national targets that made benchmarking easier, however they were now free to set their own targets.

(Cllr Werner left the meeting).

Councillor Hill said that benchmarking was a good thing as it allowed local authorities to compare performance and learn best practice. He expressed concern regarding the time taken to answer calls, which had fallen below 90%. The Council Tax collection rate was also down, although the abandonment rate of calls was good. Councillor Hill also queried whether visits to libraries could be recorded as a 12 month rolling figure.

The Chair expressed his agreement regarding the call rates, and empathised that RBWM should ensure that it can be contacted in any way that suits the customer. It was then asked if the report helped the officers with continued performance. The Managing Director responded that it did, not because of the report itself but by the process of putting the data together and supporting indicators as this allowed RBWM to see what needed to be improved.

Councillor Hill asked if more people were interacting with the council digitally.

The Managing Director informed that there was a need to get more people to interact with the Council via digital methods especially as it was more cost-effective, however residents should still have a choice how they contacted the council..

Councillor Walters commented that some people had no interest in going digital and that whilst it could save money it would cause some residents to feel alienated if they could not use traditional methods of communication. The Panel were informed that the council would continue to push digital transactions, but would still offer support and options for those that would rather not use this method.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report.

ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS REPORT 2018-19

The Head of Head of HR, Corporate Projects & ICT, introduced the 2018/19 annual complaints report prior to its publication on the RBWM website.

The Panel were informed that the period covered was April 2018 to March 2019 and that the Council was required under statute to produce a report for adults and children's complaints, but not on complaints relating to corporate activities. However, the Royal Borough's annual report covers all services.

The council's complaints process was made up of various stages depending on the type of complaint, with the complainant being able to take it to the local government and social care ombudsman if they remained dissatisfied once the council's process has been exhausted. The Panel were informed that in the last year there had been over 1600 contacts made to the Complaints team, of which 437 were progressed as complaints. Of these, 62 were for services covered by this Panel, with 7 for law and governance, 14 for communications and 41 revenues and benefits. These combined make up 14% of the total complaints progressed.

The main reasons for complaints were due to; a lack of action, attitude of staff and failure to follow time scales. It was confirmed that timeliness had improved in responding to complaints, from 51% in 17/18 to 64% in 18/19. Performance for the three corporate services in responding within timescales was higher than the council average with law and governance at 100%, communications at 71% and revenues and benefits at 88%. All three services also saw an increase year on year in timeliness in responding to complaints.

In relation to outcomes, overall the council upheld or partially upheld 67% of all complaints.

If a complainant remained dissatisfied, they could complain to the LGSCO. Of the 44 complaints and enquiries made to the LGSCO in 2018/19, six related to services within the remit of this Panel:

- 4 for law and governance; 3 of which were closed after initial investigations and 1 was not upheld
- 2 were for revenues and benefits; 1 was referred back for local resolution as it was premature and 1 was closed after initial investigations.

In terms of compliments, these had increased from 456 in 17/18 to 555 in 18/19. Of these 5 were for HR and corporate projects, 1 for communications and 7 for revenues and benefits.

The Chairman queried whether this meant that people were happy with the service that they were receiving, the Panel were informed that this could be the case or that there were less contacts made directly with officers due to the report it function.

The Chairman summarised that the report was clear evidence that the Council was doing a good job and that the feedback could be used in a positive way. Councillor Hill was in agreement with the Chairman and commented that it was an excellent and useful report.

The Panel were informed that the communication of complaints process had been much improved with regular meetings being held with leadership teams. Councillor Walters noted that Highways topped the list of complaints, although Councillor Hill argued that this might be due to the way things like potholes were reported.

The Panel asked for their thanks to be passed to the complaints team for their work.

Cllr Sharpe asked if it was possible to have complaints broken down by location and was informed that the way data was collected this may not be possible but officers would look into this.

Resolved unanimously: that the Panel note the report.

KEY RISK REPORT

The Panel considered the latest key risk report.

Members were informed that risk register extracts that supported the overarching report explained what the key risks to the council are and included both the mitigations which are in place and working along with those proposed.

Details of the officers who were in responsible for each risk was listed in the report. The Chairman asked whether some of the risks detailed in the report were likely to happen due to predicted problems, using the example of strains on the borough's hospitals as a reason for the risk of delayed hospital discharge. The Panel were informed that there could be a significant impact if mitigation was not put in place to manage certain risks.

Councillor Hill suggested that it was important to maintain the risk register and make sure that risks were carefully looked at and at the right level, such as Adult Social Care, Maidenhead regeneration, pensions and flooding which he felt that the risks should be rated at a higher level.

Councillor Sharpe believed that IT security was one of the biggest risks, especially with the aging equipment that RBWM currently used and should therefore be a high risk priority.

The Chairman queried why tree management was the responsibility of three people rather than one like the other categories and was informed that this was the only way of reporting this risk as there was no clear ownership.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; that the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel approves the report.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman confirmed that there would be further meetings in October and potentially November, with CIPFA being invited.

Councillor Hill suggested that the Panel look at the financial plans towards the end of the year.

The meeting, which began at 6.30 pm, finished at 8.10 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....