

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 4 OCTOBER 2021

PRESENT: Councillors Phil Haseler (Chairman), Gary Muir (Vice-Chairman), Julian Sharpe, Lynne Jones and Simon Werner

Also in attendance: Councillor John Bowden, Councillor Gerry Clark and Councillor Gurch Singh

Officers: Mark Beeley, Emma Duncan, Adele Taylor, Vanessa Faulkner and Nikki Craig

ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE CHAIRMAN

There had been a change to the Panel membership since the last meeting, with Councillor Targowski standing down as Chairman and being replaced on the Panel by Councillor Muir. A new Chairman therefore needed to be elected.

Councillor Werner nominated Councillor Jones for the position of Chairman. This was seconded by Councillor Jones.

A named vote was taken.

Cllr Jones to be Chairman (Motion)	
Councillor Phil Haseler	Against
Councillor Gary Muir	Against
Councillor Julian Sharpe	Against
Councillor Lynne Jones	For
Councillor Simon Werner	For
Rejected	

The motion fell.

Councillor Sharpe nominated Councillor Haseler for the position of Chairman. This was seconded by Councillor Muir.

A named vote was taken.

Cllr Haseler to be Chairman (Motion)	
Councillor Phil Haseler	For
Councillor Gary Muir	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	For
Councillor Lynne Jones	Against
Councillor Simon Werner	Against
Carried	

RESOLVED: That Councillor Haseler was elected as Chairman of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

Councillor Haseler had been the Vice Chairman of the Panel, therefore a new Vice Chairman needed to be elected.

Councillor Werner nominated Councillor Jones for the position of Vice Chairman. This was seconded by Councillor Jones.

A named vote was taken.

Cllr Jones to be Vice Chairman (Motion)	
Councillor Phil Haseler	Against
Councillor Gary Muir	Against
Councillor Julian Sharpe	Against
Councillor Lynne Jones	For
Councillor Simon Werner	For
Rejected	

The motion fell.

Councillor Haseler nominated Councillor Muir for the position of Vice Chairman. This was seconded by Councillor Sharpe.

A named vote was taken.

Cllr Muir to be Vice Chairman (Motion)	
Councillor Phil Haseler	For
Councillor Gary Muir	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	For
Councillor Lynne Jones	Against
Councillor Simon Werner	Against
Carried	

RESOLVED: That Councillor Muir was elected as Vice Chairman of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the remainder of the municipal year.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence received.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 23rd June 2021 were approved as a true and accurate record.

Councillor Werner asked why the finance update was not on the agenda for the meeting, it had been discussed in the work programme section of the last meeting.

Adele Taylor, Executive Director of Resources, confirmed that the update should have been on the agenda, she would ensure that this was added to the work programme going forward.

The Chairman said that this could be discussed during the work programme item at the end of the meeting to see where the update could be considered.

Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Adele Taylor explained that the council was currently working to an interim strategy, with the new corporate plan due to succeed the interim strategy once it was ready. The performance report reflected the councils performance against certain metrics from Q1:

- 4 of the targets were green and had succeeded or achieved the target
- 3 of the targets were amber and near the target
- 2 of the targets were red and needed improvement

The road to recovery for RBWM after the pandemic had been both positive and negative. Collection of business rates was below target, with a number of businesses not receiving their bills until early this summer, this was in line with the government's guidance and strategy. Libraries had been reopened and the number of visits had been gradually increasing. The time taken to process new claims had exceeded target. Adele Taylor explained that the budget setting process was underway and would be shaped by learnings from the CIPFA review of governance arrangements.

The Chairman commented on the issues with business rates and asked if this would pick up naturally over time or if there were any specific issues.

Adele Taylor said that it was difficult to tell as the targets had been set prior to this year. RBWM was performing similar to other Berkshire local authorities so there was no specific concern, she encouraged businesses to speak to the team if they needed guidance or support.

Councillor Werner said that national schemes like furlough and a ban on evictions were coming to an end and asked what effect this would have on the performance. He asked if discounted residents parking was in the medium-term plan.

Adele Taylor said that parking was a policy decision for Cabinet, the budget setting process was underway at the moment. The council was aware of the impact of national schemes ending and were monitoring it closely. The number of residents who needed council tax support had not gone up although some schemes had only just ended. Homelessness support was focused on those who came forward. RBWM was slightly behind on its collection rate for council tax, but this was similar to other Berkshire authorities.

The Chairman said that the parking policy was something that had been discussed at a recent Full Council meeting.

Councillor Jones commented on agency staff and recruitment, as the figures in the report were from June 2021. She asked if there was any further update.

Nikki Craig, Head of HR, Corporate Projects and IT, said that the agency issue was not fully resolved. There were national skill shortages which was a challenge for all local authorities. RBWMs employment strategy was publicly available on the website to show potential employees what it was like to work for the council. Nikki Craig said that RBWM was looking to close the gap where possible.

Councillor Jones mentioned that neighbouring councils were also recruiting, she asked if RBWM could match their offering and be attractive to more potential candidates.

Nikki Craig said that there was a small pool of employees that were available. RBWM offered national pay grades along with other benefits like the local government pension scheme and

wellbeing benefits like RBWM Select. Nikki Craig was aware that the finance team had recently launched a microsite to attract potential new staff which had been very successful.

Adele Taylor continued by explaining that the field of candidates who had come forward as a result was very good. Officers had been undertaking a lot of networking and extra work to ensure that RBWM was attracting the best candidates.

Councillor Sharpe passed on his thanks to Adele Taylor, Nikki Craig and their teams for the work which they had done. He asked if there was anything in the performance report that officers were concerned about.

Adele Taylor said that the areas that were below target were the focus but it was clear why they were below target, it was not unexpected.

Councillor Sharpe asked if other local authorities were experiencing similar in their performance.

Adele Taylor confirmed that RBWM was very similar to other authorities and so it was therefore performing as expected.

Councillor Jones commented on the numbers and asked that the next time the performance report came to the Panel that figures related to the resource were also included.

Nikki Craig said that she would take this away and see if it could be included in future reports.

ACTION – Nikki Craig to discuss with Councillor Jones after the meeting.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and:

- i) Noted the 2021/22 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel Q1 Data & Performance Report in Appendix A.**
- ii) Requested relevant Cabinet Members, Directors and Heads of Service to maintain focus on improving performance.**

ANNUAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS REPORT

Nikki Craig explained that the local authority had a statutory obligation to report on complaints and compliments for adult and children's services, but RBWM chose to report on all areas too. Should any resident be dissatisfied with the response that they had received, they could complain to the local government and social care ombudsman. There had been 2,268 contacts made in 2020/21, with 415 contacts being progressed as complaints. Of these, 350 were for non-adults and children services. The report covered the reasons for complaints being received, the timeliness of complaints being dealt with, whether a complaint was upheld and the lessons that had been learned. The data for complaints was broken down into three areas, one for adults, one for children's and one for all other services. Learning from revenue and benefits complaints mostly related to the pandemic and changes or cancellations made to services such as registrars and ceremonies.

There had been an increase in compliments, 766 in total for 2020/21 which had increased from 355 in 2019/20. The revenue and benefits team had received 24 compliments, while HR had received 21.

Councillor Werner asked if, in the experience of officers dealing with the complaints, the number had gone up due to the pandemic. He asked how complaints were dealt with in regard

to waste collection, were these registered as RBWM complaints or were they sent straight through to Serco.

Nikki Craig said that over 2000 contacts had been made and were from 'report it' issues, parking tickets and other methods. If there had been a number of missed bin collections from the same household, this would be progressed as a complaint. There was a similar number of complaints to last year, the local government ombudsman had paused investigating complaints at the beginning of the pandemic.

Councillor Werner asked for confirmation on if RBWM had stopped accepting complaints at the start of the pandemic.

Nikki Craig confirmed it was just the ombudsman, where complaints could be progressed if residents were not happy with the response received from RBWM. Their work had restarted now.

Councillor Jones said that timescales were a concern and asked what was being done.

Nikki Craig said that the timescales had improved in some areas. Officers were now better at liaising with the person who had made the complaint and an extension to the deadline could be requested if it was required.

Vanessa Faulkner, Service Lead – HR People Services, explained that officers had attended service meetings when there was a danger of not hitting the timescales. Drop ins had also been organised where discussions could take place on how teams could progress complaints through the system.

Councillor Jones commented on compliments and the issue that staff who were working in person received more compliments than those who were working from home. She asked how staff who were working remotely still received compliments. On waste management, Councillor Jones was surprised to see the service in the top three for compliments.

Nikki Craig said that there had been an increase in compliments, these were fed back into the system and came back to teams. Feedback mechanisms could be worked on to improve this further. On waste management, there had been a significant number of both complaints and compliments.

ACTION – Nikki Craig to feedback to the Panel on a breakdown of the waste management complaints and compliments.

Councillor Sharpe asked if there was anything that the council should be changing or adapting in response to complaints that had been received.

Nikki Craig said that each service had highlighted the issues and what needed to be changed to avoid future complaints.

Councillor Werner asked if for a compliment to be registered there needed to be physical evidence.

Nikki Craig explained that the vast majority of compliments were received in the form of emails, or where a resident had completed a form.

Councillor Werner gave the example of a verbal conversation where a complaint and compliment were part of the conversation. He asked if it could be recorded as both a complaint and a compliment.

Nikki Craig confirmed that it could be.

Councillor Jones commented on one fifth of complaints being logged due to a lack of action. She asked if it was about managing expectations better with residents.

Nikki Craig said that communication and overpromising could be the issues. The complaints team were in contact with relevant departments to make sure that complaints were being progressed.

Adele Taylor said that complaints had to be part of the learning process. It was also important to learn from compliments which had been received.

Councillor Jones said that it was important to consider the perception of complaints and compliments. She asked how IT fitted in, for example how contacts were recorded and how easily accessible they were to find for residents.

Nikki Craig said that Jadu forms had been originally used but this had recently been replaced with a new system called Drupal. Improvements were being made to make things easier.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and:

- i) That the report was published on the Council's website.**
- ii) That the annual report continued to be produced and presented at Overview and Scrutiny Panels.**

REVIEW OF COUNCILS GOVERNANCE OF RBWM PROPERTY COMPANY

Adele Taylor said that the Property Company review had come out of the CIPFA governance review. 31Ten had produced an external report which included a series of actions that officers were advised to take.

Councillor Werner said that he was interviewed as part of the review process and he was pleased to see the report. He believed that there should be a focus on social housing which included social rent. Councillor Werner questioned if there was any point having the property company if the council did not provide the appropriate resources. He said that it was basically a property consultancy company and asked if the council wanted the property company to succeed. In the report, there was mention of 'delivering XX number of homes', Councillor Werner said that the council should be provided with an idea of how many homes.

The Chairman said that affordable housing was part of the National Planning Policy Framework. Affordable housing was a broad term and there were a number of different types.

Councillor Werner said that he wanted to see more homes that were affordable.

Adele Taylor said that the housing target was the business plan of the property company and they needed to consider the needs of the borough and ensure that the right mix of housing was provided. The property company would hit all the figures which had been asked for.

Emma Duncan, Deputy Director of Law & Strategy and Monitoring Officer, informed Members that if the council was renting property (outside certain specified exemptions), it could only do so through a housing revenue account which the council had recently closed down. RBWM had therefore decided if it wanted to go down the rented route, it would do so through the property company. This avoided the 'right to buy' scheme, which would have seen the council selling stock at a massive discount. To subsidise social rent, many housing associations were having to sell units at market rent and make market sales. The property company allowed the council to avoid doing this.

Councillor Werner said that affordable housing was a broad term but there was nothing in the property company's vision about social housing.

Adele Taylor said that this was to recognise that affordable methods would not only be social housing.

Councillor Werner felt that having social housing mentioned in the vision would be useful.

Councillor Jones said that there was increased transparency coming through the council. She agreed with Councillor Werner's comments and wanted to see social housing and affordable rent included in the vision. Homes encouraged thriving communities that were good places to live. Councillor Jones wanted to see the property company provide a good standard of homes in the borough.

Councillor Sharpe said it was good to have visibility of what was happening with the property company, the council should be informing the company of what they wanted to see being developed.

Councillor Muir said that he agreed with Councillor Jones on affordable rent. It was going to be a difficult time for many people and affordable housing was important.

The Chairman said that it was frustrating when developments came forward with no affordable housing as part of the application.

Councillor Werner suggested that social rent was incorporated into the vision of the property company.

Emma Duncan clarified that social rent was heavily regulated, affordable rent was different. If the Panel was asking the property company to provide social rent, it was effectively asking the property company to work within the constraints of an RSL.

The Chairman suggested that the vision should therefore be left as it was.

Councillor Jones argued that the document was a vision, delivery of affordable rent was all it needed to say.

Emma Duncan said that social rent was very specific for local authorities. If the Panel was asking Cabinet to consider making the property company a social rent provider, this would be substantially different to what it had done before.

The Chairman asked if the term affordable rent could be used instead.

Emma Duncan said that the intention of the property company was for affordable housing to be provided which included a wide variety of different types. It was up to the property company how that was best done. Emma Duncan recommended that if the Panel was trying to tell the property company which schemes it should use, then it would be difficult as the property company had to ensure that it was viable.

Councillor Werner said that the vision was setting out what the property company would be doing. Including affordable rent in the vision would send the property company a signal.

Councillor Sharpe said that the property company was one element of the housing stock solution, there were other organisations which would provide affordable housing.

Emma Duncan said that the property company was not treated differently to any other developer. Therefore, the council's policy was affordable housing would apply to any site that was developed on. Affordable housing would be part of the application which would be sold at

a reduced rate to a social housing provider. Emma Duncan was concerned that the Panel was asking for the property company to become a social housing provider.

Councillor Jones explained that the Panel was not suggesting that the property company became a housing association, it was just suggested that there was a focus on affordable rent. RBWM had not produced enough affordable rent in the past six years, shared ownership was not the same thing. It was important that the council gave residents the option of affordable rent.

The Chairman suggested the wording 'a mix of tenures, to include affordable rent'.

Emma Duncan said it was important that the property company was not continually making a loss, so a mix of tenures was appropriate.

A motion was put forward by Councillor Werner to recommend to Cabinet that the wording 'a mix of tenures, to include affordable rent' was included in the property company's vision. This was seconded by Councillor Jones.

A named vote was taken.

To include the wording 'a mix of tenures to include affordable rent' in the property company's vision (Motion)	
Councillor Phil Haseler	For
Councillor Gary Muir	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	For
Councillor Lynne Jones	For
Councillor Simon Werner	For
Carried	

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommended to Cabinet that the wording 'a mix of tenures, to include affordable rent' was added into the property company's vision.

Adele Taylor said that the Panel would have the opportunity to consider the business plan of the property company going forward.

Councillor Werner asked how detailed the business plan would be.

Adele Taylor said it would be between what had been suggested and what the Panel currently had before them, it would show the overall direction of travel for the property company.

Councillor Werner was pleased that the governance arrangements around the property company were a lot stronger than they had been.

Councillor Sharpe said that the business plan would evolve over time, it would be interesting to see the schemes as they came through.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and:

- i) Offered any comments or suggested areas for further consideration.**

WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Werner said the finance update needed to be added to the work programme, as had been discussed at the start of the meeting.

The Chairman said that he would work with Adele Taylor to schedule this in.

Adele Taylor said that budget monitoring would be added to the work programme going forward.

Emma Duncan commented on the Panel considering the budget at the end of January. She was currently investigating whether the draft budget could come to scrutiny before Christmas, which could happen instead.

The Chairman asked if an extra meeting would be needed for the scrutiny on the draft budget to take place.

Emma Duncan said that would be discussed once it was clear when the draft budget would be ready. It was important for scrutiny to feed into the process and would also enable scrutiny to receive the consultation responses. Recommendations from the Panel would be helpful at an earlier stage than had been done previously.

Councillor Sharpe said that it would be good to get that added into the work programme.

The meeting, which began at 7.00 pm, finished at 8.35 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....