

## CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 19 APRIL 2021

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

Also in attendance: Councillors David Hilton, John Baldwin, Clive Baskerville, Gurpreet Bhangra, Donna Stimson, Samantha Rayner, David Cannon and Gurch Singh

Officers: Mark Beeley, David Cook, Emma Duncan, Adele Taylor, Andrew Vallance and Nikki Craig

### APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence received.

### DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

### MINUTES

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes from the meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021 were approved as a true and accurate record.**

### Q3 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Adele Taylor, Director of Resources, introduced the report. She explained that the interim council strategy was in place until the summer, with the quarterly performance reports focussing on this strategy. Of the nine performance indicators:

- Three were green and exceeding expectations.
- Five were amber and were meeting expectations.
- One was red and was not meeting expectations.

There had been challenges for the council to get back to its normal performance levels but there had been evidence of month on month improvement on things like calls answered within 60 seconds, which was now amber and meeting expectations. The number of calls abandoned after 5 seconds was green, while revenue and benefits targets continued to improve. The performance indicator which was red was for the volume of visitors to libraries, which reflected the fact that libraries had not been open due to lockdown. The library team had worked hard to adapt services, for example click and collect, which meant that this target had improved.

The Chairman thanked officers for the report and also for the report being circulated to the Panel early. The Panel had requested that performance reports were circulated once they were ready so that Members could review them closer to the time period in which they reflected. The Chairman asked if the challenges facing the revenues and benefits team had been similar to earlier in the year.

Adele Taylor said that it was difficult to answer at this stage but the pandemic had caused a number of issues at the beginning of the year.

The Chairman believed that the Crucial Conversations programme, which had been rolled out across the council for all staff, was an excellent idea but noticed that 73% of the workforce had attended a session. The Chairman queried why this figure was not higher, given that the sessions were compulsory for staff.

Nikki Craig, Head of HR, Corporate Projects and IT, said that they would expect the figure to be higher but for a number of reasons, including leavers and employees on maternity, some staff had not yet attended a session. Karl Joseph in Human Resources had trained a number of staff to run the sessions across the organisation, it was hoped that the programme would continue over the coming months and on an ongoing basis to allow more staff to attend a session.

Councillor Cannon joined the meeting.

Councillor Sharpe said that the libraries were an issue and wondered how usage of them could be driven upwards over the coming months. There would be a big need for library's going forward.

Adele Taylor said that for the first quarter of the year, the libraries were physically closed due to the lockdown. The library team had been working hard and libraries were now starting to reopen. Some online events had also been organised, with a recent event with an author attending a session with over 300 people. The library team would look to continue to offer more of these events going forward.

Councillor L Jones commented that the interim council strategy was for 2021 and asked if officers were looking to do a three year or five year strategy. Linking the performance with the environment and climate strategy, Councillor L Jones asked who was involved with that. There was also concern about positions that were covered by agency staff which was consistently high and also the number of voluntary leavers across the council. Councillor L Jones had noted that the summary for each section was not in the same order across the report and asked if this could be changed for the next report so that there was consistency, which would make it easier to read.

Adele Taylor said that she would pass the comment on the report summary on to the team that produced the report. For the question on voluntary leavers, Adele Taylor said that she would provide a written response to the Panel after the meeting. Plans were in place to bring forward the Corporate Strategy which would be completed early in the next municipal year.

**ACTION – Adele Taylor to provide written response to the Panel after the meeting.**

Councillor Haseler gave his thanks to officers who achieved the good results in the performance report. He asked if there was a breakdown on individual service areas for contacts made by digital forms.

Adele Taylor confirmed that there was more detailed operational information but this would be a significant amount of data to share with the Panel.

Councillor Rayner, Lead Member for Resident & Leisure Services, HR, IT, Legal, Performance Management and Windsor, explained that the libraries had reopened last week. The team had been working hard to get the footfall back and there was a feeling that residents were happy to be back in the libraries. Councillor Rayner thanked Adele Taylor and her team for the report which showed that the council was in a strong position.

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

- i) Noted the 2020/21 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel Q3 Performance Report in Appendix A.**
- ii) Requested relevant Lead Members, Directors and Heads of Service to maintain focus on improving performance.**

## ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT PROGRESS REPORT - VALUES AND BEHAVIOURS

Nikki Craig provided the Panel with an update on the Annual Governance Statement, specifically on values and behaviours. She explained that there had been a refresh of the appraisal system and there had been a focus on raising the profile of the whistleblowing process. Over 400 staff from across RBWM had been through the Crucial Conversations programme and training was starting to be rolled out to line managers on the new appraisal system. The whistleblowing policy was available on the staff SharePoint and internal intranet, while it was also advertised regularly in the 'Borough Bulletin' email sent to all staff to raise awareness.

The Chairman asked how Members could improve their ability to show the RBWM values and if there was any training available.

Nikki Craig said that the question on Members received the biggest response of 'neither agree nor disagree' in the survey. In terms of training, the Crucial Conversations programme was being provided to staff and Nikki Craig was happy to take this offline and look to see if something could be provided for Members too.

The Chairman believed that if elected Members were to be judged by staff then they should at least be provided with an opportunity to fix and improve the score from the survey.

Councillor L Jones pointed out that it was not clear how much interaction staff had with Members and that this question should have been included in the survey so that the context was clear.

Nikki Craig agreed that the wording could be reviewed for the future, for example a two-step question could be used which asked staff if they interacted with Members, with the second part asking about the interaction.

Councillor Werner warned officers to be careful of changing the wording of questions like this as it risked disguising the problem. Officers were often residents and would see things like how Members behaved in public council meetings and posts on social media. Members needed to accept there was a problem before any training would be beneficial.

The Chairman said that social media was a separate issue, but it was important for all Members to understand what the RBWM values were. Training could be focussed around these values and how to abide by them.

Adele Taylor explained that for some staff it was through personal interaction while for others it was through council meetings or other indirect methods. More information was needed but things were moving in the right direction. Officers were looking at the results of the staff survey and were seeing if there was more that could be done.

Councillor Werner believed that it was an urgent requirement that Members needed to get to grips with.

Councillor Haseler asked if several questions about Members were included on the survey or if it was just the single question. He asked if the survey could be broken down into more detail.

Nikki Craig said that she was happy to send round a copy of the survey questions and answers to the Panel.

**ACTION – Nikki Craig to circulate survey questions and results to the Panel.**

Councillor Haseler asked if there were any plans to create a survey for Members on their interactions with officers and contractors across the council.

Nikki Craig said that she would put the suggestion forward to see if its something the council should look to do. The largest response from the staff survey on the Members interaction question was 'neither agree nor disagree' which showed that most staff had very little interaction with Members.

Councillor Sharpe said that this was a good piece of work and showed a promising direction of travel, particularly as it was being carried out in a difficult time. He had concerns over the response for interaction with Members but the general direction was good. Councillor Sharpe asked what other councils did with staff surveys and if their results were similar.

Nikki Craig said that she had regular catch ups with the other Berkshire Heads of Human Resources. Lots of organisations had done regular surveys on things like staff wellbeing and happiness. The RBWM results were not too dissimilar to other local authorities and the engagement level had been good.

Councillor Werner asked how other local authorities compared on the issue of interaction with Members.

Nikki Craig said that she was happy to ask and report back to the Panel. Each local authority did not necessarily ask the same questions, with a significant number of the questions in the RBWM survey based around the new values.

**ACTION – Nikki Craig to ask other Berkshire local authorities for their survey results on interactions with elected Members and report back to the Panel.**

Councillor Rayner passed on her thanks to Nikki Craig and her team for the report. She believed that this showed that RBWM took its staff seriously and listened to their views. The increase in response rate showed that staff thought the survey was worthwhile. It was important to note that during the pandemic, Members would have had less direct interaction with staff.

Councillor Hilton, Lead Member for Finance and Ascot, noted that interactions between staff had not improved despite the majority of staff taking part in the Crucial Conversations programme. It was important to understand the context when considering the survey results.

Nikki Craig explained that the new values were being launched in 2020 when staff were working in different ways due to the pandemic. There was a small downward response to internal staff interactions but officers wanted to improve the overall figure.

Councillor Baldwin said that he was not surprised about the Member behaviour being reflected in the survey staff. However, elected Members were temporary, depending on elections, but the leadership at the top of the council was more permanent. Councillor Baldwin therefore believed it was important to focus on the question in the survey around staff confidence in the Corporate Leadership Team at the council rather than the interactions staff had with Members.

Councillor Werner believed that this needed urgent action and asked if it was possible for Cabinet to investigate.

Adele Taylor said that the Annual Governance Statement would be going to the Audit and Governance Committee, so a recommendation could be made to them.

The Chairman agreed that this would be appropriate.

Councillor Rayner suggested that the Panel could ask for a breakdown of the Members showing the values question which would give further clarity to the situation and ask for it to be considered by the Audit and Governance Committee.

Councillor Sharpe was not sure what action the Panel wanted to take. He suggested that asking for further information would be a better approach.

Councillor L Jones disagreed with Councillor Sharpe and explained that the Panel did not need further information, the action would be for officers to go away and investigate the issues around Member interactions before reporting back to the Panel, if required. The Panel believed that there was an issue and they would like this to be addressed by officers in the upcoming Annual Governance Statement.

Emma Duncan, Deputy Director of Law & Strategy and Monitoring Officer, said that officers were aware that this was an issue. The Centre for Governance and Public Scrutiny had recently published a piece of work on governance failure and risk with one of the key focusses being around officer and Member relationships. There would be some self-assessment work done by officers and Members as part of the actions coming out of the Annual Governance Statement. This would generate some understanding of the key issues and allow officers to investigate them. There could be an opportunity for the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel to engage in some work around this.

The Chairman asked for confirmation on where the Annual Governance Statement would be considered and that work on this issue would continue in the background alongside the Action Plan.

Emma Duncan explained that the Annual Governance Statement was produced by officers on behalf of the Leader of the Council and the Managing Director. Within the statement there would be an action plan, with some of the actions being referred to the Panel. A change of culture was only possible by listening and making changes in several different places.

Councillor Stimson, Lead Member for Climate Change, Sustainability, Parks and Countryside, said that she had studied cultural behaviour and that the council needed to be careful when finding out what people had said. The most important thing was that staff were responding to the survey and making their views known.

Nikki Craig confirmed that the survey was anonymous and was only broken down at a service level.

Emma Duncan clarified for the Panel that they could agree to note the report and recommend to the Audit and Governance Committee that issues around behaviours were picked up through the action plan, with the Panel being updated on the progress at future meetings.

The recommendation was proposed by the Chairman, seconded by Councillor Sharpe and:

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and recommended to the Audit and Governance Committee that issues around behaviours were picked up through the Annual Governance Statement Action Plan. The Panel would then be updated on any future progress.**

#### CIPFA REVIEW OF GOVERNANCE ACTION PLAN - QUARTERLY PROGRESS UPDATE

Andrew Vallance, Head of Finance, explained that the CIPFA action plan had been approved by Cabinet and this report was the second update that the Panel had received on the action plan. The Medium Term Financial Plan and Budget were now complete and approved, while the Transformation Strategy was also approved in September 2020 and the accompanying

action plan would be considered by the Cabinet Transformation Sub Committee soon. In terms of financial management improvements, there were still a few items outstanding due to staff being required to focus on tasks related to the pandemic. Most partnership arrangements had now been completed. The final item on the action plan was the governance arrangements of the property company, with consultants being appointed. Internal audit had also now commenced.

Councillor Singh joined the meeting.

Councillor L Jones said that there had been an improvement of reporting around capital programme management. She asked if officers believed that the Capital Programme Board had ensured that there was good decision making and monitoring. Councillor L Jones also asked if there was an ongoing review of partnership arrangements and if there was the budget available to support further training if it was required.

Andrew Vallance said that he was the Chairman of the Capital Programme Board so he hoped that it had ensured good decision making, while the information going to Cabinet had been improved. Partnership arrangements would be monitored by the Adults, Children and Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Adele Taylor said that the review was a reassurance at that point in time and partnership arrangements would be part of contract management and reviewed on an ongoing basis using several factors. Member training would be a blended approach while there was also a need for Members on Committees to receive relevant training.

Councillor Hilton said that the document was now around six months old and what was important to see was the direction of travel. There were a few milestones in the report, with one of which being the Pension Panel and the work that had been done to improve governance. As part of this work, a new Pension Manager had been appointed. Councillor Hilton explained that he was on the Achieving for Children Board and that he had learnt a lot, with the quality of information and financial strategy showing where they were.

Councillor Werner raised concern that the meeting was an Overview and Scrutiny Panel and therefore Cabinet Members were there to answer questions that the Panel might have. Councillor Werner therefore believed that there was no need for what he felt were speeches from Cabinet Members unless they had been asked a question. Councillor Werner asked for the Monitoring Officers view.

Emma Duncan replied by explaining that the purpose of scrutiny was to gather as much information and evidence as possible. It was important for scrutiny members to ask the right questions to scrutinise decisions effectively.

Councillor L Jones agreed with Councillor Werner's comments and believed that it extended the length of the meeting for no reason. She said that statements had been made that were not related to questions that the Panel had asked.

Councillor Rayner commented that training was very important through a variety of methods.

The Chairman asked when the Panel would see the next version of the CIPFA Action Plan.

Andrew Vallance said it would probably be in three to four months' time as this was reported on a quarterly basis, depending on the date of meetings.

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel reviewed the report and:**

- i) Noted the actions already taken in respect of the objectives set out, and those planned for the next quarter.**

## ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT

The Chairman explained that he had worked with Councillor L Jones to produce the report and asked the Panel if they had any further comments that they wanted to add.

Councillor L Jones said the most important thing to ask was did scrutiny add value to the council's work. The Panel should be challenging the council to see if it could do things in a different way. Things like 'scrutiny days' could be utilised to allow the Panel to focus in depth on a specific topic area. Councillor L Jones said that she did not feel like she was adding enough value to the council through scrutiny.

Councillor Werner supported the comments made by Councillor L Jones. He said that scrutiny was not challenging enough.

The Chairman agreed that the report would be recirculated to include the suggestions from the Panel before it was submitted to Full Council in June 2021.

## WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor L Jones said that some reports on the Work Programme could be circulated via email rather than coming to a meeting of the Panel.

The Chairman said that the only issue with doing this was that it could affect the transparency of scrutiny and the access residents had to the process. He suggested that even if items were circulated outside of meetings it might be worth keeping them on the Work Programme.

Councillor Werner said that the Panel could decide outside of the meeting what needed to be considered.

Emma Duncan said that this was where the Panel could make a difference. The Panel could add value and it was suggested to focus on key areas. Ineffective scrutiny came from having too many items on the agenda.

The Chairman said that himself and the Panel would go away and reflect on what they would like to see on the Work Programme.

The meeting, which began at 6.15 pm, finished at 8.00 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....