

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

Thursday 27 July 2023 at 6.00 pm
In the Council Chamber at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Anandou, Fenton, Fisher, Hinchliff, Lewis, Taylor
and Tipper.

In attendance: Tony McGovern (Director of Regeneration and Growth),
Elaine Newsome (Assistant Director – Law and Governance),
Victoria Lee (Assistant Director – HR), Nigel Collumbell
(Assistant Director – Housing Management), Colin Marsh
(Divisional Manager – Adult Social Care), Lee Bentley (HRD
Strategy & OD Officer), Helen Green (Strategic Improvement
Manager – Corporate Customer), Connor Robinson
(Democratic Services Officer) and Anthony Lloyd
(Democratic Services Officer).

48/23 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors E Giles and Owen.

49/23 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.



50/23

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 29 June 2023 be approved as a correct record.

51/23

Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business.

52/23

Sickness Absence Outturn 2022-23

The Board received a presentation on sickness absence outturn for 2022-23.

Overall, as expected, sickness absence rates had increased over the past few years across most directorates. Nationally, many employees had experienced an increase in sickness absence during 2021. Sickness absence rates for the financial year 2022-23 were 10.81 days per employee; this equated to 4.87% working days lost. In comparison, the national average for the UK was 2.6% overall and 3.6% across the public sector.

It was acknowledged that in certain smaller directorates, such as the Law and Governance directorate, one or two sickness absence cases could heavily skew overall stats, especially if staff were on long-term sickness leave. The majority of sickness cases were due to stress, depression and mental health issues which greatly increased in the recent year. The second most common cause of sickness was infectious illness. A notable amount of cases consisted of problems around muscular skeletal issues. Although both short-term and long-term sickness was a concern for the authority, long-term sickness was especially a problem due to resourcing requirements which incurred extra costs for the Council.

In response to questions from members, the following points were stated:-

- the Council did not have an insurance policy to cover the costs of long-term sickness, however, the Council's terms and conditions offered extensive sick pay;
- the Council had a strong in-house Occupational Health provision including a closed suite that could contain doctors, nurses and physiotherapists;

- a variety of reasons could be attributed to sickness across the directorates depending on the type of work. Services that dealt with difficult and emotional problems were more likely to see sickness related to stress;
- the aging workforce meant that a lot of absence was due to family bereavement as well as conditions usually associated with age;
- no evidence was available that indicated that the Council's generous sick pay offer was a reason for high sickness absence levels;
- ill health retirement and redeployment was offered to staff whose condition(s) resulted in them not being able to carry out their work;
- facilities were in place to monitor staff who were regularly sick to identify patterns and address concerns when required;
- the feasibility of introducing incentives and bonuses for staff would be considered and reported back at a later date. Costs of offering the incentive would be weighed against the costs of covering agency staff pay;
- data regarding the impact of long-COVID on the workforce would be circulated to members when the data had been collated and analysed.

Officers were thanked for their attendance.

Resolved that the Head of Human Resources, in consultation with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources, request that the Cabinet consider the feasibility of introducing bonuses and/or incentives to improve staff absenteeism.

53/23

Customer Journey Progress Update

The Customer Journey was one of the most important strategic priorities for the Council following external reviews. Excellent examples of customer service had been seen throughout the service, but many areas were still not to the standard desired. The scale of the work was highlighted to members with over 1.5m contacts with customers in 2022/23. In the last 12 months, the Council had received over 628k phone calls.

Officers hoped that the action plan set out a detailed guide on how the Council would improve the customer journey. A clear vision of where the Council wanted to be had been realised.

Recommendations from the Customer Journey Scrutiny Review, which was carried out by the Board in 2022/23, had also been added to the plan. Performance data was being reviewed daily as this was deemed the key to highlighting demonstrable progress on whether the Council was heading in the right direction.

Ensuring that customers had a wide range of options to contact the Council was important. The use of online services had been by far the most popular way that residents contacted the Council, however, there were still vulnerable individuals who required face-to-face alternatives.

The pilot scheme for community hubs was underway and data had been obtained to steer future decisions. Community hubs had been designed to signpost residents to many of the Council's services, including further referrals to smoking services and health checks, whilst also being a starting point for those who wished to interact with staff in-person. Initial data received was low due to the soft launch of the hub. Although footfall was low, an array of age groups had interacted with the service with many of the enquiries relating to housing and revenues and benefits. 63% of visitors had used the hub as their first point of contact, however, 37% of visitors had stated that this was not their first attempt to resolve an issue. Customer service satisfaction was high in relation to the community hubs and a 12-month extension of the pilot had been agreed.

A procurement process was in motion to provide modern technology to help improve the customer experience – it was hoped that implementation of the new system would take place in 2024. Whilst software used by the Council was becoming out-of-date, it was noted that replacing technology at once could present a significant risk.

Further questions from members were responded to with the following points:-

- training around cultural differences, especially regarding body language, would be incorporated into customer training;
- security officers working in the one-stop shop were agency staff and therefore, the Council had no remit on who was selected;
- members were minded that the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board were currently conducting a Scrutiny Review on Social Isolation and Loneliness;

- the Council's digital team had been looking into a booking system for the One Stop Shop; further consideration would be made as to whether the system could be expanded across to all services in the Council;
- work was still underway to consult and engage with the public to receive input around what they wanted from the Customer Journey.

Officers were thanked for the report.

54/23

Centre for Governance and Scrutiny – The use of call-in: guidance for English authorities

In April 2023, the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) had published guidance on the use of call-in by English authorities. Sandwell Council's arrangements only allowed key decisions to be subject to call-in. Guidance from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny highlighted that extending the use of call-in to all executive decisions (i.e. both key and non-key decisions taken by cabinet Members) was best practice to ensure an effective Scrutiny function.

A steer was sought from members on their appetite to request that call-in use be extended. Having considered benchmarking data of neighbouring local authorities, the Board was minded to recommend to the Governance and Constitution Review Committee and Council that all key decisions taken by the Cabinet and non-key decisions taken by Cabinet Members should be subject to scrutiny call-in which would bring the Council in-line with CfGS good practice.

Resolved that the Governance and Constitution Review Committee be requested to consider and recommend to Council the expansion of the use of call-in to all executive decisions.

55/23

Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme 2023-24

Resolved that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board Work Programme for 2023-24 be approved.

56/23

Cabinet Forward Plan

The Cabinet Forward Plan was noted by the Board.

57/23

Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations

Members noted the Scrutiny Action Tracker.

Meeting ended at 7.56pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk