

MINUTES of a meeting of the CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Coalville on WEDNESDAY, 12 JUNE 2019

Present: Councillor R Boam (Chairman)

Councillors J Hoult, E G C Allman, V Richichi, S Sheahan, D E J Tebbutt, M B Wyatt and D Bigby (Substitute for Councillor R Johnson)

Officers: Mr G Jones, Mr M Murphy and Mrs R Wallace

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R Johnson.

**2. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Councillor S Sheahan declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 5 – 2018/19 Quarter 4 Performance Report due to the reference to HS2 within the report. In addition, during the item, a further discussion ensued and therefore Councillor S Sheahan declared a pecuniary interest and left the meeting for the remainder of the debate.

**3. PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

None.

**4. WORKFORCE AND AGENCY COSTS - ANNUAL UPDATE**

The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development presented the report to Members.

In response to a question from Councillor S Sheahan, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development confirmed that the total expenditure on agency staff did not include consultants. In response to a further question, it was reported that the increase in use of agency staff in recent years was mainly due to recruitment difficulties within the Housing repairs and waste teams. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services stated that he was confident that costs for agency staff would continue to reduce going forward as permanent staff continued to be recruited in the repairs team on the new terms and conditions for operatives, which were agreed last year.

Councillor M B Wyatt asked for the number of long-term agency staff that had been employed, the reasons why and what the longest contract was. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development agreed to provide the information outside of the meeting.

Councillor V Richichi asked if it was financially beneficial to have a bigger workforce rather than agency workers. He also referred to the fact that the agency staff working in housing repairs were not always doing an adequate standard of work, which meant that the job had to be rectified afterwards. He felt this was a waste of money and suggested that it may be because there was not a sense of pride with agency staff because they were not permanent members of staff. The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development explained that he could not provide a definitive answer on the financial benefit as it varied depending on the scenario. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services stated that it was the Council's aspiration to have as many permanent members of staff as possible and they were committed to reducing the amount of agency staff used. He advised that agency workers in repairs may have slightly higher salary

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costs but permanent staff attracted higher pension contributions from the Council, so the net financial position was generally cost neutral.

In response to a question from Councillor D Bigby, the Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services confirmed that as the number of full time equivalent permanent employees increased last year, the resulting increase in staff costs had offset the reduced expenditure on agency staff.

Councillor M B Wyatt suggested that a future item for the work plan could be the inspection of works for housing repairs as he felt the standard had been poor. He believed that the standard of work was often low from agency workers and there was a high turnover. Therefore, he felt stability with permanent staff was key. The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development reported that an advantage of using agency staff was that their standard of work and performance could be assessed on the job which assisted on whether to recruit some agency staff on a permanent basis.

RESOLVED THAT:

The report be noted.

## **5. 2018/19 QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services presented the report to Members.

Councillor M B Wyatt asked if the Council was doing anything to ensure all development sites for new council housing were carbon neutral, as he believed we should be setting a precedent. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services stated that it was not currently a corporate aim but it was something to take on board for the future.

In response to a further question from Councillor M B Wyatt, the Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services stated that housing repairs were measured for 'right first time' and he would include the information in future reports.

Regarding the performance of the call centre, Councillor S Sheahan was pleased that improvements in call waiting times had improved. However, it stated within the report that the volume of calls had reduced due to the redirection of Universal Credit Calls and asked if this was the reason for the better performance. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services confirmed that Housing Benefit queries had reduced and Universal Credit calls were now taken by the Department of Work and Pensions and this was contributing to the reduced volume of calls. However, there was also the fact that more services were now available online.

Councillor S Sheahan was pleased to see that the two Syrian families had settled in well and asked if any more families would be arriving in the district. It was confirmed that there would be a further two families by November 2019.

In relation to the relaunch of 'my account' self-service system, Councillor D Bigby shared his experience of using it, as it was not simple. He wanted to change his bank details for his direct debit payments and it was unclear how it could be done.

At this point Councillor S Sheahan left the meeting during the discussion which focussed on HS2, as he had a pecuniary interest.

Councillor D Bigby referred to a new consultation document that had been published which included details of a large railhead site close to Ashby that would last approximately

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seven years. He asked how the Council was planning to respond and if they would be calling for the work undertaken to establish the railhead to be done with a view to facilitate the opportunity to open passenger services in the future. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services would ask the Head of Economic Regeneration to provide a response.

Councillor D Bigby felt that the target figure for affordable homes in the District should be revisited, as it was not directly related to the Section 106 requirement for affordable homes, the HEDNA or the Local Plan. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services responded that he would look at setting the target with a more scientific method. He explained that the current target was based on the knowledge of the number of houses being built by the Council and housing associations, and what the Section 106 agreements were likely to provide, as well as the number of people on the housing waiting list. He added that in comparison to 5-10 years ago, there had been a considerable increase in the number of affordable houses built in recent years, and this was evidenced by the number of households on the Housing Register reducing over the previous 18 months.

In relation to the shop front scheme as part of 'Building Confidence in Coalville', Councillor M B Wyatt asked for more information as to why the grant awards had fallen short and details of any problems that were being experienced. The Strategic Director of Housing agreed to provide the information outside of the meeting. Members requested that an item be placed on the work programme for the next meeting and the Head of Economic Regeneration be invited.

In response to a request from Councillor S Sheahan, the Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to provide information outside of the meeting regarding the purpose of the four new earmarked reserves as part of the Self Sufficiency Reserve as detailed at paragraph 3.7 of the report. Councillor S Sheahan felt it was poor that there was not more detail and it was not clear what direction the council was moving in. Councillor D Bigby agreed.

In relation to the Wi-Fi Scheme proposed for Ashby and Coalville, Councillor D Bigby asked if the work had been finished yet and if not he suggested that an intervention plan should be implemented as it was way behind schedule. Councillor E Allman asked if people's data would be safe when using the Wi-Fi, as it was important to make it public if information was being taken by the provider. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to investigate and report to Members outside of the meeting.

Councillor D Bigby asked what the additional expenditure against the budget for the leisure centres was and where the land was that had been purchased. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services reported that the land purchased was off Nottingham Road in Ashby. He agreed to provide the information regarding the leisure centres outside of the meeting.

At the request from Councillor D Bigby for an explanation into the increase in non-distributed retirement benefits, the Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development stated that the increase was due to the amount of capital pension costs incurred through ill-health retirements. The previous year's payments had exceeded the threshold and the Council had to fund the difference, therefore he was trying to mitigate costs going forward by taking out an ill health retirement insurance policy to ensure any new cases were funded.

In relation to the air source heat pump programme, Councillor S Sheahan asked if there was any satisfaction surveys undertaken regarding the installation and operation. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to look into it.

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Councillor E Allman expressed concerns regarding the average amount of absence by employees due to illness. The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development advised Members of the national conditions of service, which all local authorities operated, and the length of paid absence due to illness permitted. He reiterated that the absence figures were an average across the authority and reassured that there was a very detailed sickness absence policy. After further discussion, it was agreed to provide more detail in future reports regarding where the sickness absence was occurring across the authority.

At this point Councillor M B Wyatt left the meeting.

Councillor E Allman commented that there was more awareness of stress and anxiety than ever before and asked if there was an opportunity for staff to speak to a professional if needed. The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development explained that staff had access to a 24-hour telephone service staffed by professional councillors, which could lead to a referral for a face-to-face session if required. The service also offered broader advice on subjects such as medical, financial and legal matters. In addition, there was now a number of trained mental health first aiders in the authority.

In response to a question from Councillor S Sheahan, the Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to provide information outside of the meeting regarding any fly tipping improvements.

Councillor S Sheahan asked for the results on the feasibility study for electric charging points in car parks. The Head of Human Resources and Organisation Development responded that an electric charging point pilot was planned for one of the Ashby car parks. This would be monitored and if successful, the plan was to install more.

Councillor S Sheahan felt that the recycling targets should be more ambitious and suggested that officers make some comparisons with neighbouring authorities who were more successful.

Councillor S Sheahan asked for more information regarding the access road on High Street Measham, which was included in the underspend/items no longer required list at page 36 of the report. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to provide the information outside of the meeting.

In response to a question regarding the reason for the various re-profiling in the HRA Capital Programme, the Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services explained that there had been delays in new house building in 2018/19, therefore expenditure had been moved back to 2019/20. In response to a further question regarding delays in the capital programme to ensure the decent homes standard was maintained across the housing stock, he explained that this was due to bringing the work in house and the initial difficulties in recruiting sufficient labour.

Councillor V Richichi referred to possible fly tipping enforcement because of a litter pick in his local area, and subsequent disposal of the rubbish. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services agreed to investigate the matter further.

In relation to the funds that were originally put aside to cover various Hood Park Leisure Centre repair costs, Councillor D Bigby asked if the new leisure service provider would still be undertaking the repairs. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services explained that the money was put aside to cover any risks of the equipment failing and in need of urgent replacement. He was unsure as to how the new leisure services provider would proceed, and if indeed when or if any works would be required. Councillor D Bigby asked for some further information if possible.

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Councillor D Bigby raised concerns regarding risks on the register that were classed as stable even though they were high risk. In particular, he was surprised that the leisure centre project was allowed to go ahead being such high risk. The Strategic Director of Housing and Customer Services reassured Members that additional control measures were added and there was a contract management framework in place to monitor performance of the larger projects such as the leisure centres. He made it clear that even though some projects had an inherent high risk there were a series of measures in place to mitigate them, and the residual risk rating on the risk around projects reflected the Council's prudent approach.

RESOLVED THAT:

- a) The report be noted.
- b) Comments made by the committee be provided to Cabinet when considering the report.

**6. ITEMS FOR INCLUSION IN THE FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME**

RESOLVED THAT:

The work programme be noted.

Councillor M B Wyatt left the meeting at 7.54pm

The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm

The Chairman closed the meeting at 8.25 pm