

Overview and Scrutiny

Meeting date: 30 October 2023

Member Questions to Publica

1. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

There is repeated reference to the ability to capitalise on the partnership approach in order to be more efficient and improve service delivery. This makes complete sense. However, what is the impact of councils (like Cheltenham BC) moving services back in house? How resilient are the partnerships and how fluid?

The Publica Operating Model (mentioned on page 17) refers to the lower cost and higher customer satisfaction of self-service approaches to customer enquiries and business transactions. How is customer satisfaction measured?

Response

One of the key requirements when Publica was established was the requirement to be flexible in terms of delivery recognising the sovereign roles of Councils might mean different delivery options or different service offerings. In simple terms – share where there are points of similarity but have the flexibility to flex where necessary.

It is certainly the case that some Councils use Publica to deliver services that are only taken by the Council – so for example Street Wardens in Forest of Dean.

Clearly if a Council chooses to bring services back in it has an impact and from an efficiency position - this becomes 'sub optimal' – Treasury Management would be example in respect of Cheltenham. That service transfer has an impact of increasing the cost to other partners – however individual Councils must make their decisions based upon their circumstances.

Given the announcement of last week I think it is fair to say that the resilience of the partnership is being tested and is certainly fluid. Certainly it is fair to say disaggregation increases costs and makes the ability to share learning more difficult.

We use a range of tools to measure customer satisfaction but the principal tool is the Govmetric model which seeks customer feedback after interactions. This model is used by many Councils and provides useful benchmarking data.

2. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

On the Publica Business Plan published in May 2022, it's mentioned that 10% of users don't have access to the internet. Further in the document it's noted that Publica plans to "Develop[e] our approach to digital engagement with communities, particularly those that are hard to reach, using digital engagement platforms". It's really good that we have alternatives in place to support people who need to use phone or in-person services, but what measures are Publica taking to signpost to digital inclusion resources, or and are they working in partnership with other organisations such as DAISI Project - GRCC to deliver this?

Response

Digital inclusion is a multi-faceted issue and in broad terms includes:

1. Access to good quality and affordable broadband, wi-fi and mobile data
2. Opportunities for digital skills training and support
3. Devices that can access the internet, that are affordable and good quality, and meet their users' needs
4. The ability, motivation, confidence, and physical space to safely access the internet
5. Accessible services that are designed inclusively to meet the needs of service users

Working in partnership is going to be key in improving digital inclusion and Publica has actively contributed to the Gloucestershire Digital Divides work. We're keen to see the Digital Divides steering group progress a Gloucestershire countywide digital strategy - a strategy that is high level and all-encompassing covering the following areas:

1. Connectivity: the digital infrastructure
2. Digital skills and Inclusion: digital capability for all
3. Digital Innovation: supporting the digital sector/businesses
4. Digital transformation: supporting all business/organisations in digital
5. Safety and cybersecurity
6. Digital government: supporting statutory services in digital
7. Data: supporting the data economy and infrastructure

Over the last two years we have bid successfully for government PropTech funding which has helped us develop tools to broaden digital engagement beyond those traditional approaches and has led to a better response to activities such as Local Plan consultations.

3. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

There's a risk of 'carbon tunnel vision' when it comes to climate action. I really appreciate seeing the plans you're making to implement "advanced climate emergency training for planning officers and other employees whose professional roles require that they have a greater understanding of issues around energy use, low emission building and transport technologies". However, this omits a vital element of climate action in terms of biodiversity, of which planning plays a key role. Is wildlife and biodiversity support being added to the advanced training given to planners? The work of [IEMA: Transforming the world to sustainability](#), for instance, is vital for an independent assessment of planning measures in relation to ecology – has this been considered as a core element of Publica's staff development plan?

Response

The training we are providing for employees on carbon net zero includes reference to the importance of biodiversity in transition to a sustainable economy. Publica are also actively engaged in providing services around biodiversity net gain to councils and this includes working jointly with all Gloucestershire Councils.

One of the challenges we have faced in terms of broader climate issues has been the lack of a shared approach to climate change from our partner Councils – they have rather wanted their own officers than allowing the creation of a shared team. This has meant we have missed the opportunity to create a broader team with a range of specialisms and have embedded duplication.

4. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

Similarly, would Publica consider sharing core training mechanisms with shareholder councils so that staff across the four partner councils could be both empowered within their roles and better aligned with Publica processes? Even if Cheltenham Borough Council has an in-house planning department, it's important to take a joined up and consistent approach particularly in a heritage town.

Response

It is certainly the case that a shared training programme could be developed across the partnership and yes that could be managed or delivered through Publica or indeed any one of the Councils in a collective endeavour. However the core Learning and Development function that has historically been shared since 2012 (as part of GO Shared Services and subsequently Publica) has recently been insourced back to the Council. I do not however think this would form a barrier to any joint training programmes if they could be appropriately structured and funded.

5. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

Again in terms of flood mitigation, do you have a nature-based strategy for managing flood risk too?

Response

All of the districts that utilise the flood risk service have sustainable development policies. All Flood Risk Management comments on new development both major and minor include the instruction that developers must use sustainable drainage solutions that (as much as possible) replicate the pre-development storage and disposal of surface water. To achieve that, developers use information on the ground conditions to design drainage that makes the best use of the natural conditions. There is a SUDS hierarchy that prompts developers to retain as much water on the development site as possible to reduce the flood risk to existing areas.

Regarding areas known to be at risk of flooding, the districts are engaged with the GCC/LLFA Natural Flood Management (NFM) group which includes various agencies such as Forestry England, Gloucester Wildlife trust, Natural England, farming & Wildlife Advisory group and the EA to identify sites which could be suitable to construct natural flood management on. There is a common goal to see NFM used widely across the county to deliver varying levels of flood defence as well as water quality improvements.

NFM includes leaky dams to control peak flows, field bunds to combat surface water run-off, tree and hedge planting to combat s/w run-off and to improve infiltration, field depressions to attenuate storm flows, flow controls on existing drainage to create localised controlled flooding and re-connection of floodplains to watercourses.

6. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

How are things progressing for recruitment of the senior manager responsible for organisational effectiveness?

Response

Zoe Campbell took up the post responsible for organisational effectiveness in July 2022.

7. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

Is it feasible for Cheltenham to develop a working partnership with the Big Solar Coop to reduce local energy costs, in replication of the work conducted with Forest of Dean District Council?

Response

Shared Learning is an important part of the Publica values and it is always useful to tap into the experience of other partners and I am sure a peer to peer conversation can be arranged.

Whether was feasible or desirable, from the Big Solar Coop perspective might depend upon what Cheltenham Borough Council was trying to achieve, and in terms of outcomes how any specific proposals fit with the Big Solar Coop's community energy model and investment criteria.

Secondly, whether it would be desirable from Cheltenham Borough Council's perspective would depend upon its view of how effective such a partnership could be relative to the opportunities for community energy led projects in its borough, and the relative merits of this as opposed to other approaches.

Big Solar Coop describes itself as a not-for-profit, carbon-first, volunteer-led organisation. It installs photovoltaic solar panels on commercial and community buildings all over the UK. It operates a community energy model, which in its most basic form can be described as renting roof space to generate renewable electricity, which is sold back to the owners of the building or their tenants. Under this model, investment funding is generally raised by a mixture debt and equity, which generally includes a public share offer that provides a return on investment to shareholders by way of a dividend.

Forest of Dean District Council selected Big Solar Coop as its community energy partner for its EU Horizon funded AURORA project, to engage residents in investing in the generation of renewable energy locally, in this case at the Lydney Leisure centre and Dean Academy secondary school. In parallel, the AURORA project is helping build a local capacity to undertake community energy projects in the district, or to work with others to do so, through the 'Forest Community Energy' group.

A similar approach could be taken by Cheltenham Borough Council by working in partnership with Big Solar Coop, or another Community Energy organisation e.g. the Gloucestershire Community Energy Coop, where a building owner (e.g. the Council) was agreeable to renting roof space, the consumers of the electricity were willing to pay a price that made the investment financially viable and provided a sufficient return on investment.

An alternative approach might be to work with Big Solar Coop or other Community Energy organisations in the county, collaboratively, to identify and support the

development of new community energy projects in the Borough i.e. a more general collaborative relationship rather than partnering for a specific project.

8. Question from Councillor Tabi Joy

Did Publica spearhead the Crowdfund Cotswold funding channel, and would this be a project that Cheltenham could potentially emulate with Publica's guidance?

Response

The successful Crowdfund Cotswold was jointly spearheaded by Publica and Cotswold District Council's portfolio holder for health and wellbeing sitting at the time, and with the full backing of the administration.

Based on the success of Crowdfund Cotswold we have just implemented Westhive Community Crowdfunding for West Oxfordshire District Council. Should Cheltenham Borough Council wish to introduce a crowdfunding approach Publica could happily offer guidance.

Overview and Scrutiny

Meeting date: 30 October 2023

Member Questions to Marketing Cheltenham on Christmas in Cheltenham

1. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

Regarding engagement with the Visit Cheltenham web page, what proportion of the views represent very local (ie Cheltenham) residents and what proportion are derived from a wider geographical area? Are there target numbers/KPIs to drive more views and to keep people browsing the site for longer?

Response

Thank you for your question. The latest figures for the website are from May 2023. Between 1st January 2020 and 24th May 2023, approximately **14%** of users of the website were located in Cheltenham. This is the second largest location of users, with London being the most popular at 20.75%. The third largest is 'not set' at 13.75% and this is followed by Gloucester with 5% and Bristol with 3.4%. After this, the user locations are fairly evenly spread across the whole country (0.16% - 2.94%) and no pattern can be demonstrated in terms of location.

72.12% of website users came from the UK between 1st January 2023 and 24th May 2023.

Service level KPIs monitor the level of engagement with each of the Marketing Cheltenham team's brands. For Visit Cheltenham, the target is to increase the profile of the brand through:

1. increase website user numbers by 5% (session duration and pages per session are monitored but not targeted)
2. increase subscribers to the newsletter by 5% (read rates are monitored but not targeted)
3. increase social media followers by 10%

2. Question from Councillor Jackie Chelin

The Cheltenham ice rink contributed an additional £3M to the local economy in 2021. How is this calculated and, if there are targets to try to exceed this year on year, what are the key actions to effect this?

Response

The Marketing Cheltenham team commissioned The South West Research Company to undertake a visitor survey amongst visitors to Cheltenham over the Christmas period, 18/11/21 – 02/01/22. This survey aimed to evaluate the impact of the town's enhanced Christmas offer in terms of visitation, satisfaction levels and spend.

The survey was conducted online using Marketing Cheltenham's direct email database. There were a total of 628 responses from visitors to the town during the Christmas period. The survey asked a series of questions including questions on home location, spend during their visit, length of visit and demographic questions including age. The Cambridge Model was used to assess the economic impact based on responses received.

This survey will be repeated to focus on the impact of the 2023/24 ice rink.

We have not set a target for the economic impact because there are a number of variables that are outside of our control. However, the team are committed to boosting the economic impact of the ice rink and have a plan to encourage this with activities including:

- promotion of local businesses to ice rink visitors,
- partnerships with local businesses to offer associated discounts or promotions which will be shared via Visit Cheltenham and ice rink social media and mailings,
- training ice rink staff to provide information about what's on and where to go once they have finished skating,
- combined promotion of the wider Cheltenham offer alongside the ice rink,
- sponsorship and advertising opportunities around the rink to promote local businesses,
- comprehensive social media engagement with ice rink visitors.

Overview and Scrutiny

Meeting date: **30 October 2023**

Member (27 total)

1. Question from Councillor Tim Harman

Will Cheltenham Borough Council or the board of Cheltenham Borough Homes take the final decision to wind up the company?

Response

The decision to wind up CBH can be taken either by the Leader as the Shareholder or by the CBH Board passing a resolution recommending that the company is wound up.

2. Question from Councillor Tim Harman

Can tenants of CBC be assured that they will be fully consulted about the final decision with clearly explained question which is not skewed to get one outcome or another?

Response

Consultation will be carried out in accordance with the recommendations set out in the cabinet report. The Cabinet have highlighted the importance of consulting with tenants as part of the Cabinet report. Furthermore, the Cabinet report recommends that a 3rd party organisation, independent of the council is engaged to conduct this consultation.

3. Question from Councillor Tim Harman

Can the consultation process be announced tonight or shortly?

Response

The Council is keen to ensure that the consultation is comprehensive and therefore, as per the cabinet recommendations, it is proposed to commission a consultation framework which will provide tenants and leaseholders with the opportunity to provide their view on the proposed change in management, state their priorities in shaping the future housing service provision, ensure their continued involvement, and complement the new consumer standards.

Furthermore, members will note from the recommendations that it is intended that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are engaged in that process.

4. Question from Councillor Tim Harman

Did the Campbell Tickell in preparing their report take evidence from any tenants before producing their report?

Response

No

5. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

In considering the decision to bring CBH back into CBC control – how many other LA's, particularly any similar to CBC, were consulted for advice as to “best practice” and any “lessons learnt”?

Response

Senior Officers from the council engaged with at least 2 other local authorities to seek their views, however these meetings were arranged and agreed to be confidential so it would be inappropriate to name those authorities.

6. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

Given the impact of the decision on so many tenants across the town and the fact that this sort of thing has already been completed by 31 of the 70 ALMO's, was any support/advice from the LGA or is the Campbell Tickell report the only external advice sought?

Response

Campbell Tickell were not the only external view/advice sought, senior officers have regular engagement with the LGA and other local authorities. In addition, external legal advice was sought from Anthony Collins. Anthony Collins also reviewed the Cabinet Report.

7. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

If 31 or the 70 LA's had brought social housing back in house by 2019, why did CBC wait until now to bring back in house and why the urgency?

Response

The Cabinet do not consider this to be an urgent decision. It is important to review the provision of all the council's services periodically to ensure that they are fit for purpose and deliver best value. The Cabinet undertook a review of housing services previously in January 2021 which explored bringing the service back in house. At that time, it was judged not to be the best option but since then, as detailed in the most recent report, the council has faced the highest inflation for decades, surging energy prices and communities that are struggling to meet the challenges presented

by a cost of living crisis. Both the General Fund and the HRA have been placed under further pressure because of these once in a generation factors. In addition, reforms of the housing regulations have been undertaken by Government. It was therefore timely to undertake a further review in 2023 bearing in mind these significant factors. The fact CBC is one of the later authorities to bring forward recommendations to wind up the ALMO demonstrates that the Council has taken appropriate time to consider options.

8. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

Will CBC be following Campbell Tickell's advice and appointing an "interim CEO to oversee the transition process" and/or an "interim executive programme director"?

Response

It is unknown at this stage as to what interim or temporary arrangements are required, however, to support any future transfer of services the council recognises that it may need both capacity and specific knowledge or skills to support any transfer.

9. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

Will responsibility for CBH integration into CBC, and ongoing Social Housing responsibility, be covered within the Portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Housing?

Response

Future cabinet portfolios are unknown at this stage and are at the discretion of the Leader.

10. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

I understand that CBC Members on the CBH Board were only advised of the situation just 7 days before the general Members briefing on Friday 6th October. How can this constitute "consultation"?

Response

All CBC Members have access to the forward plan to enable them to ask questions. The Cabinet Report was published on the public forward plan in advance of the 28 days' notice to follow the process for all other Cabinet decisions. The Cabinet report is clear that tenant consultation will take place in advance of the decision to wind-up CBH. Overview and Scrutiny will play an important role in overseeing the process going forward providing a platform for members to share their views.

11. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

How many redundancies are expected from CBH staff?

Response

This is unknown at this stage and any future integration of CBC and CBH will take time. Through this process it is expected that efficiencies will be delivered from working as one team and reducing duplication, but it is impossible to be specific at this stage. The council has a successful track record in minimising or even eliminating the need for compulsory redundancies and this is the approach that will be taken again. The Council is committed to following all appropriate HR processes and engaging with unions through any change process.

We hope that bringing the two organisations together will also bring some opportunities for people to expand and develop their knowledge.

12. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

Is the £2m annual saving net of the redundancy costs?

Response

Yes. Both the Council and CBH have one off ear-marked reserved that are set aside for transformation.

13. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson

How confident are you of the £2m annual saving?

Response

Paragraph 5.13 of the Cabinet report sets out the areas identified for potential savings. The £2m savings target is considered achievable.

14. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Who initiated the request for a consultant's report on the issue?

Response

The Cabinet requested that officers take appropriate measures to explore the option of bringing CBH back under the control of the council. Officers then recommended that an external adviser was used to support the Cabinet in reaching a decision on the future of housing.

15. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Who drafted the terms of reference and what were those terms of reference?

Response

Officers drafted the brief for Campbell Tickell for approval by relevant Cabinet Members. In summary the brief set out that CBC would like to commission a strategic housing review which will:

1. Provide assistance to CBC in developing its strategic vision for housing;
2. Set out a detailed evaluation around the short term option of a fully integrated shared management team across CBC and CBH, including how this might best be implemented;
3. Consider 2 options for the longer term:
 - a. Bring the ALMO fully in-house and not retain the legal entity; and
 - b. Bring the ALMO fully in-house, but retain the legal entity for specific housing purposes (such as the delivery of PRS accommodation).

16. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Were the procurement rules followed? If not, what were the reasons for this?

Response

Campbell Tickell were appointed in accordance with the Councils Contract Procedure Rules. Given the cost was just over the £10,000 threshold which would require the Council to obtain 3 quotes, a waiver was granted to enable a direct award to be made on the basis that they are leaders in the field and had previously worked with both the Council and CBH, having conducted the review of the CBH board and therefore were familiar with both organisations

17. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

How much did the report cost?

Response

£10,450

18. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

When was it commissioned?

Response

Campbell Tickell were engaged in May 2023. However, Campbell Tickell have previously undertaken reviews for the Council and have been previously commissioned by CBH so they have extensive existing knowledge of both the Council and CBH.

19. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Who were the stakeholders referred to in the report?

Response

The stakeholders referred to included, Cabinet Members and Senior Officers.

20. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

What were the reasons for not including consultation with i) CBH employees and board members ii) tenants?

Response

As stated in the Cabinet Report, tenants will be consulted in advance of any decision to wind-up CBH and the cabinet report also emphasises the importance of engaging with tenants. In 2021, a report was presented to Cabinet with an attached review from Campbell Tickell on options for the future of housing services, this included the option of bringing the service back in house. The CBH Board, tenant board members, TSIP and senior employees were all given an opportunity to share their views at that point. The most recent CT review specifically focussed on the option of integrating services following the significant changes and challenges that the Council and CBH have faced.

21. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

When we moved to an ALMO, benefits were very clear in that funding could be accessed to update properties to the decent homes standard, meaning tenants had new kitchens, bathrooms, heating systems, and more. There was a direct link between the decision and tangible positive outcomes for tenants. CBH is an outstanding organisation and tenants are happy with the ALMO. The report doesn't show any clear benefits to residents from the change in management. It does talk about some benefits but not how they would be realised. What are the direct, tangible benefits to tenants from this change?

Response

The report is clear of the financial challenges facing both the General Fund and the HRA. It is estimated that £2m in efficiencies across the General Fund and HRA will be generated through CBH and CBC becoming one organisation. Many tenants and residents rely on the services that CBC provide so the most significant tangible benefit is that through making efficiencies we will be able to maintain council services when otherwise we may have been faced with decisions to cut or reduce services at a time when our tenants and residents need them most.

In addition, a further tangible benefit that we expect to be realised as the organisations evolve is smoother and more efficient customer journeys, more responsive and joined up services and, through sharing our collective skills in regeneration and development delivering more much needed homes at greater speed than remaining as separate organisations.

A final benefit is that workforce challenges are a nationwide issue across many jobs roles in the public sector. Being a single, larger organisations help to mitigate workforce challenge risks.

22. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

If the decision to wind up CBH has not yet been taken, why does the CBC media campaign surrounding it say that it has?

Response

It is common for Councils across the country to set a clear strategic direction for the services which they are ultimately accountable for. The Cabinet report sets a clear strategic direction with a recommendation to wind-up CBH as a company.

As stated previously, consultation with tenants will take place in advance of the decision to wind-up CBH as a company.

23. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

What are tenants, board members and employees meant to infer from the campaign?

Response

The Cabinet has set a clear strategic direction that it is the intention to wind-up CBH and transfer housing services under the direct control of CBC and that Tenants will be consulted on this change.

24. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

How can consultation be meaningful if all those being consulted have been told the decision has already been made in CBC media communications?

Response

Consultation with tenants has not yet started but the letter to tenants makes a clear commitment that *“As we look to the future, tenants and leaseholders will have the opportunity to be front and centre in helping to shape what our housing services will look like.”*

24. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Why was the option of transferring the housing stock to a housing association not included in the report?

Response

That was not an option that the Cabinet, as the executive, wished to explore.

25. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

When was the decision of the cabinet communicated to CBH staff and how was it communicated? If in writing, please could we see copies of correspondence.

Response

An all staff briefing for CBH staff, hosted by CBC and CBH was held on 4 October to advise employees of the proposed direction of travel ahead of any information being placed into the public domain. Subsequently a dedicated inbox was set up to provide a facility for employees to submit questions.

26. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

When was the decision of the cabinet communicated to the CBH board and how was it communicated? If in writing, please could we see copies of correspondence.

Response

The chair of the board was briefed by the Leader on 22 September 2023.

27. Question from Councillor Wendy Flynn

Have any talks taken place with CBH staff around TUPE or redundancy? If yes, when did these start?

Response

Until such time as the integration plan referred to in the cabinet report has been prepared and agreed it is not possible to enter into formal discussions around TUPE or redundancies. Informal conversations have taken place to ensure both organisations are managing staff concerns. When that time arises, the Council will follow all appropriate HR processes and engage with the recognised trade unions.