

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 28th February, 2022
6.00 - 7.30 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Chris Mason (Chair), Dilys Barrell, Nigel Britter, Alisha Lewis, Emma Nelson, John Payne, Julie Sankey and David Willingham (Reserve)
Also in attendance:	Harry Mayo, Judith Baker, Richard Gibson, Councillor Martin Horwood, Paul Jones and Kim Smith

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Flynn and Hegenbarth. Councillor Willingham was present as a substitute.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Nelson declared a non-pecuniary interest in the Police and Crime Commission.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Minutes of the last meeting, held on 17 January 2021, were signed as a true record of the meeting.

4. PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS, CALLS FOR ACTIONS AND PETITIONS

There were none.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

There were none.

6. PUBLICA BUSINESS PLAN

Jan Britton (JB), MD of Publica, told Members that the company is required to submit an annual business plan which is brought to O&S in advanced draft form to offer Members the chance to comment and contribute before the plan is submitted to the Cabinet. Cheltenham is an equal 25% shareholder, but isn't provided with the same range of services as the other three partner councils, focussing on IT and HR-related services.

In response to Member questions and concerns, JB confirmed that:

- taking into account that Publica serves four different councils with differing interests and priorities, its teams are structured in a range of ways – some completely integrated to provide service for 3-4 councils, some for two councils, and a small number of council-specific teams. Economies and

efficiencies of scale are important, but the sovereignty of each council is respected;

- the portals referred to in the report are part of the Revs and Benefits system which has gone live for the other three councils, enabling the public to log into the system at any time. Cheltenham offers a similar system, under a different name;
- there is also a councillor portal project for the other three councils, a landing page where Members can go for information relating to the councils, contact information, press releases, applications – anything of interest to councillors;
- the advanced climate emergency training referred to in the report is quite technical and aimed at those in the building service. The Executive Director People and Change confirmed that carbon literacy training is planned for all councillors after the election;
- with regard to data-driven decision making, data protection is set across all public sector organisation, and personal data cannot be taken from one area and used for another;
- Publica is very conscious that however much 24/7 digital contact is to be desired, there are people who struggle with digital technology and prefer telephone or personal contact. These services will be maintained, though not provided by Publica in Cheltenham;
- Publica recognises trade unions for collective negotiation, and enjoys a constructive working relationship; management meets informally with staff reps as well as TU reps, to maintain good support for staff;
- it is difficult to set key performance indicators to show progress towards zero carbon as monitoring carbon usage is an imperfect science. However, the same formula is used year on year and the reduction in the number of carbon tons is used to measure progress;
- public sector organisations continue to struggle with recruitment and staffing, but succession, retention planning and staff development have become more significant in recent months;
- Publica is a 'people business', with 80% of its budget spent on employees, and got close to Investors in People (IIP) accreditation last year. It is committed to having 10% of staff in some sort of leadership training, including junior roles, and is very close to that target;
- Publica is fully committed to IIP- challenging inequality and being a disability-competent employer – these issues are part of management practice and not a separate function. The Executive Director People and Change added that the council has committed to championing diversity within tech and digital employment by signing up to the national Tech Talent Charter;
- it seemed counter-intuitive to have a separate section in the business plan for each of the four councils, even though Publica provides more services for the other three partner councils than it does for Cheltenham, which only shares in HR and IT functions; a blended document was produced deliberately;
- with regard to general inequality in terms of pay, public sector bodies have had a duty to measure the gender pay gap for many years – this was bigger than realised at the start, but is now substantially less and continues to move in the right direction;
- employee mileage reduced by 35-40% through the Covid period, and the target for employment travel and transport cost, as part of the move

towards a more carbon-neutral environment, is now to make sure this doesn't go up. Figures show a reduction in staff mileage since 2019;

- none of the four councils have completed a customer satisfaction survey since the second quarter of 2019, and there is no plan to do another one at this point. However, Publica has open and regular dialogue with CBC, and would be informed by the CEO or directors if there were any serious problems. Through informal groups and monthly meetings with heads of service, Publica is aware of areas where senior officers think its performance needs to be picked up and where it is doing well.

The Chair thanked Members for their thoughts and comments.

7. ENCOURAGING VOTER PARTICIPATION AT LOCAL ELECTIONS

The Electoral Services Manager ran through her report, which set out all the steps taken by her team to ensure that the electoral register was as up-to-date as possible and included all eligible voters, as well as figures showing election turn-out for the last ten years. The Executive Director Finance and Assets, speaking as CBC's Returning Officer, pointed out that the Council motion agreed by Members asked the council to investigate ways to encourage voter participation in local elections; the statistics speak for themselves, with 100% names registered in some areas, and it is down to the candidates to get people out to vote – only they can increase voter participation.

In response to Members' questions, the officer confirmed that:

- regarding the photo ID scheme to be introduced in 2023, there will be national campaigns, starting later this year, to ensure that people are made aware of the need for photo ID. Forms will be sent to voters, who will be able to apply on line, but they will also need to be able to apply in person at the council offices;
- postal voters currently need to re-register periodically, refreshing their signatures and re-confirming their date of birth;
- for clarification, canvassers visit households up to three times to gather up household information about who is living there, and up to two times to encourage or help potential voters to complete their registration forms;
- the council can use CBH data to help identify potential voters because CBH is an arm's length organisation; data for other social landlords, such as Bromford, can't be accessed in this way, although council tax records can be used;
- the HMO register is used when sending out canvassing forms, and if the canvasser struggles to get information, individual landlords can be contacted;
- the elections office works with the university to ensure students in halls of residence can register, including information on the university intranet and emails to students encouraging them to look out for their registration forms in the post;
- ID cards will initially be government-funded, though whether this will remain the case indefinitely is not known.

On request, the Chair invited the Cabinet Member Regulatory Services to speak. He thanked the elections team for their hard work, saying that we shouldn't take voting for granted. The statistics showed the clear correlation between deprivation and voter turn-out, and this needed to be addressed on a bigger scale. There were a number of solutions, including elections held over several days, as in India, elections at weekends, as in Europe, and proportional representation. He wondered if these can be contemplated in legislation. He agreed that voter ID would cause issues and make matters worse for low income, marginalised groups, and would also cost millions – and that there was no need for it. He wondered how many allegations of fraud in local elections there were on record, and whether the new system would be tracked at local level. More radical and inclusive measures were needed to make elections freer and fairer.

The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that any changes to the voting system would have to come through Parliament. She said that she had no knowledge of any fraud allegations at any of Cheltenham's elections, only in very rare circumstances an administrative error. She also confirmed that the ID system would allow tracking, to show how many people voted and how many people were turned away without any ID.

A Member asked how voter ID would prevent students from voting twice, in their home town and university town. The Electoral Services Manager confirmed that they are permitted to vote in both for local elections, but have to opt for one or the other in national elections. She confirmed that landlords and HMOs are obliged by law to provide information i.e. the names of everyone living at a particular address, and it is then down to the elections office to contact the individuals and make them aware of their voting options.

The Chair thanked officers and Members for their contributions, adding that if Members wanted further debate on this issue, they could submit a motion to Council.

8. TACKLING MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION

The Strategy and Engagement Manager supported the review, commenting that it would be crucial and illuminating, but was concerned about officer resource to support it – it could take longer than 12 months. He also questioned what would be done with the findings, as CBC is a small player in tackling deprivation in the town. He suggested a wide range of consultees – CBH officers, expert witnesses, external partners, food banks, advice providers, organisations helping to coordinate regeneration, the police job centres – and said it was up to the committee to determine the next steps.

The Chair confirmed that if the committee wanted to set up a working task group, it would need to agree on whether to open this to all interested members of the council.

Members thanked the officer for his clear report, in particular the maps and charts, highlighting areas of higher deprivation, and were fully supportive of the proposed review. They made the following comments:

- the real question will be what can the council do to make people's lives better? The hope was that a review, involving the council, Hesters Way Partnership, CBH, Oakley organisation, police, schools etc, would show what is within CBC's influence, what it can do, what support it can give, and what it should prioritise;
- whilst appreciating officers are very busy, commitment to a 12-month timeline was important – this was an urgent problem which has been avoided for decades. In particular the review should consider the wider housing strategy and how to bring forward more affordable homes in the most deprived wards;
- Cheltenham is masked by an aura of wealth, and the high levels of deprivation suffered by many residents needs to be brought to the fore. There is no quick fix – the council needs to look at a long-term strategy, pick key elements, and work on these to show that the council means business. In view of the enormity of the task, the best way forward may be to tackle it one aspect at a time, do it properly and then move on to the next;
- although the maps in the report show the most deprived wards, it should be noted that there are pockets of deprivation and individuals in need to help in all wards across the town – we should not be too map-bound.

Members considered whether the committee should identify two or three priority areas for the working group, or whether the group itself should be trusted and empowered to decide this. In view of the upcoming election, it was agreed that the working group should be set up, decide on its initial focus, identify officers and resources, then come back to O&S in six months' time with a workplan to be completed in 12 months. It was also agreed that in view of the importance of the work, the group would make a recommendation to Cabinet.

This was agreed unanimously.

9. FEEDBACK FROM OTHER SCRUTINY MEETINGS ATTENDED

There was none.

10. CABINET BRIEFING

There was nothing to report.

11. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN

This is a standard agenda item. There were no updates.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

To be confirmed.

Chris Mason
Chairman