

# 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.