

**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

**16TH OCTOBER 2023, AT 6.00 P.M.**

PRESENT: Councillors P. M. McDonald (Chairman), S. T. Nock (Vice-Chairman), A. Bailes, R. Bailes, A. M. Dale, E. M. S. Gray, R. J. Hunter, B. Kumar and S. A. Robinson.

Observers: Councillor S. Ammar, Councillor S. J. Baxter, Councillor S. R. Colella, Councillor C. A. Hotham (on Microsoft Teams), Councillor M. Marshall, Councillor K. J. May, Councillor S. A. Webb and Councillor P. J. Whittaker (on Microsoft Teams)

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Mr. P. Carpenter, Mr. G. Revans, Mrs. C. Felton (on Microsoft Teams), Ms. J. Willis, Ms. M. Howell, Mr. S. Parry, Mrs. B. Talbot and Mr. C. Wells and Mr. M. Sliwinski.

36/23

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J. D. Stanley.

37/23

**DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no declarations of interest nor any whipping arrangements.

38/23

**TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD HELD ON 10TH JULY 2023 AND 11TH SEPTEMBER 2023**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2023 and 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023 were considered.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2023 and 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023 be agreed as a true and correct record.

39/23

**AGILE WORKING PRESENTATION**

The Interim Chief Executive introduced a presentation about the Council's Agile Working policy alongside the project team of officers who had supported its development and launch.

The Agile Policy was part of the Workforce Strategy which aimed to have the right people in the organisation with the right skills to support

the Council effectively. In implementing the policy there was a focus on managing performance and achieving the Council's priorities.

The policy was launched in June 2023 and applied to all permanent and fixed term contracted employees of the Council. There were clear parameters within the policy and at service levels there were service objectives including ensuring appropriate staff cover. Depending on the nature of any specific job, the policy may not apply as ensuring customer service outside the office-based environment was a key requirement. Several pilots had been run to assess the impact of the policy before broader implementation.

All new starters received a face-to-face induction and regular one-to-ones and appraisals continued across the Council.

Three key areas had been covered since the launch of the policy – customers, staff, and infrastructure. The project team were working with service managers to ensure that the policy was adopted and working. Fourth tier managers were being surveyed currently and that would be followed up with meetings to explore operational models, policies and procedures, staff training and development, communication, infrastructure, and service measures. The Council remained committed to supporting staff health and wellbeing whilst working in a different way.

The Interim Chief Executive emphasised that customers remained at the heart of how the Council's services operated whilst officers were developing and implementing the agile working policy. Recruitment and retention continued to be a challenge for the public sector, but in terms of making the Council an employer of choice, the policy supported this approach.

During consideration of this item the following issues were discussed:

- Details of how the policy was being implemented and whether new employees were expected to be office based until they were familiar with the team and the work expected. The Interim Chief Executive responded that the Council did not employ home workers; the needs of the service dictated when employees should be in the office or indeed out in the field. All managers would let new recruits know what the expectations of the role would be and how the agile working principles were employed to their role specifically.
- In terms of service measures and whether they were 'SMART', these were managed by outcome and not by attendance. An example was given of a contracted service which could demonstrate that all members of staff were meeting their contractual requirements. Managers were required to be clear about what they were required to deliver and how that could be demonstrated.
- Whether a cost benefit review had been undertaken. It was noted that officers were using this approach consistently. An example

was given that the agile working approach had led to the reduction in occupation of office space which had in turn realised a £70k saving in the budget.

- What arrangements were being made for employees to have appropriate equipment for working at home. The Interim Chief Executive responded that the Council had insisted on DSE assessments being carried out during the Covid pandemic, and equipment had been supplied to employees, including desks, chairs, and screens etc. All staff were required to complete an online system to assess whether they required any additional practical support in working from home.
- Some members referred to not being aware of who was working in a specific office on a day-to-day basis, and this impacted their ability to deal with issues. The Interim Chief Executive responded that members should receive the same response whether an officer was working at home or not; if a face-to-face meeting was required then that would be arranged.
- Members also commented that they did not always know who to contact as they were not aware of team structures. It was suggested that perhaps the IT system could be developed to support this better.
- The Interim Chief Executive responded that she had been made aware of some issues about responsiveness to Councillors and the business improvement team were looking at the issue. A small project team had taken on board feedback about Members' experiences and would report to the Strategic Management Team. She emphasised that officers must be responsive and proactive as members represented the community.
- What objectives of the policy were and how they would be measured. The Interim Chief Executive responded that the key parameters of the policy set out that objectives, performance measures and ensuring service cover were priorities. The objectives were service specific depending on the type of service being delivered. Agile working had to be arranged to support the Council's priorities.
- What arrangements were in place for staff who were unable to work from home and what flexibility there was generally. The Interim Chief Executive reported that during the pandemic a number of staff were unable to work from home for various reasons and they had been supported to be office based. In the policy there was an opportunity for a discussion between the employee and their manager at any time to review arrangements. The balance between working at home and in the office would also be tested.
- Whether managers had the skills to deal with poor performance that might be masked through lack of regular face to face contact. The Interim Chief Executive responded that managers had training support and would follow up performance issues.
- Whether the policy applied to for agency workers. It was noted that it generally did not apply, although a manager may decide that it would be appropriate in service specific instances.

- A member suggested that the title 'Agile working' might be misconstrued as in project management terms it was a way of implementing large projects. Officers undertook to review the title as the initiative was important for recruitment and retention.
- Where the pressure came from to develop the policy. The Interim Chief Executive responded that the initiative had emerged post Covid as a result of the experience of working differently through the pandemic, but the Council would work in the most efficient way possible with a balance for the Council and for staff.
- What channels were available to employees if a manager was not available or 'visible'. The Human Resources and Development Manager responded that they were encouraged to contact their senior managers through their management structure in the first instance. The inductions process identified the relevant team and departmental structure.
- Whether the council used 360-degree appraisal. This was not currently used, but different surveys undertaken, such as staff and spot surveys, and these were increasing frequency. They provided information about where in the organisation there might be issues relating to performance.
- What arrangements were in place for customers to review services; the Interim Chief Executive responded that there were records of service enquiries within service areas. The Council had a complaints and compliments system and the level of both were monitored by the Corporate Management Team. The Council also used customer satisfaction surveys to inform managers of performance.
- Whether some form of follow up could be introduced as part of measuring satisfaction with customers' interaction with services. The project team would pick this up.
- In response to a query about the Workforce Strategy Board, the Interim Chief Executive reported that this was part of developing the workforce action plan. It had been identified that a corporate board was needed to manage and monitor outcomes and implementation. The Interim Chief Executive would chair the Board, which would involve colleagues from the Senior Management Team, supported by project leads and other officers to advise as required. It would meet monthly for at least 6 months and would look at all workstreams.
- Whether the overall impact on mileage as a result of flexible working had been captured. The Human Resources and Development Manager responded that it had been measured previously during the pandemic but not more recently.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

[At the discretion of the Chairman, item 9 on the agenda – Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee – Update – was considered earlier in the meeting as item 5]

The Council's Representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), Councillor Kumar, updated the Board on the matters discussed by the HOSC at its recent meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2023 as follows:

- Hillcrest Mental Health Ward. It was noted that the Ward was recently given a 'poor' rating by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) due to issues such as lack of recordkeeping. At the HOSC meeting Members asked for clarification as to what was happening to rectify the worrying situation with the Ward. Among other things, it was reported that there were plans to transfer the Ward to the Worcestershire Royal Hospital (part of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust).
- Children's Hearing Services (paediatric audiology). It was reported that in October 2022, some inconsistencies with the accuracy of children's hearing tests delivered were identified. To date, the review, identified the need for 115 children to have their hearing retested due to inconsistencies with testing. This number was likely to increase as the review continued. It was noted that the incorrect test results led to children being given attention deficit disorder diagnosis. Due to this, 7 cases of moderate harm and 16 cases of greater harm had been identified resulting from the incorrect diagnosis. In all cases the families involved had been given a full explanation and apology as part of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust (WHAT) Duty of Candour.
- Health Services Winter Planning. The use of jargon and acronyms was raised by Members in relation to this item. It was said that this impeded understanding of the health system by members of the public and patients. For example, a term such as 'virtual wards', denoting the health oversight and monitoring of a patient after the patient had left hospital was a jargon term that was not easy to understand for people not working in the health system. As part of this report, the Representative to HOSC noted that problems were identified with the launch of the 'Home for Lunch' campaign, which was a plan to discharge patients from hospitals before lunch time.
- The Council's Representative reported that at the meeting he raised the issue of poor level of service in GP surgeries across Bromsgrove District.

**RESOLVED** that the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee Update be noted.

A presentation on food bank provision across the District was delivered by the Head of Community and Housing Services. It was noted that this item was originally scheduled on the agenda for the last meeting and was to cover information concerning the Newstarts Community Supermarket only. However, at the Members' request this presentation was now extended to cover community supermarkets and food bank provision across the District.

The details of the following organisations providing community supermarket and foodbank provision in the District were given:

- NewStarts Community Supermarket - It was noted that this community supermarket was based on the stand-alone shop system with one member of staff and a number of volunteers providing community supermarket provision. This project was not funded by the Council. This project emerged from discussions at multi-agency Cost of Living (COL) Partnership and, as NewStarts was an organisation that was used to handling food and had the correct food safety registrations, it offered to pilot the community supermarket project. The standalone cost of initiating the project was £67,000 and it launched operation at the Bromsgrove site from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023.

It was explained that the project operated on the environmental principle of preventing food waste by obtaining food that would otherwise be wasted. For example, NewStarts had agreements through a scheme called Neighbourly to collect surplus food from Lidl, Aldi and sometimes Sainsburys. In addition, NewStarts were supplied by an organisation called WasteKnot who obtained fresh fruit and vegetables that would either be ploughed back into the ground or placed in landfill.

Initially, the community supermarket was only running at the Bromsgrove Sherwood Road site since June 2023, but in August 2023 a second space was set up in New Frankley Arden Road. The community supermarket had been operating on a 'pay what you can afford' model as no resident was thereby excluded from accessing the provision.

It was highlighted that a number of metrics were used to measure the success of the NewStarts Community Supermarket, and in this regard it was noted that since the launch of the Bromsgrove Sherwood Road site on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023, 134 people used the supermarket and an income of £420 had been generated. 750kg of food was also saved from going to waste. For the New Frankley Arden Road site, opened on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2023, the respective figures were 82 people who used the supermarket, £208 income, and 150kg of food saved from going to waste.

It was noted that the project thus far operated at a £391 deficit, however, it was hoped that as more people learned about the

project and the range of items widened, the income would increase. The project saw positive development in terms of making an impact to people who accessed the Bromsgrove and New Frankley sites. It was highlighted that both sites were currently open once a week on Thursdays between 3pm and 6pm to provide continuity of opening times.

- New Starts Food Bank – In addition to Community Supermarket, food bank was also operated by NewStarts at Sherwood Road, Bromsgrove, and Arden Road, New Frankley sites. The food banks were open to all Bromsgrove residents and were open Monday-Friday 9am to 4pm. The operating model to access the service was by agency referral and the food banks relied on donations of cash and food, in addition to the wholesale scheme with Morrisons and donations from Lidl, Aldi and Sainsburys, for its supplies. As part of the NewStarts scheme 1,706 food parcels had been distributed at Bromsgrove site and 1,246 at Rubery site to date.
- Catshill Baptist Church - Based at Catshill Baptist Church, the focus of this food bank was on Catshill residents but it was open to all of Bromsgrove. The offer consisted of food and household supplies, the food bank was operated by volunteers, open on Wednesdays from 10.30am to 12.30pm, and was accessible via agency referral. The food bank relied on donations of cash and food, in addition to donations from Catshill Co-op, Catshill Spar, Catshill One Stop, and Waitrose and Lidl supermarkets in Bromsgrove. 986 parcels had been provided between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023.
- The Basement Project - Based at Hanover House, the focus of this scheme was on people under 25 but it was open to all Bromsgrove residents. The offer consisted of food and toiletries supplies, the food bank was open Monday to Friday from 9am to 4.30pm, and was accessible via both self-referral and agency referral. The food bank relied on donations of cash and food, and it worked with schools to provide food parcels to families. 610 parcels were provided via this project in the last 12 months.
- Hollywood Christian Life Centre - Located at Simms Lane in Hollywood, the food bank was open to all Bromsgrove residents, providing food and toiletries supplies. It was open on Mondays from 1.30pm to 2.30pm, although parcels were provided 5 days a week. The food bank was available via both self-referral and agency referral, and the number of parcels provided were approximately 20-25 per week.
- Alvechurch Community Larder - Based at Alvechurch Baptist Church Hall, open to residents of the Parish, providing food and some household supplies. The food bank was open on Fridays between 11am and 12.30pm with another day added recently due

to popularity. The larder was accessible via self-referral where users paid £4 cash to access approximately £20 of food, with food provided from supermarkets. Numbers of parcels distributed to be advised.

- The Duke of York - This would be run from a pub in Sidemoor which offered food on Mondays and Wednesdays between 8am and 10am. The operation model was via self-referral and the project was currently in the process of being set up.

Following the overview of the provision provided by Officers, the following issues were discussed:

- It was noted that the Council's Cost of Living surveys as well as anecdotal evidence highlighted an increase in the need for food bank services. More data was also held by Bromsgrove Partnership to confirm the trend. This data was backed up by the increase in the numbers of people accessing food banks nationally over the last few years. It was noted that many people who were previously unknown to the Council (for example people who were not accessing state financial support) were presenting at food banks.
- It was enquired whether the reference to 216 people who used the NewStarts Community Supermarket to date (both sites) denoted 216 unique individuals accessing the supermarket or 216 instances of access to the Supermarket (regardless of whether a person accessed it more than once). It was commented that this question also related to data presented for other foodbanks. Officers undertook to clarify whether the data related to the number of visits or the number of users.
- Some Members thought that the referral model for accessing food banks was not appropriate, especially where people experienced sudden crisis or emergency situations and needed immediate access to food. It was explained on the other hand that the voluntary organisations providing the service had only limited supplies of food and the referral system helped them plan for demand and ensure that food parcels were provided to all people referred.
- It was noted that the referral system enabled the Council to know more about a resident and thereby signpost to access support and funding, for example the Household Support Fund during Covid-19 pandemic.
- Officers commented that it was likely the Government would no longer offer Household Support Fund and information was awaited on what funding support would be available from Government in this area in future years.
- It was commented that most of the food bank schemes in the District were concentrated in Bromsgrove Town Centre, with some operating from other urbanised areas of the District. One of the schemes researched operated a delivery service.



- It was pointed out that there were some discrepancies in food banks coverage across the District and that there were also differences across food banks with some requiring agency referral whilst others being available via self-referral. Some Members expressed concern that to access parcels at some food banks, residents had to provide personal information to the food bank staff.
- It was noted that the Council did not fund the food banks or the community supermarket, but that these voluntary organisations could access grants funding administered by the Council. It was noted that the Basement Project received a small amount of funding from the Council relating to housing.

Following the discussion, Members agreed that it would be appropriate to establish a Task Group to investigate the food banks provision in the District, including what models of operation could work best in the District. It was agreed that the Task Group would be comprised of five or six Members and that membership would be decided following the meeting, to be formally confirmed at the next meeting of the Board.

**RESOLVED** that a Task Group be established to investigate the topic of Community Supermarket / Food Bank provision in the District.

42/23

#### **GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS REVIEW - IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS UPDATE (VERBAL UPDATE)**

The Head of Legal, Democratic and Property Services provided an update on the progress in implementing the outcomes of the Governance Systems Review and in doing so reported that initial draft proposals on the Memorandum of Understanding (between all political group leaders on maintaining the 'hybrid Leader and Cabinet' for at least a four year period from May 2024). would be brought forward before the Overview and Scrutiny Board and Cabinet in November to enable Members to view the wording of the memorandum and propose amendments if necessary. There would be a similar draft with regard to Cabinet Advisory Panels, hoped to be presented before Members in November.

It was hoped that at the November meeting of Overview and Scrutiny a more detailed action plan in relation to other proposed constitutional changes could also be provided.

In terms of monitoring the progress in implementing the changes to governance review, it was noted that there would be a progress update at each meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Board. It was highlighted that changes to governance arrangements and model would come into effect from the start of the next municipal year.

**RESOLVED** that the Governance Systems Review – Implementation Progress Update be noted.

43/23

**NOTICE OF MOTION - REQUEST TO INVESTIGATE - FUTURE OF LIBRARIES WITHIN THE DISTRICT**

The consideration of this item was deferred to the next meeting of the Board.

44/23

**FINANCE AND BUDGET WORKING GROUP - UPDATE**

The Chairman reported that the next two meetings of Finance and Budget Working Group were due to take place on 17<sup>th</sup> October and 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023 respectively.

**RESOLVED** that the Finance and Budget Working Group Update be noted.

45/23

**CABINET WORK PROGRAMME**

The Cabinet Work Programme was presented for Members' consideration.

It was highlighted that the next iteration of the Cabinet Work Programme would contain a short paragraph or description next to each item on that Work Programme to assist Members with understanding the context of the particular Cabinet report. This next iteration would be implemented in time for the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board in November.

A query was raised by Members with regards to access by District Councillors to minutes of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) – Bromsgrove Partnership. It was responded by the Interim Chief Executive that the request to access the minutes/notes of the LSP meetings would be made on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Board. However, as LSP was not a public body, it would be for the LSP Board to decide at its meeting whether to grant this request.

**RESOLVED** that:

- 1) A request be made to the Bromsgrove Partnership (the Local Strategic Partnership for Bromsgrove District) that access to the minutes/notes from its meetings be granted to Bromsgrove District Council Councillors.
- 2) The contents of the Cabinet Work Programme be noted.

46/23

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Overview and Scrutiny Board Work Programme was presented for Members' consideration.

**RESOLVED** that the Overview and Scrutiny Board Work Programme be noted.

Overview and Scrutiny Board  
16th October 2023

The meeting closed at 8.09 p.m.

Chairman

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