201

CORPORATE SUPPORT COMMITTEE

28 September 2021 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Dendle (Chair), Bennett, Clayden, Mrs Cooper, Huntley, Madeley, Warr and Pendleton (Substitute for Roberts)

Councillor English was also in attendance for all or part of the meeting.

[Note: Councillor Warr was absent from the meeting during consideration of the matters referred to in the following minutes – Minute 308 (Part) to Minute 310].

298.   WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the first physical meeting of the Corporate Support Committee.

A special welcome was extended to Councillor Warr as this was her first meeting having replaced Councillor Purchese on the Committee.

299.   APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence had been received from Councillors Oppler and Roberts.

The Chair asked the Committee, and it approved, that Councillor Pendleton would act as Vice-Chair for this meeting.

300.   DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

301.   MINUTES

The minutes from the last meeting of the Committee held on 10 June 2021 were approved by the Committee as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

302.   ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA THAT THE CHAIR OF THE MEETING IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY BY REASONS OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Chair confirmed that he did have one urgent item to bring to the Committee's attention. He had requested that a report be brought to this meeting following a press story featured in the Littlehampton Gazette regarding staff redundancies. It was his view that Members should receive a report of explanation and to allow for Members to debate the item.

Corporate Support Committee - 28.09.21

It had since been pointed out by the Chief Executive that this area did not fall under the remit of this Committee and would need to be referred to the Audit & Governance Committee.

Having been asked by a Member of the Committee why this report needed to be referred to the Audit & Governance Committee when the Corporate Support Committee had responsibility for Human Resources, the Interim Group Head of Corporate Support was asked to provide advice. She confirmed that this information was contained within the Council's Statement of Accounts which fell under the remit of the Audit & Governance Committee. Also, scrutiny of decisions in that area was also the remit of that Committee. This Committee had responsibility for the consideration of and scrutiny of HR Policies.

Following further discussion, the Chair confirmed that it was important for this item to be scrutinised and that he would leave to Officers to sort this being presented to a future meeting of the Audit & Governance Committee.

303.   PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair confirmed that no questions had been submitted for this meeting.

304.   UPDATE ON PROGRESS WITH THE COUNCIL'S DIGITAL STRATEGY

The Chair invited the Head of Technology and Digital to present his report. He outlined that the Council's Digital Strategy had been approved approximately 18 months ago and he provided an update on progress to date and an insight into the next phase of the programme.

Since the commencement of the delivery programme, the Council had faced a worldwide pandemic and in response to the changing landscape had had to refocus some areas of work. Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, there had been significant achievements made. Rolling out homeworking for all staff proved that the Council could operate differently and deliver more services digitally. A programme called "Future Ways of Working" was looking at how the Council could take this work forward to maximise opportunities. A new web site had been designed around how and why customers contacted the Council looking at usage trends, best practice and working with service colleagues across the Council. The new website was launched in July 2021 adding new interactive services. One of these had been the introduction of Webchat and a new on-line appointment booking system was planned. Looking at statistics, it could be seen that the number of visits to the website had increased by 40%, part of this could be related to Covid and partly due to the new website design. Other new developments were digital newsletters, allowing customers to sign up to receive regular updates and other sources of information. The Head of Technology and Digital explained that the pandemic had made it vital for the Council to work differently in ensuring that its buildings would be fit for the future. New ways of working had seen the need to install video conferencing facilities in some meeting rooms to allow hybrid meetings to take place whilst still being able to host normal meetings.

As part of a county wide Government programme, around 25 of the Council's buildings had been connected to new ultrafast gigabit capable fibre and work was progressing on connecting more public assets across the District to the same ultrafast network.

In terms of next steps and in addition to completing some of the projects already started, the Digital Team's focus would be to continue to improve the website and developing more interactive services that would encourage further digital take-up.

Responding to the presentation received, there was no doubt that the improvements made would provide a huge benefit to the District and would save money. However, as one in five people in Arun had a disability, thought needed to be given to those who were vulnerable and unable to access services by digital means. The need for some to be able to continue with face to face appointments was vital especially in resolving more complex issues. The Council also needed to consider this in light of the District's increasing and very high ageing population and in recognising Arun's high levels of deprivation. In view of this what contingency plans were in place for when IT failed or in dealing with situations when the phone system was not working.

In response, it was outlined that the Council continued to offer customers services outside of the digital arena. Members were reassured that resilience was built into systems to try to avoid systems going down. In this event, the Council would have to revert to more face to face contact. The key point to emphasise was that the Council attempted to make all services as accessible as possible and had reviewed accessibility issues in relaunching the website.

The Chair asked if a 'My Arun' portal could be introduced providing a one stop shop to residents and then directing them to other functions and services. It was explained that what was being requested was a central place where a customer could manage different accounts within Arun. A 'My Arun' option had been placed onto the web site to gauge interest, but this had not received any take up. As there had not been the demand for this type of service, this had not been pursued and the time and money had been invested into providing other transactional services. The Chair stated that as a Council would it not like to know where residents lived and to have on record their email addresses and other contact information to allow it to provide its services in more efficient ways. An example given was why the Council was continuing to send out by post Council Tax bills when there were other alternatives? It was felt that the Council should be pushing to try and get as many residents as possible to provide this information so that the Council could provide services in more efficient ways.

To assist, the Head of Technology and Digital explained that with the Council Tax portal, residents did sign up and could receive bills electronically. Similarly, residents were signing up to receive newsletters and notifications and the Council was introducing new portals allowing residents the opportunity to sign up to receive other information which the Council was harvesting and turning it into what customers wanted whether this was SMS messages and other ways of providing information.

Corporate Support Committee - 28.09.21

The new housing system could send residents text messages about appointments and emails about repairs and a new booking system was being launched soon. The message was that the Council did not feel that it needed the central portal to manage that.

The Committee felt that the need to start the process of electronic communication was key but for those who wanted it. In line with climate change reduction plans it was also important to move away from paper copy provision and to move to electronic systems where possible. A possible way forward to promote this was to insert a leaflet or supply information as part of the Council Tax bills next year to encourage residents to request an online bill the following year.

It would be important when capturing data and email addresses to make residents aware of the reason why their data was being captured and the need to consider and abide by General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Residents also needed to be offered choice, paper, or digital alternatives. Members were reassured that all customers were told why and how their data was being stored in line with GDPR requirements.

This led to further discussion on the way in which Council Tax bills could be processed and delivered to customers.

Following further discussion, Councillor Madeley then proposed the recommendation in the report and this was seconded by Councillor Bennet.

The Committee

RESOLVED

That the report be endorsed.

305. UPDATE ON PROGRESS WITH THE COUNCIL'S CLOUD FIRST POLICY

The ICT & Digital Manager presented a report updating the Committee on progress made with the Council's Cloud First Policy which had been adopted 2.5 years ago as part of the ICT Strategy. The following key highlights were provided:

- The Cloud adoption process was still on target against the action plan in place despite the pandemic
- So far, the Council had successfully migrated six line of business applications to externally hosted solutions with four more already identified
- £50k had been secured from Microsoft via the Council's Licence Agreement to assist in the on-barding process to Microsoft Azure Cloud Tenancy
- Cloud benefits were that the Council only paid for what it used, security was built-in improving resilience and business continuity.

- Improved sustainability with current estimates showing a minimum 40% reduction in CO 2 emissions for systems deployed in the Cloud compared to on-premises
- Achieving a cost neutral cloud migration
- Finally, once completed a reduction of 79% in on-premises virtual server numbers.

The Chair asked that with the reduction in the number of servers in the IT suite whether this meant that there would be a reduction in the need to provide air conditioning to keep equipment cool and if so, had the solar panels on top of the Civic Centre made a difference and been a benefit for Arun.

Questions were asked about the link to Power Place in Chichester where data was backed up, had this been relinquished? It was explained currently this was planned for July and that the Council should be able to relinquish its racks from Power Place and that this formed part of its cost savings to fund its cloud first adoption. The Council still needed to find a business continuity solution for those remaining on-premises servers that were critical to the operation of the Council as part of this process. Also, phase 2 of the cloud adoption project would need to be completed before the Council could relinquish its presence in Power Place. An overview was then provided to the Committee explaining the security issues of being in the Cloud and who and how regularly data was monitored and backed up.

Following further discussion around security and the Cloud, the recommendation in the report was then proposed by Councillor Cooper and seconded by Councillor Clayden.

The Committee

RESOLVED

That the report be endorsed.

306. CUSTOMER SERVICES ANNUAL UPDATE - 2020/2021

The Customer Services Managers presented a report providing a brief overview of Customer Services. It considered the operation of the service over the last financial year ending March 2021 and identified emerging trends of operation comparing this with the operation over the previous 3-5 years.

The pandemic forced huge changes onto the team and with the help of IT, the whole team had been able to quickly work remotely. On average, the Customer Services Team received 13,600 calls per month with only 16 staff taking these calls. The need for the Centre had not diminished during the pandemic. New rules and grants for businesses from the Government meant that there were many more enquiries with businesses and vulnerable customers requiring assistance. The Contact Centre had been fundamental in providing a first point of contact and resolution service for customers who might not have been able to contact the Council via other channels.

Corporate Support Committee - 28.09.21

The Contact Centre dealt with responding to voicemails and emails handling environmental health and cleansing enquiries via the online-portal and some social media responses as well. This has required the team to embrace new ways of working and find innovative solutions to deliver services. The Contact Centre had been keen to encourage customers to self-serve and utilise alternative channels to contact the Council and had been pleased to have been able to develop the new Webchat service which had been available for about 13 months. Since its implementation it had received 4,392 chats and plans were underway to develop this service further to include other service areas. Generally, customers had adapted well to new ways of working learning to access the Council's services differently. With IT, the Centre had developed an online booking system and was utilising a workaround system for service areas such as housing, elections, and land charges to make appointments for their customers to come into the Civic Centre when a face to face appointment was needed.

The Chair asked how the Webchat service worked in terms of responding to chats received out of hours. It was explained that a set of questions were asked and answers provided for out of hours queries and that most of these questions would be answered correctly by the knowledge bot allowing customers to be able to access the service twenty four hours a day seven days a week. If it was not possible to provide an answer, the customer could request an email or telephone call response.

A Councillor raised concern that the Council offices were still not open to the public to walk into when other authorities across West Sussex were. It was explained that Reception areas both at the Civic Centre and Bognor Regis Town Hall had been available for customers to access housing services throughout the beginning of the pandemic. Since 19 July 2021, when the Government had changed its restriction guidelines, the reception areas had been manned by staff to operate a meet and greet service where customers were signposted to other services online or could make an appointment to meet staff face to face.

Councillor Cooper then proposed the two recommendations in the report which were seconded by Councillor Clayden.

The Committee

RESOLVED – That

(1)   The report be endorsed acknowledging the work of the Customer Services Team and implementation of the digital improvements; and

(2)   The Committee's thanks be recorded to the Customer Services Team for ensuring that customers continued to receive a high level of service during the pandemic.

307.   BUDGET 2022/23 - PROCESS

The Interim Group Head of Corporate Support and Section 151 Officer presented a report outlining a summary of the budget process for 2022/23 as this was the first budget to be completed under the new Committee system form of governance.

It was therefore important for all Members to be fully aware and understand how the Budget would be considered under the new structure, the process having been approved by the Corporate Policy & Performance Committee (CPPC) on 1 September 2021 involving the need for the budget to be considered by each Service Committee before the full budget would be considered by the CPPC on 10 February 2022 before approval by a Special Meeting of the Council on 23 February 2022.

It was accepted that within the resource constraints there would be the requirement for resource switching to address and enable the Council's priorities to be progressed and to meet new statutory requirements. Any growth would need to be minimised and met from resource switching where possible. In view of the Council's severely limited financial resources and limited officer time, any changes funded through resource switching would need to meet certain criteria with proposals aiming to be cost neutral, fully costed, and feasible to be deliverable for inclusion in the budget for 2022/23. A summary of budgets managed by this Committee and the outturn for 2020/21 had been provided in the Appendix to the report. The key dates for this Committee for the Budget 2022/23 process had also been provided.

The Committee then noted the budget setting process for 2022/23.

308.   REVIEW OF THE ELECTIONS HELD ON 6 MAY 2021

In the absence of the Chief Executive, the Group Head of Policy presented a detailed report reviewing the arrangements that had been put into place for the Elections held on 6 May 2021 providing information, feedback and lessons learned. It was outlined that these had been the most complicated set of Elections that the Council had been responsible for delivering and administering due to the cancellation of Elections in 2020. Election planning had been very challenging especially given that there had been so much discussion about whether they would even take place. In view of the advanced planning required to arrange elections, planning had commenced in Autumn 2020 and had had to continue based on having at that time no news about a vaccination programme and during the peak of the pandemic. Planning had therefore continued based on the worst case scenario and upon receiving conflicting advice from different bodies.

Sections 1.9 to 1.13 of the report set out the staffing issues and the Group Head of Policy used this opportunity to again thank those staff members who had been prepared to work. The report had included illustrations so that Councillors who had not had the opportunity to attend postal vote opening or the Count could see the extensive arrangements that had been put into place to maintain safe working.

Corporate Support Committee - 28.09.21

The public had been strongly encouraged to use the postal vote option for voting and numbers had increased by 25% compared to previous years. The Group Head of Policy stated that it would be interesting to see any long term changes from trying different methods would be seen in the future.

A major challenge had been overcoming the difficulty in identifying polling stations as not all used previously were suitable for use under Covid-19 restrictions or following risk assessment did not meet the health and safety instructions issued by the Electoral Commission and other bodies. A reduction in staffing available also meant that not all of the polling stations could be used as there were not enough staff to man them. There had been a few voters who had complained about the location of their polling station, however, most of them had accepted the reason for change and had asked for reassurance that the normal polling stations would be used again in the future, and this had been confirmed.

A main change had been the use of tablets to access an electronic register. Although there had been an error with the tablets at the start of the poll, with a very small number of electors being issued with ballot papers they were not entitled to, this had been quickly resolved. The reason for the problem was identified and work was progressing with the tablet software company and the election management software company to ensure that this would not be repeated in the future.

The report set out the plans that had been put into place in organising the verification and counts for the elections which had been held over three days to ensure safe working for staff and those observing.

In summary, despite the major challenges the measures put into place had resulted in successful elections. Due to a massive team effort from the whole of the Council's staff, the Council had been able to successfully deliver all the Elections. Thanks were passed onto Freedom Leisure and those responsible for the venues for their co-operation and support. In particular, thanks were extended to the Elections Team who had delivered the most complex set of elections under very difficult circumstances.

There had been several successful new ways of working which had had to be used and these would be implemented for future elections.

In considering the report, and in acknowledging the overwhelming difficulties that had been tackled, concern was expressed over polling station locations and the problems that the change in locations had caused with elderly and more frail residents.

This point was acknowledged by the Group Head of Policy who also confirmed that the Council had written to effected voters as early as January 2021 to confirm the changes and to encourage other ways of voting. The Council had done the best that it could in the circumstances with this experience proving that a large majority of the electorate still wished to vote in person. The Committee was advised that the Council constantly kept the location of Polling Stations under review and that it would be looking at this again prior to local Elections in 2023 as resident numbers and polling station

venues could change. It was important for Members to accept that the Council could not always keep the same polling station venues but that lessons would be learned from issues discussed and identified by the report.

Having reviewed the information presented and having made various comments, the Committee thanked the Group Head of Policy for the report, and it thanked the Election Team and all Council staff for their involvement and hard work.

309. <u>OUTSIDE BODIES</u>

There were no feedback reports from Outside Bodies to present to this meeting.

310. <u>WORK PROGRAMME</u>

The Committee received and noted its Work Programme covering the remainder of the Municipal Year.

The Chair outlined that the work programme provided the Committee with an opportunity to drive innovation and change within the Council and so it needed to think carefully about suggesting appropriate items.

Having received no further suggestions, the Chair thanked Members for their input.

(The meeting concluded at 7.24 pm)