

Minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 20 January 2022

Present: Colin Greatorex (Chairman)

Attendance

Charlotte Atkins
Tina Clements
Mike Davies
Kath Perry, MBE

Jeremy Pert
Bernard Peters
Samantha Thompson
Conor Wileman (Vice-Chairman (Overview))

Also in attendance: Councillors Alan White and Victoria Wilson.

Officers: Janene Cox, Trish Caldwell, Rachel Spain and Kerry Dove.

Apologies: Gill Heath and Mike Worthington

PART ONE

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made at the meeting.

2. Minutes of the two meetings held on 6 January 2022

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the two meetings held on 6th January 2022, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Proposed New Joint Coroners Service

The Committee considered the report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture which proposed a Joint Coroners service for Staffordshire, joining the South Staffordshire jurisdiction with that of Stoke on Trent and North Staffordshire to create a new service.

The proposed new joint service would follow national policy of merging smaller coronial areas and therefore reducing the overall number of Coronial jurisdictions in England and Wales. The retirement of the South Staffordshire Coroner had provided the opportunity to consider consolidating the coroners service into a single new service, which it was suggested, would enable a more consistent, resilient service for Staffordshire residents and, over time, deliver efficiencies through economies of scale.

It was explained that this was a decision for both the County Council and Stoke on Trent City Council. The County Councils Cabinet would consider the proposal on 16 February 2022. Following agreement from both Local Authorities, the business case would then be submitted to the Ministry of Justice for approval. This would lead to the preparation for the required laying of the statutory instrument for the legal process to commence. A period of at least 4 months was required to provide sufficient time for this to take place. The Ministry of Justice would also complete the required 4 week targeted consultation.

The Strategic decision making would take place through a Joint Executive Committee comprising of Cabinet Members from both authorities, together with appropriate Lead Officers and with support from Legal and Finance teams. The North Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Coroner had been party to the development of the arrangements and current staff had been consulted.

During the debate on the report the following information was shared with Members:

- 1) The current staff would remain on their current contracts and remain based at their current office locations unless they wanted to move to a centralised site. Any new appointments would be placed upon a new contract with the host authority and based at the back office location. Current/ existing staff would be given the opportunity to move to the new contract but this would not be mandatory.
- 2) The proposal would not exceed the current financial commitment so would have no financial impact. The current proportion of total funding costs would remain.
- 3) A local coronial presence would remain and it was planned that the new structure would open up opportunities for more local access such as in Library's, although the locations had not been finalised yet.
- 4) Nationally agreed performance indicators regarding the statutory process are in place and these would continue in the new joint service.
- 5) Opportunities for efficiencies would be considered, for example the consolidation of contracts with hospital trusts or funeral directors and more digital technology would be used as digital autopsy is rolled out. 'Teams' was now being used for inquests where possible for the bereaved relatives although the Coroner is required to have a physical office presence.
- 6) In the aspirational structure, there were 2 new Court Support Officers and a PA post proposed. These posts should reduce the administrative role of Coroners Officers.
- 7) There should be no impact on the public or inquests processes.
- 8) It was envisaged that there would be no increase in waiting times or delays because of the changes.

- 9) During the initial consultation, there had been verbal responses from partners however not as many written responses as hoped for. The Ministry of Justice would also be carrying out a full consultation on the proposals as part of their processes.

The Committee made the following comments on the proposed merger:

- a) The principle of the merger was accepted but it was felt that the proposals still needed development and this should be reflected in the business case.
- b) It was important that there was no disruption to the process or negative effect on the public. Focus needed to be on transition with minimum disruption.
- c) There were many references to 'efficiencies in the future'. It was felt that examples of these needed to be detailed in the business case.
- d) There was concern over the limited response from partners during the consultation. This was also concern as the NHS was restructuring (Integrated Care Systems) and alignment needed to be made to ensure a smooth transfer. It was felt that further consultation would be beneficial.
- e) The business case seemed to lack ambition and that more should be done to look at different ways of working such as more agile, flexible working, better use of technology etc.
- f) Concern was expressed that there would be no scrutiny of the service, with only the Cabinet members having information on the performance of the service. It was felt that it would be hard to hold the service to account or look at efficiency if it's not reporting anywhere. It was acknowledged that scrutiny of performance and/ or any significant development within the new joint service would still take place within both Local Authorities and the report would be amended to reflect this.
- g) The proposed increase in back office staff of 3 fte was noted but there was no information on what they would do or what changes would need to take place to accommodate the loss of the South Staffordshire Coroner.
- h) The Committee was concerned that risks had been listed in the report but the proposed mitigation was missing. Although officers confirmed that these were in place, members felt that these should be more visible and it was confirmed that the full risk register would be included within the Cabinet report.

The Cabinet Member took the opportunity to thank officers for their hard work during the process.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the Committees comments as listed above in the minutes be noted prior to the submission to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice.

4. Strategic Plan 2022 - 26

The Committee considered the Strategic Plan which set out the Councils ambitions and priorities for the years ahead. It was explained that whilst the Plan covered a four-year period, the ambitions contained within it set the direction of the Staffordshire envisaged for decades and generations to come.

The report included the draft Cabinet Report and the Strategic Plan for 2022-26.

It was explained that the Plan had specifically been designed to be shorter and easier to read, with more of a focus on the councils' priorities.

Following a question on the sale of land for a dementia site in the Moorlands, it was explained that meeting local need whilst being dependent on commercial development was difficult in the current economy. Working with District and Borough Councils and looking at innovative ways of working was essential.

There was a lengthy discussion on the need for information on how the priorities would be measured and monitored in order for scrutiny to challenge effectiveness and how these had been delivered. It was explained that there were action plans to support all the priorities but these may need to be looked at by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees for members to fully challenge not just if they had been delivered but also the standard reached and any adverse or positive effects for example on climate change.

It was explained that Government would continue to be lobbied for additional funding and a fair settlement.

It was explained that the public were often frustrated by what they saw as the lack of progress or the pace of delivery. An example was given of highway repairs which were highlighted as needed but then went on to a programme which could see them waiting for a considerable time. The standard of repairs also caused frustration and often lead to reaping the same patch of road many times when once should have been sufficient.

Whilst gaining values for money on all occasions was sensible and desirable, it was felt that this should not be at the expense of sustainability.

It was felt that the public should be at the heart of the plan and their views should be listened to and taken into account.

It was suggested that the information that the Committee receives in the quarterly performance reporting should highlight the improvements and pace of change. It was acknowledged that Service Overview and Scrutiny

Committees may want to look at the detailed delivery plans, but a dashboard of indicators would be useful for this committee.

The Committee made the following specific comments on the Strategic Plan:

- 1) The clear and more concise style of the Strategic Plan was welcomed. It was viewed as a positive vision and aims for the future.
- 2) Future priorities were noted and agreed.
- 3) The Councils role as Influencer and bringing partners together needed to be strengthened.
- 4) There was a need for some reference to delivery plans and how the priorities were going to be achieved.
- 5) Action plans and delivery plans needed to be considered by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 6) It was acknowledged that delivering the priorities, when so much depended on partners or government investment, would be a challenging. An example of highways improvements was given and the smaller than anticipated government settlement.
- 7) Detail on the standards expected when delivering some of the pledges was critical. For example, "Help partner organisations to build more homes" we need to ensure that standards are high; carbon neutral; and the impact on flooding etc considered.
- 8) The Pledge "Live within our means and deliver value for money" was viewed as the right aim but this had to be measured against the cost of sustainability. The sale of land was given as an example, where value for money was required but the future use of the land needed to be environmentally sustainable.
- 9) Working together with partners must include the public and listening to their views at an appropriate stage in developing plans was essential.
- 10) It was felt that the public don't see an acceptable pace of change, e.g., pothole repairs. There needs to be more emphasis on repairs being carried out to the correct standard, first time.
- 11) It was also noted that the means of communication of progress on programmes, like the roads maintenance one, need to improve so that residents better understand the level of progress achieved or otherwise.

RESOLVED:

- a) That the Committee note the progress made in developing the Strategic Plan 2022-26.
- b) That the comments of the Committee, as listed above, be referred to Cabinet at their meeting on 26 January 2022.

5. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022-2027 - Report of the Medium Term Financial Strategy Working Group

The Committees Working group had been established to scrutinise the Council's budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The Groups final report set out details of the work the work undertaken between October 2021 and January 2022; their conclusions and their recommendations for submission to Cabinet on 26 January 2022.

The Chairman of the Working Group, Councillor Greatorex had been invited to attend the Cabinet meeting to present the findings.

Members of the Working Group commented on the usefulness of talking to other local authority experts during their considerations and that they had learned a lot from listening to their experiences and the way they worked.

RESOLVED: That the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) working Group report and recommendations, be approved and submitted to the Cabinet at their meeting on 26 January 2022.

6. Work Programme

RESOLVED: That the work programme be noted.

Chairman