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RESOURCES & DELIVERING VALUE SCRUTINY BOARD - 31 March 2022

MINUTES

Present Councillors: M Parker (Chairman), D Holl-Allen MBE, S Davis, M McCarthy, A Rebeiro, P Thomas, M Gough, B Groom, M Allen

Officers Sam Gilbert: Assistant Director, Finance & Property Services
Paul Langham: Assistant Director, Business Systems
Adrian Cattell: Head of Human Resources
Paul Rogers: Democratic Services

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor J Tildesley, for whom Councillor M Gough was substituting and from Paul Johnson, Director of Resources and Deputy Chief Executive.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY OR CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

3. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

No questions or deputations were received.

4. PUBLIC MINUTES

The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

RESOLVED:

- (i) To agree the Minutes arising from the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board meeting held on 1st March 2022 as an accurate record.

5. SMARTER WAYS OF WORKING

The report before the Scrutiny Board updated Members on progress with the Council's key programme, Smarter Ways of Working (SWOW). The Assistant Director for Finance and Property Services presented the report.

Members were informed that the SWOW Programme was a key Council Plan priority and had been reported periodically to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board, the last update report having been received by the Scrutiny Board in October 2021. At the Scrutiny Board meeting held on 12th October 2020, Members received a SWOW update report in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which had provided an opportunity to reset the SWOW Programme. A number of interdependencies were evident across the SWOW Programme, as well as a number of benefits arising in 2020, such as a

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reduction in carbon emissions, a reduction in the Council's sickness absence and some forms of financial benefits.

The application of hybrid working was reported to be varied across respective Council Directorates, which largely reflected individual service's needs, but on average 40% of staff were working from Council premises as part of the SWOW Programme.

In October 2021, Members of the Scrutiny Board received a further SWOW Programme update report, which detailed the pilot SWOW work taking place in the Council House. From this period, staff numbers returning to Council premises began to rise, which was supported by the newly implemented cloud room booking system for the Council House, which had been well utilised since its introduction. The desk booking system was scheduled to be rolled out across other Council buildings to manage staff occupancy.

Other Council functions and facilities were also under review, such as The Core, accommodating the library, theatre and voluntary sector. The SWOW Programme was currently being reviewed in conjunction with library staff.

Staff attendance in Council office space had varied across respective Directorates; for example, Children's Services were reported to be 100% office based, with other services occupancy within Council buildings varying week by week. Use of the Council House car park had previously been reserved for essential users only, but during the SWOW pilot it was trialled that any Council staff working from the Council House site could use the car park. Various peaks and flows had been seen during the pilot period, with the pilot working remaining under review at this time. The pilot scheme presently allows for essential users to park in the Church Hill multi-storey car park free of charge in the Council House staff car park is at full capacity.

From the I.T. perspective, the Assistant Director, Business Systems informed Members that the SWOW Programme facilitated hybrid working through the provision of the necessary IT kit for employees, such as a laptop, monitor, mouse and business phone, all of which had been successfully rolled out to staff. All staff were now fully equipped with laptops, which could be used at home and in Council buildings.

Microsoft Teams had been successfully implemented across the Council for all Council staff, with staff now showing great proficiency in using the Microsoft Teams application for supporting their services.

In respect of the desk booking system, the Assistant Director, Business Systems further advised Members that the system provided additional health and safety benefits in that it detailed who was present in a Council building at any time, which supported the application of risk management measures.

Staff home working was supported through provision of a smart phone, which facilitated access to broadband hotspots in the event of any outage. This

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supported continued access to the Councils business systems for staff; for example, to maintain access to business e-mail systems.

The Head of Human Resources advised Members that the workplace had changed significantly with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council was actively promoting the benefits of working for the Council in support of its recruitment campaigns, which included promotion of the SWOW Programme and the Council's Well Being offer. Work continued around the PDR Framework to reflect SWOW and expected behaviours from employees via the Annual PDR.

A number of policies and reviews linked to the SWOW Programme were reported to have been completed, including Hybrid Working Guidelines, Uniform Policy Guidelines, Flexible Working Policy, Sickness Absence Management Policy and the Performance and Development Review (PDR) Framework and were now 'live' policies. A review of a number of Council policies were reported to be works in progress and included policies for travel and subsistence, car parking regulations, probation, resolution and management of change.

The Head of Human Resources further advised Members that an organisational approach to employee wellbeing was being taken forward. This entailed addressing wellbeing for both individuals and teams, supported by wellbeing action plans. The work also incorporated a review of how new SWOW arrangements may be impacting staff. Furthermore, a Smarter Ways of Working learning pathway has been created to guide employees to the range of new and existing learning and development opportunities available.

Members were advised that significant work had been undertaken in respect of the mental health awareness offer for employees, incorporating measures to ensure managers were aware of individual's work/life balance and that regular line management contact was maintained with staff through the SWOW and hybrid working arrangements.

A Workforce Champions Group had been successfully established towards the end of 2021 and was used to facilitate engagement and consultation on the SWOW Programme, from which 189 staff comments were received and which in turn were reviewed.

In January 2022, a Winter Well Being event was facilitated by the Council, which sought to identify further ways by which employees physical and mental wellbeing could be supported. Over 400 places were taken up through the event. The intention was to facilitate the Winter Well Being event on an annual basis.

In respect of financial implications, Members were advised by the Assistant Director, Finance & Property Services that there was some budget provision in support of the SWOW Programme; for example, £332,000 to support home working and £490,000 for ICT equipment to support remote working. For the 2023/24 financial year it was proposed that costs would be offset by future

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savings accruing through the SWOW Programme. Savings targets from this point were established at £250,000 per annum. Members were further advised that the fiscal closedown for 2022 would provide a further 2 years of data in terms of establishing the Council's operational and running costs during the pandemic period and would provide greater costs incurred against budget heading such as mileage, travel and subsistence and stationary and would provide greater clarity as to whether the £250, 000 savings target would be met.

Having received the Officer's presentations, Members of the Scrutiny Board raised a number of related questions arising from their consideration of the report, resulting in the confirmation of the following matters:

- Employees response to the SWOW Programme had been very positive, with employees reporting they had found it to be a positive experience. The cloud desk booking system had proven to be very helpful and had been well received by staff.
- Disciplinary and sickness management meetings had to be facilitated confidentially if such meetings were held virtually, as defined in the recently reviewed Disciplinary and Capability policies. There were also sufficient meeting rooms available in the Council House to hold face to face, private and confidential meetings as and when required. The policies addressing confidentiality were introduced after some reported incidents of recordings having been made in private and confidential settings without consent. The Disciplinary and Capability policies would be communicated to employees once they were made live policies.
- In terms of Council office space and capacity, decanting of some services located in satellite sites in the borough had taken place in an effort to utilise space in the Council House; for example, Children's Services. The provision of additional meeting rooms in the Council House had also taken some space available within the Council House, as had provision of a greater number of collaborative working areas for supporting team/project working than had previously been available. Council House usage had yet to stabilise, but the SWOW occupancy target of 40% remained. Capacity and staff numbers within the Council House complex would continue to be monitored as part of the SWOW Programme pilot and if necessary the Council's Assets Policy could be reviewed at a future point as needed.
- Staff sickness had reduced significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic period, but it was now reported to be rising. In August 2021, average sickness stood at 0.7 days per FTE. From December 2021 to February 2022 sickness grew to 1.4 – 1.8 days per FTE. The latest figures for February 2022 stood at just under 1 day per FTE. The rise in sickness levels during December 2021-February 2022 may also be attributable to the relaxing of pandemic lockdown regulations. Absence attributable to

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mental health remained the biggest factor in sickness absence, followed by Covid-19, cancer and post-operative treatments.

- During the initial introduction of hybrid / home working working arrangements arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some significant delays in receiving all ICT kit was experienced. However, the Council moved from a procurement strategy of ordering twenty laptops for example, to bulk ordering with a longer lead in time and subsequently managing the roll-out of the devices to staff. Some older IT equipment was still in use, but it was fully compatible with the SWOW programme. The Council was now into a business as usual cycle, replacing equipment over a 4-year cycle.
- The Smarter Ways of Working Charters had been developed by two Directorate Champions Groups, which fully engaged with the workforce and did not employ a top down approach.
- It was recognised that on-going learning continued through the SWOW Programme, which was demonstrated through provision of the learning and development suite and opportunities made available to support employees and to support on-going communications with employees. The employee development offer would not remain the same and would evolve over time. Feedback from participants would be sought and the development programme will evolve over time as an on-going process.
- The current car parking policy for the Council House was introduced when the car park capacity varied during the pandemic period. Therefore, the current policy was introduced on a trial basis and would be further reviewed going forward based on the data gathered for the Council House car park.
- In respect of hybrid meetings, some initial technical and familiarisation difficulties were experienced with facilitating hybrid meetings, although staff were now very familiar with hybrid meeting protocol. Supporting notes for those Charing hybrid meetings had also been made available.
- Monitoring the implementation and impact of the SWOW Programme will continue through a number of associated reports to the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board, for example via Annual Sickness report, Digital Strategy Update report and the Corporate Use of Assets report, ensuring Councillors will be kept informed across a range of aspects of the SWOW Programme.

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- Promotion of the SWOW Programme by the Council to attract potential employees, especially for those service areas which faced some recruitment challenges such as social work and ICT, had been relatively quiet. Difficulties currently experienced in the recruitment market is a national experience across the public sector. The Council recognised the importance as an employer to build a reputation to promote going forward. The Council did, however, continue to secure and appoint good quality candidates; for example, two Assistant Directors were recently appointed in Children's Services and a Human Resources Business Manager. Furthermore, salary structures were a factor in securing candidates although the Council did review market forces. The Council had made use of recruitment videos in the past for senior positions.

- The induction process supporting new Council employees had been adapted to take into account the Councils SWOW programme, particularly in relation to hybrid working arrangements, both at the corporate and local service levels. It was recognised that induction processes would naturally vary to some degree across respective service areas taking into account their specific functions.

- A number of Council Directorates had adopted the SWOW Charters, including Adult Social Care and Economy and Infrastructure Directorates. It was expected for other Directorates to follow suit in due course in adopting the SWOW Charters.

- It was confirmed that the Council was working towards silver accredited West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Thrive at Work employer status, ultimately working towards gold accreditation.

- Employee sickness levels had fallen considerably during the 2019/20 Covid-19 pandemic period, largely attributable to employees working from home and therefore not exposed to influenza and other common viruses.

- Members noted the one-off budget allocation from the Budget Strategy Reserve in respect of equipment for home working, additional ICT equipment to support hybrid working arrangements and savings arising from the expiry of the Citrix solution and questioned the feasibility of delivering net budget savings going forward in future years. Members were informed that the potential for savings going forward in future years had yet to be established with a clearer fiscal position expected to emerge in the latter half of 2022.

Having considered the Smarter Ways of Working (SWOW) report, the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board:

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RESOLVED:

- (i) To note the progress of the Smarter Ways of Working (SWOW) to date;
- (ii) To agree that the progress with programme implementation was satisfactory; and,
- (iii) To include a Smarter Ways of Working (SWOW) Update Report within the Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board's Work Programme 2022/23 (incorporating the SWOW Risk Register).

6. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The meeting was not open to the public during discussion of the following items because the reports contain exempt information as defined in Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

7. ORACLE CLOUD PROGRAMME: UPDATE REPORT

8. PRIVATE MINUTES

The Resources and Delivering Value Scrutiny Board
meeting closed at 7:43 p.m.

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