

FINANCE & PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

15th March 2023

Answers to Questions at the meeting

PERFORMANCE MONITORING – QUESTIONS (*minute 2022/23 35*).

from Head of Contracts, Leisure, Waste and Environment as to why a smart bin trial was being proposed, what this would involve and whether they would be value for money. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

Officers are currently assessing the viability of this pilot.

Smart bins are litter bins that use solar power to compact the waste/litter contained inside the bin. In theory, this means that the bin needs emptying less frequently saving resources and reducing emissions. The cost of smart bins is expensive (even for a limited time trial) and they only really save time and vehicle emissions if journeys currently undertaken can be avoided. Prior to conducting the trial. Officers will look at case studies from other authorities to see if the learning required can be obtained from others, rather than conducting the trial ourselves.

from the Head of Strategic Housing as to why the purchase of properties to meet housing needs of the Borough using RTB receipts would not meet its target by year end and why the Council were behind in meeting this target. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

The council have purchased four homes during the 2022/23 financial year and will take ownership of a further home as part of a developers contribution. Three further homes planned to complete this year needed to be extended into 2023/24 for reasons outside of the council's control.

Other properties have been considered by the council, however were not progressed because the cost of bringing them up to Charnwood's Lettable Standard would have exceeded 10% of the purchase price, they did not offer value for money, or the homes were of a type or in locations of limited housing need, and therefore did not meet the council's strategic priorities relating to acquisitions.

We recognise that this falls short of our ambition of acquiring between ten and twenty homes per annum and we plan to rectify this in the forthcoming year.

The Housing Acquisitions Policy is in the process of being reviewed to confirm the council's objectives and approach in relation to purchasing, and where appropriate building, new council homes. The revised policy will provide a framework for proactively seeking opportunities to increase the council's housing stock with the right type and quality of homes, in the right location, that will make the most impact for the residents of Charnwood who are in housing need.

from the Head of Strategic Housing regarding KI11a and b and what progress was being made.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

There have been a number of vacant positions within the Housing Needs and Landlord Services teams which have resulted in reduced officer and management capacity and impacted upon the void repairs and relet times. Following a restructure within the Housing Needs Service additional capacity has been created to increase and speed up property allocations. Within Landlord services, a new contractor has been procured and work is underway to address outstanding void works.

A voids action group meeting takes place on a weekly basis to track and monitor the progress that is being made with voids, and actions set to ensure that the number of weekly lets increase and the weekly number of voids decrease.

The Directorate is currently reviewing the allocations, lettings and voids processes to identify areas that are working well and any areas that can potentially be improved / streamlined, thereby reducing property void and relet times.

from the Head of Governance and HR regarding the delay to completing the rollout of report writing modules for Modern.Gov. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response, (response from the Democratic Services manager):

Democratic Services completed ten training and build sessions on the Report Manager module (known commonly as Work To do). The number of training and build sessions was significantly more than anticipated and there were a lot of tasks that need to be undertaken by the team after each session to progress the roll out. The various tasks undertaken included building workflows based on governance processes, creating new report templates, writing procedure guides and a considerable amount of testing.

Approximately 50 report authors were trained in January and February 2023. A report management guide from Modern Gov (Civica) and a general report writing guide was produced to supplement the training for report authors.

The roll out of Report Manager (Work to Do) commenced March 2023 in date order of meetings and has been a success for report authors with Democratic Services providing a substantial amount of support in the background to ensure governance processes are followed.

from the Director of Customer Experience regarding the delay to completing the implementation of the ASSURE back-office system. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

The implementation delay has been due to the lack of staff resources from service areas and technical issues encountered with the system as part of areas such as user acceptance testing and application configuration (which are identified once users have the capacity to test the system).

Current go live timescales (depending on resources);

- *Environment Health (non-food areas) by end of April. Food data will be loaded onto*

the system in July

- *Planning Services (including Building Control); Phase 1 go live is scheduled for mid-May. Phase 2 to be scoped on completion of the first phase*
- *Licensing; system build to start in April, planned go live in June*
- *Strategic Housing; configuration is currently being assessed, once this is completed a deployment plan will be agreed*

from the Director of Customer Experience regarding the delay to developing options for the replacement of the CRM system. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

Due to capacity issues meaning a reprioritisation of work the CRM has been delayed as this presented minimum risk. However initial scoping work is underway with CBC services to understand the needs of the business and customers. A soft market test will follow which will inform our requirements and the impact on supporting areas such as the website

Early investigations are starting to scope the technical requirements which will include.

- *An online, agile, flexible, self-service system centralising customer contact including areas such as; online eforms, telephone, face-to-face, email and social media.*
- *Utilising existing systems and infrastructure – this includes identify customer management functionality in back-office applications alongside the need for a CRM system.*
- *Capturing common data entities such as people, property, codes, etc which will be used as foundation block for sharing data with back-office applications*
- *Standardisation of workflows, rules (e.g. authorisations, notifications, etc) and processes*
- *Investigating the practical use of modern technology such as AI, chat bots, Virtual Agents, automating workflow and Business Intelligence (through reporting and Dashboards)*

from the Information Technology Manager and Human Resources regarding the delay to introducing a recruitment process which would be attractive to applicants. (*corporate delivery plan action*)

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

In line with the discussions undertaken as part of the Workforce group, the review of the Establishment Structure, improving processes involved with Delegated Decisions, and the requirement to align/integrate staff data with other systems have taken priority over continuing development of the Recruitment process.

The Communications Team have updated the Recruitment pages on the Council's website to make this more appealing to potential applicants. Further training on Recruitment is also scheduled in the coming months which will include ICS and HR aspects.

The requirements for developing the Recruitment process with a supporting timeline will be reviewed with the Workforce group once the items covered above have been implemented.

REVENUE MONITORING POSITION (GENERAL FUND AND HRA) – QUESTIONS
(minute 2022/23, 36)

From the Head of Strategic Housing regarding the ease of the process and the response time of the DWP to the Council when applying to switch payment of the housing element of UC.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response: (response from Director of Housing and Wellbeing)

the process of applying to the DWP for the housing element of universal credit to be paid directly to the landlord works well and the turnaround time for such applications is managed efficiently and in a timely manner.

From the Head of Strategic Housing regarding the delays to repairs and improvements to properties and what actions were being taken to expedite this.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response (response received from Director of Housing and Wellbeing):

Capital contracts are mobilising, and delivery is now taking place. For example, J Tomlinson Ltd is now in tenants' homes delivering new kitchens and bathrooms. Recruitment of permanent responsive repairs and voids staff has been challenging, in what is a difficult labour market. Additional temporary staff have been brought on board, and further recruitment exercises will take place.

From the Head of Strategic Housing why the overspend in B&Bs was high and what factors both locally and nationally was influencing this

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

In response to the higher than anticipated bed and breakfast spend during 2022-2023, measures have been implemented to reduce the number and duration of placements and ensure that in 2023-2024 the same issues do not recur.

On 31st May, 2022 the total number of households in bed and breakfast was 54. As of 14th April, 2023 there are 5 households in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The following changes within the Housing Needs service have positively impacted, and are expected to continue to positively impact, upon the numbers of households in bed and breakfast and the associated spend:

- Introduction of a temporary accommodation sign-off procedure within the housing options team. A housing options officer is required to seek a team leader / manager approval before a placement into bed and breakfast can be made. The team leader / manager will consider the case and ensure that all steps have been taken to prevent homelessness and the need for emergency accommodation before approving the placement.*
- Once a placement is approved, the main applicant signs terms and conditions, these set out the expectations of the household whilst in bed and breakfast. If the terms and conditions are not adhered to, the housing options officer are able to, and do, bring the placement to an end, in line with our statutory duty.*

- *Following a restructure of the Housing Needs service, a Temporary Accommodation coordinator role was created. The purpose of this role is to manage and monitor all bed and breakfast placements, the spend and ensuring that we procure accommodation that is cost-effective whilst meeting the needs of our homeless households.*

The Housing Needs service has already seen an increase in homeless presentation as a result of the rise in cost of living; this is impacting upon us locally and also nationally. Neighbouring boroughs have seen a similar increase in homeless presentations. The Housing Options team are working with landlord and households to proactively prevent people from losing their homes, and where this is not achievable, helping them to secure alternative accommodation, thereby avoiding the need for emergency accommodation.

CAPITAL MONITORING REPORT – QUESTIONS (*minute 2022/23, 37*)

from the Head of Strategic Housing regarding whether contractors were sub-contracting out work and if this impacted the overall delivery of work, and what control the Council had over sub-contracting.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response (response received from Director of Housing and Wellbeing):

Yes, typically delivery is mixed with some direct delivery and some sub-contracted. Sub-contracting enables contractors to deal with peaks in work and to obtain specialist services. The main contractor is expected to manage subcontract resources, for example, by checking work. Where this is effective, there should be no detriment to delivery. Contracts contain clauses setting out the main contractor's responsibilities around sub-contracting, and the process to be followed when requesting of the Council that an aspect of the work be sub-contracted.

from the Director of Housing and Wellbeing regarding whether other areas within housing were impacted by sub-contractors delaying the completion of work.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

There are no current delays arising from main contractors sub-contracting out works.

from the Director of Commercial and Economic Development regarding more detail on the reasons for slippage within the Carbon Neutral Project, when the projects were predicted to start and the monies were going to be spent.

Officer / Cabinet Lead Member response:

A number of smaller value projects have been instructed or will be instructed imminently. Southfields has undergone a major lighting upgrade to LED lights which will reduce energy consumption through lower power usage and intelligence switch sensors that turn the lights off when not in use/no personnel present. The Town Hall is to shortly have works undertaken to increase the energy efficiency of the air handling system as well as the building management system.

Work has been commissioned to provide feasibility work around new accommodation which will see our Carbon score reduce dramatically, but this will take some time to finalise and deliver and the money will be spent once the first stage of work is complete.

As well as having projects to deliver, the Council has a legal responsibility to deliver best value, and any work commissioned needs to be appropriately planned and commissioned. Many of the major projects which will contribute the most to reductions in the Council's Carbon score will require time to plan and deliver.

In the meantime, any capital plan reserves the Council may use to fund this work remains in Council coffers and is invested in line with the Treasury Management Strategy to deliver additional income to the Council's General Fund revenue account.