

POLICY & CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 11 March 2024

PRESENT – Councillors Connor, Fielding, Humphrys, Hussain S, Liddle, Slater N and Taylor.

ALSO PRESENT – Councillor Mahfooz Hussain, Executive Member for Digital and Customer Services.

OFFICERS – Michael Ahern, Steven Oldham, Tony Watson and Phil Llewellyn.

RESOLUTIONS

16 **Welcome and Apologies**

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting. Apologies were received from Councillors Salim Sidat and Tasleem Fazal.

17 **Minutes of the last meeting**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 9th January 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

18 **Declarations of Interest**

No Declarations of Interest were submitted.

19 **Digital Inclusion and IT Update**

Steven Oldham and Michael Ahern delivered a presentation that supported the report submitted on the Council's approach to Digital Inclusion.

It was noted that Digital Inclusion was a social issue, and a lack of digital skills and access could have a huge negative impact on a person's life, leading to poorer health outcomes and a lower life expectancy, increased loneliness and social isolation, less access to jobs and education. It could also mean paying more for essentials, financial exclusion, an increased risk of experiencing poverty. People who were digitally excluded also lacked a voice and visibility in the modern world, as government services and democracy increasingly moved online, with those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – most likely to be missing out, further widening the social inequality gap as a social issue.

The Council's approach to supporting residents was outlined, which included an emphasis on designing services with residents, simplifying the Council website, providing intelligent voice forms, a focus on support in libraries, learning centres and Family Hubs, a digital skills offer and work with companies to improve internet connections. Opportunities were outlined, which included public access to PCs in a range of locations, potential device recycling, and linking in with partners. Next steps include better promotion and exploration of Data Bank access and a Device Bank in BwD.

The Technical Debt Recovery and Risk Management approach was outlined, which highlighted the position from early 2023, to where the Council wanted to be late in 2024, with a move from very old infrastructure to class leading digital infrastructure and development and retention of local talent. The issues and progress were outlined for the position shift, with a focus on cyber security, updated software and roll-out of new laptops to staff and Councillors.

Members gave examples of recent residents issues in accessing online services, and Councillor Mahfooz Hussain that it was because of such issues that the approach outlined was being taken. Other matters raised by Members included:

- Promotion of the changes with residents
- Data protection and the use of AI
- Impact on staff of the changes, via AI and the use of the Council app
- How secure is the Council / Cyber security for the forthcoming elections
- Use of in-house software/unsupported products/security patches

In response, the Executive Member and officers explained that in terms of promotion and engagement with residents, the approach included working with partners, and good use of buildings regularly accessed by the public, to enable them to receive assistance and access to services, to ensure a joined up approach to digital. The use of AI was being investigated, but would need to focus on more straightforward services, where the technology could assist, rather than more complex services, such as Social Care and Children's Services, where there would be data protection and other issues arising from using such technology.

Use of the Council app continued, but the focus was more on making the website more accessible to mobile devices, and AI could assist in certain cases, staff may need to up-skill, and ultimately the focus on AI and automation would lead to savings. Self-service was a particular focus, but AI could help in allowing staff to support those who weren't self-sufficient.

In terms of cyber security, the Council was as secure as national companies, but was at daily risk of attack, with schools a particular challenge, but systems were in place to make the Council a hard target. For the forthcoming elections, work was already underway to look at vulnerable areas.

There was little use of in-house software, the Council did not develop many of its own systems, and tended to buy in products from major suppliers, so the latest versions of software were being used.

Councillor Sylvia Liddle suggested that the Committee look at this topic again in 18 months time, although it was noted that work programme topics would be decided by Members as appropriate at the first scrutiny meeting of the relevant Municipal Year.

Signed:

Date:

Chair of the meeting
at which the minutes were confirmed