

PP9. Corporate and Housing Services Performance Update – April 2017 – March 2018

The panel considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services setting out a summary of performance for the period April 2017 to March 2018. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services provided an overview of the report.

The report provided information on:-

- significant challenges and changes in Service pressures since the last Performance Panel update, and
- an update on relevant underpinning strategies, i.e. workforce strategy, medium term financial strategy, and digital/technology strategy

The Director of Corporate and Housing Services highlighted:-

- Equal Pay – in particular the work undertaken to negotiate and settle the Council's outstanding claims which had given the Service a number of challenges in terms of the resource commitment for this work.
- High Rise Fires - a range of additional measures to provide reassurance to tenants and ourselves had been implemented, in conjunction with Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and professional technical and fire safety advisers.
- Cyber-attacks and cyber-crime – officers had recently attended a Scottish Government Cyber crime and Cyber Resilience workshop which focussed on how authorities could anticipate threats and minimise risk.
- Revenue Budget – the Councils estimated budget gap was around £28m over the next two years. A key challenge was how to bridge this gap. Work was ongoing to identify a range of options for Member consideration to ensure that the Council delivers its Corporate Plan within the challenging financial climate.
- GDPR – the service had led on preparations across the council for the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) coming into force in May 2018. This had involved a cross Council audit of personal information held and intensive work on the preparation of privacy notices. There has also been work on awareness raising and training for Council staff which had been led by and co-ordinated from the Service.
- Universal Credit – Full Service Universal Credit had been launched in the Falkirk area on 21 March 2018. There had been an acceleration in the number of new cases each month and this presented significant challenges, as expected. The roll-out of Hubs in West and Central, and the recent move of Community Advice

Services to Revenues and Benefits, would help ensure that we identify, inform, and protect the most vulnerable households where possible.

In addition the Director summarised the current position of the following strategies which underpin the work of the Service. These were:

- Workforce Strategy
- Council of the Future Change Programme
- Procurement Strategy
- Digital / Technology Strategy
- Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)
- Local Housing Strategy 2017-2022 (LHS)
- Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2018-19 to 2022-23 (SHIP)

The convener emphasised that the Council's estimated budget gap of around 28m over the next two years meant that all Services would have to continue to look at ways of working more efficiently and to look at the services which were delivered.

The panel discussed the impact of Universal Credit and the Council's arrangements to identify and protect the most vulnerable in the community recognising that as Universal Credit rolled out there had been increasing demands on officers' time. The Revenue Manager confirmed that there had been a three-fold increase in cases since Universal Credit was introduced in May 2016. In the short term, as claimants come off legacy payments, there would continue to be an increase in workload. He estimated that this would flatten out in around 2 years. He responded, to a question on whether Universal Credit had caused an increase in rent arrears, that, previously rent arrears started to decrease within 12 months but with this new system it was taking longer.

Members highlighted the need for an increase in affordable housing. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services concurred and confirmed that affordable housing this would be funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) or through Council budgets. While the private sector was not excluded as a source of supply, HRA Funded housing was the preference.

The committee discussed at length the need for increased housing provision for the elderly. In response to a suggestion promoting the development of a village for the elderly, the Director of Corporate and Housing Services responded that there had been interest from the private sector in creating a 'care village' and perhaps this was a suggestion that needed to be addressed as the elderly population grows. The Director of Development Services summarised discussions with Forth Valley Health Board on the use of the Falkirk Community Hospital Site. Currently dialog was ongoing. She provided detail on the concept of care villages, which allowed the elderly to stay in their own accommodation in a supported environment with care facilities also on site from those unable to remain in their homes. The Council had discussed the concept with developers but the model was expensive and would rely on inexpensive

land being available. Outline planning permission had been granted for a care village in Maddiston albeit on a relatively small scale compared to others. The Head of Procurement described a housing development in Stenhousemuir in which the provision was mainly for the elderly. Although this was not a “care village” it was a model which could be replicated elsewhere. A benefit of the development was that new amenities, such as chemists would be provided near to the cluster of homes but importantly the elderly were able to remain in their community.

The Head of Procurement explained, in response to a question on whether the Council could provide cheaper heating in its housing stock, that different systems were being looked at. It was vital to balance the cost of the Council to install the systems against the need to provide the most cost effective heating systems for customers. It was anticipated that once identified, systems could be procured and installed before winter 2018. In regard to the cost of heating, the Director of Development Services advised that grant funding was available through the Energy Efficiency Fund and gave an overview of the Grangemouth District Heating pilot which could provide cheaper heating. The District Heating project would provide heating for public buildings but could if successful extend to include residential heating. In response to a question the Head of Procurement confirmed that the Council would install solar heating panels on new build housing and cited an example in Stenhousemuir where panels had been installed on a housing block.

The panel discussed the Council of the Future project and praised recent presentations by project leads at meetings of the project board. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services suggested in response to a suggestion that these presentations could be made to the panel, that the Council of the Future Board had discussed ways in reaching members and officers, for example by using webinars. The suggestion that the panel receive presentations on key projects was welcomed.

In response to a further question in regard to the increased workload arising from the rollout of Universal Credit, the Director of Corporate and Housing Services stated that the increase had been anticipated but the demand had been managed. This increase had impacted on service provision, for example in the turnaround time – which had been approximately 2 weeks was now longer. Members asked whether, given the complexity and volume of work, individuals could ‘slip through the net’. The Director replied that all efforts were made to ensure that individuals were supported.

The Director summarised the Performance Panel Statement which was set out as appendix 1 to the report. This set out progress on key priorities.

Following a question in regard to whether the trial to permit drivers to take their vehicles home at night had resulted in an increase in parking issues, the Head of Procurement said that he was unaware of any parking issues, however the purpose of the trial was to flush out issues.

Members commented that the gross rent arrears on % of rent due had improved year on year since 2015/16 but that council was by comparison in the bottom half of Scottish Local Authorities. The Revenue Manager confirmed that the aim was to be in the top half of Councils. He explained that processes were not consistent across the country (for example by not writing legacy debt off, as some authorities do). Nonetheless the panel expressed concern at the Council's performance in this area.

The panel discussed the goal of promoting vibrant town centres and remarked that the forthcoming closure of Marks and Spencers was disappointing and would present the Council with a challenge in regard to Falkirk Town centre.

Members highlighted that improvements to town centre CCTV had not progressed and suggested that buy-in and funding from Police Scotland was critical, especially given that it benefited the most from effective CCTV provision given this members expressed disappointment in Police Scotland's position in regard to Falkirk CCTV. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services stated that there was no consistency in how CCTV was funded across the country. Currently Police Scotland allocated funding on a year by year basis and commitment over the longer term was required if the provision was to become digital. The Scottish Government and Police Scotland had confirmed they would not provide funding for upgrades to digital.

The Director confirmed that CCTV provision in Stirling had been funded through City Deal finance.

In regard to the closure of Marks and Spencers in the High Street, it was suggested by the panel that a holistic approach to the regeneration of the town centre was required. The Director of Development Services confirmed that there were ongoing discussions with interested parties, including elected members, the Scottish Government and developers. The town centre was no longer vibrant and it needed reshaped so that there was a mix of workers, residents and visitors. The revitalisation of the town centre was a huge challenge.

The Director of Corporate and Housing Services then summarised performance as measured by key performance indicators. Overall these showed good performance by all areas of Corporate and Housing Services in challenging times.

In regard to indicator CH5062, number of customer accounts created on My Falkirk, the panel sought clarification on why there was no benchmark figure. In regard to the number of accounts created the target was 14000 for 2018/19 – the panel asked what the potential number could be. The Head of Policy & ICT Improvement stated that potentially there could be an account for everyone in every household. Currently there was no requirement to create an account, this was done on a voluntary basis. Some authorities had implemented digital only access to services – the Council had deliberately not gone down this route. The Director undertook to provide the panel with details of the geographical spread of

accounts, following a question in regard to whether any areas were hard to reach. The Head of Policy & ICT Improvement stated that location of accounts was measured and concurred that connectivity was an issue – for example in the Upper Braes area. Falkirk as an area has traditionally had good broadband width but there were pockets where it was not up to standard. The Council was working with the Scottish Government's Digital Programme to address this issue.

The panel discussed the target of 100% of 1st stage complaints responded to within timescales and stated that this was unrealistic. The Director of Corporate and Housing Services confirmed that it was not achievable but the aim was to get as close as possible consistently. There were no penalties set by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman for not responding within this timescale. In addition to responding timeously the Director suggested that as an organisation the Council could be better in how it responds.

Decision

The Performance Panel noted the performance of Children's Services over the period April 2017 to March 2018.