

S14. Corporate & Housing Services Performance Update April 2018 – March 2019

The committee considered a report by the Director of Corporate and Housing Services setting out a summary of performance for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

The report provided information on;-

- Significant challenges and changes in Service pressure since the last update, and
- Progress towards achieving the priorities and outcomes within:-
- The Corporate Plan
- Council of the Future projects
- Local Government Benchmarking Framework Indicators

The report provided an update on the following workstreams:-

- Equal Pay
- Revenue Budget
- Universal Credit (UC)

It also provided an update on workstreams relating to the following strategies:-

- Workforce Strategy
- Council of the Future Change Programme
- Procurement Strategy
- Digital / Technology Strategy

The Committee discussed the impact of Universal Credit on rent arrears. Paul Ferguson confirmed a slight increase in rent arrears in 2018/19 of 0.2% which equated to £200k. He did not however anticipate a significant increase in 2019/20 following a full year of Full Universal Credit. It was advantageous that this was a 53 week payment year. He also cited East Lothian Council's experience where rent arrears had occurred for new claimants for Universal Credit. Those who remained on Universal Credit tended, it had been found, to be stable. The committee then discussed the Poverty Strategy and asked whether the Council had policies to reduce the stigma of poverty. Sally Buchanan confirmed that a subgroup of the Community Planning Partnership would look at poverty awareness and the stigma around poverty. In regard to the actions to deliver locality planning underpinned by community action plans (06.02 – CHS17) members

questioned whether the status of 'on target' was accurate. While there had been workstreams initiated in the Grangemouth area, members considered that these had not delivered outcomes and the feeling in the community was that there had been no action for some time. Sally Buchanan confirmed that there were a number of workstreams ongoing but conceded that there could be better dialogue with the community to provide updates to the wider audience on what has happened and where the work was going. Stuart Ritchie proposed a meeting, having heard members concerns, with the local members in order to provide a full update.

The committee then considered action 14.03 – CH17 'encouraging our communities to participate in preparations for emergency events through community resilience', highlighting that work was significantly behind target. Such plans should, members stated, be a priority.

In regard to action COTF17.MD06 – 'redesign of BMD services- phase 2' the committee, recognising that members tended only to become involved when their constituents encounter problems with the Council, asked whether delays in completing works was done due to a lack of capacity. Members queried whether the Council employed sufficient numbers of trades people and whether the Council 'grew its own' – Stuart Ritchie stated that the length of time taken to complete repairs, emergency and non-emergency had decreased from 5 hours and 8 hours respectively in 2017/18 to 3.8 hours and 6.7 hours respectively in 2018/19. This was similar to the Scottish benchmark and better than the Service targets of 4.2 hours and 7 hours. While progress was being made, Mr Ritchie reflected that for the individual any time waiting is too long. In regard to recruitment the Council faced a struggle to recruit and retain tradespeople when the private sector was buoyant. However the Council did have a successful apprentice programme and did aim to 'grow its own'.

The committee then raised the action – 'housing of tomorrow' and asked by what method success was measured. In particular members cited examples where the public had called the Council and had not received a response. The committee then discussed how members enquiries were measured and dealt with.

John Apperson explained that Housing used the Council's Customer First System. Enquiries were logged and timescales were set for responses. It appeared, from members' comments, that breakdown occurred in the follow-up process. The introduction of digital communications for gas and gas repairs services had been beneficial and the technology would be rolled out to kitchen fitters shortly. The availability of performance management data would, it was anticipated, result in improved service. It was important in the first instance that calls were logged onto Customer First. Members agreed, stating that the practice of following up on initial enquiries should be applied in practice Council wide. Mr Apperson stated that demand generated follow up calls and at the moment demand was high. He stated that 40% of calls were emergencies and by their nature the response cannot be planned. These required a 3 hour response. He again confirmed that if a call was logged on Customer First by staff then it would be tracked and actioned.

Other methods of raising calls such as telephone, email and in writing could more easily not be logged and it was here that breakdowns could occur.

The committee noted that the Council was 'awaiting an agreed way forward with Falkirk Community Trust' in regard to action COTF17. EEC1 – implementation of the Central Advice Hub and spokes. However this would be raised at the Scrutiny Committee (External) review of the Trust's performance later in the year.

The committee then returned to Customer First. It was recognised by members that those enquiries which were logged on the system were tracked and actioned. There appeared to be an issue when an enquiry was received but not logged. It was normally the case that members became involved at a point beyond the breakdown in communication or when repairs hadn't been actioned and were 'trouble shooting'. Ideally, it was suggested, all enquires should be logged as a matter of course and members should be given full access to Customer First to allow them to interrogate the system and to feedback to constituents direct. Members asked whether all enquiries were logged onto Customer First. While they should be, Stuart Ritchie stated that evidently this was not the case. In the discussion members also recognised that not all elected members logged enquiries directly onto Customer First. For some this was cultural, having been used to using the phone to raise enquiries direct with officers, while for some there were training and familiarity issues. However there were concerns from members that whichever way they made an enquiry it should, regardless, be logged. Stuart Ritchie repeated that evidently not all enquiries were logged- it was often easier to take action to resolve an issue and having done so officers would be unlikely to then enter the enquiry on the system. Members of the committee accepted that this was the case and understood the logic of doing so but without data it was more difficult for patterns to be analysed for service improvement and it also caused breakdown in communication and in enquiries being actioned.

The discussion concluded with members of the committee agreeing that the matters discussed had been raised before in various forms and asked officers to look again at the use of Customer First and members' engagement with the system.

The committee turned to progress made in closing the gender pay gap. Stuart Ritchie cautioned that the Local Government Benchmarking Framework data did not provide context. The data showed that almost half of officers in the top 5% earners were women. This had changed over the previous two or so years due to various reasons. In regard to whether the Council supported female workers, Mr Ritchie stated that the data provided in the LGBF did not address the question.

The committee then returned to rent arrears. In terms of gross rent arrears, as measured by the LGBF Falkirk sat 16th at 7.7% (gross rent arrears as a % of rent due). Stuart Ritchie noted that the data was for 2017/18 and highlighted work which had been undertaken to reduce rent arrears. Early intervention was the key. The roles of the neighbourhood officers had been extended to include first line engagement. Housing staff were being trained

to deal with rent arrears in the forthcoming weeks and it was anticipated that this would realise benefits. Paul Ferguson noted that Glasgow Housing Association had led on early intervention with exceptional results. The housing officer model would be rolled out on 10 June 2019 and in the early weeks would focus on training. At the start of July a personalised letter would be hand delivered to all tenants which would include named officer details.

The committee returned briefly to Customer First, suggesting that in some cases members were not advised when a piece of work was concluded.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) approved the report and acknowledged progress by the Sservice in meeting the Council's priorities;**
- (2) asked officers to review how Services input and manage enquiries with reference to Customer First. This to include a review of the use of, and engagement with, Customer First by elected members.**