



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
OVERVIEW SELECT COMMITTEE

Held: THURSDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2023 at 5:30 pm

P R E S E N T :

Councillor Cassidy (Chair)
Councillor Surti (Vice Chair)

Councillor Bajaj
Councillor Batool

Councillor Porter
Councillor Whittle

Councillor Dave
Councillor March

Also present:

Sir Peter Soulsby

City Mayor

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34. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to disclose any pecuniary or other interests they may have in the business on the agenda.

There were no declarations of interest.

36. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no Chair's announcements.

37. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

38. PROGRESS ON ACTIONS AGREED AT THE LAST MEETING

The Chair noted that following several queries and requests for additional information at the previous meeting, particularly in relation to the financial reports, a note was circulated to members with further detail. Progress regarding other actions from the last meeting was also reflected on the OSC work programme.

39. QUESTIONS, REPRESENTATIONS AND STATEMENTS OF CASE

There were no questions, representations and statements of case.

40. PETITIONS

There were no petitions.

41. TRACKING OF PETITIONS - MONITORING REPORT

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report which provided an update on the status of outstanding petitions against the Council's target of providing a formal response within three months of being referred to the Divisional Director.

AGREED:

That the status of the outstanding petitions be noted, and to remove those petitions marked 'Petition Complete' Ref: from the report.

42. QUESTIONS FOR THE CITY MAYOR

Councillor Surti asked the following question, that had been submitted in advance by a 15 year-old service user:

"There have recently been some changes to young people aged 14 – 16 being able to access gym facilities at Active Leicester. The changes mean that young people aged 14 – 16 now need to be accompanied by an adult who is a registered member which would mean parents would have to pay £24.95 per month for membership that they don't even need or use. We also now have to pre book a slot and the slots available are all before 5pm on weekdays or early on Saturday and Sunday, which gives us little time, if any after finishing school. My Mum contacted active Leicester who have confirmed that there was no consultation done on this and that they have followed guidance from Active UK which we feel is wrong. I have set up a petition to get this changed and currently have 37 signatures from other young people who feel as frustrated and excluded as me. I have not been back to the gym for over a month and this is having an impact on my mental and physical health. And I am sure I am not the only young person who is feeling the same. Please can you explain the rationale behind the decision, why children and young people weren't consulted and can this decision be reviewed?"

In responding to this question, the City Mayor made the following points:

- Having sought guidance from Active UK, he felt that some improvements were needed in respect of the City Council's arrangements for requiring supervision of 14-16 year olds in gym facilities.
- He understood the concerns lodged by the service user, though reported that he had been advised that unsupervised access for those under the age of 16 was undesirable as some equipment was potentially dangerous.
- Some other providers did not permit under 16s to access their facilities at all.
- Sports Services scheduled dedicated gym sessions for 14-16 though the City Mayor stated that he was unsure whether these took place at the most suitable times for service users and parents.
- Parental supervision did not have to be via a monthly membership subscription and could be paid for per session.

The City Mayor stated he would follow up with officers whether alternative approaches could be explored and would respond to Cllr Surti and the questioner.

In response to a further question raised by Councillor Porter during the meeting with regard to the conflict in Israel and Gaza, the City Mayor confirmed that he had recently written to the Labour Leader expressing a view that the government and opposition should be calling for a cease fire in the Middle East. He also made reference to the recent vigil at the Town Hall event held in memory of those who had lost their lives in the conflict.

AGREED:

That in respect of the question regarding parental supervision at City Council gym facilities, the City Mayor and officers be asked to review whether alternative approaches could be explored.

43. COST OF LIVING CRISIS UPDATE

The Committee received an update with regard to the Council's current position regarding the cost-of-living crisis.

Prior to receiving a presentation on this matter, the Chair invited two youth representatives to outline a proposal in relation to unused food from school kitchens. They referred to their own personal story, some of the struggles that their family had encountered and how they had been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.

The youth representatives outlined their prime concerns citing the level of children in Leicester in low-income families and experiencing poverty. They informed the committee that they observed children at school who were hungry

whilst also seeing unused food being discarded. Their proposal centralised around providing such unused food to families for free or donating to food banks. They also felt that free breakfasts should be provided to those most in need.

In response to their presentation, the Director of Delivery, Communications Political Governance thanked the youth representatives and stated that the City Council was continuing to talk to schools about extending further opportunities in respect of breakfast clubs. She also reiterated that there was an extensive programme of provision during school holiday periods. She agreed to undertake further discussions with colleagues in Children's Services to review approaches in how unused school produce can be best managed.

A project manager from Public Health then issued a presentation which outlined the City Council's response to the cost-of-living crisis, a copy of which is appended to these minutes.

A number of comments and questions were raised by members and the following was stated in response:

- A combination of short and long-term solutions was available for residents which included helping to negotiate debt payments at better rates. A range of retrofitting solutions were also considered for tenants in terms of improving home heating.
- The City Council acknowledged firmly the level of increase in the number of those experiencing hardship. Officers stressed the need to continue to provide a broad set of initiatives that covered as many essential services as possible.
- Further detail would be provided to members in respect of the 'Warm Welcome' initiative.
- The Council supported a number of campaigns relating to heat metering with some programmes offering financial support for the most vulnerable. Detail of the initiatives were being compiled and would be provided to all elected members over the coming weeks. It was anticipated that this would help to support more residents to access the initiatives that were most appropriate for them.
- Further information would be provided in response to how cases were dealt with where there were clear impacts on mental health or if there was reported domestic violence.
- There was no set eligibility criteria for the fuel poverty programme but stringent criteria was in place for some of the other schemes.

AGREED:

- (1) That a response to the youth representatives' proposal be provided,
- (2) That further information be provided to members as outlined above; and
- (3) That scrutiny commissions be asked to look at focussed issues arising from the cost-of-living crisis as appropriate.

44. CUSTOMER SERVICES OVERVIEW

The Head of the City Mayor's Office and Customer Support Transformation submitted a report that gave an overview of the current customer services offer provided by the Council.

The Deputy City Mayor for Housing and Neighbourhoods provided an initial introduction and stated that the challenges faced by this service were far from exclusive to Leicester City Council. It was noted that there was currently a very high demand placed upon customer services, with incoming phone calls generally becoming more complex and time-consuming. A major aim for the service was to provide more services online for the digitally able, which in turn would allow greater capacity for staff to support those who were vulnerable and more digitally unable. She also referred to challenges relating to ensuring that the appropriate IT systems to support customer services platforms were in place and in relation to staff recruitment and retention. The Deputy City Mayor stated that she was pleased that the issues faced were being tackled appropriately.

The Head of the City Mayor's Office and Customer Support Transformation provided a detailed presentation to the committee. The presentation covered a number of key issues including:

- National Industry Trends
- Current delivery models and a summary of the services provided
- A snapshot of overall performance
- Detail of service transformation and change work.

As part of his presentation, the Head of the City Mayor's Office and Customer Support Transformation spoke of the value in the committee contributing to future service improvements and invited the committee to undertake a tour of the Granby Street Customer Services centre. A copy of the full presentation is attached to this set of minutes.

In response to comments and questions raised by commission members, the following points were made:

- Customer call abandonment was not viewed particularly negatively by the service as it demonstrated that people were willing to access contact through other means.
- Regarding the social care switchboard, this line was not managed directly by the customer services team, though if calls were passed to the duty desk, customers would be immediately transferred to case workers. In response to further points made around ASC calls, the Head of the City Mayor's Office and Customer Support Transformation stated that he would examine further the operation of the telephony queuing system and would confirm whether there had been any experience of call drop-off.
- There was an acknowledgement of the frustration in receiving calls from

generic numbers, thus making it difficult for recipients (including elected members) to be aware of the origin of calls. The provision of some general messaging around this was welcomed.

- It was noted that the Deputy City Mayor for Housing and Neighbourhoods and the Assistant Mayor for Education, Libraries and Community Centres were to undertake a piece of work that would ensure there was a consistent approach in the delivery of all customer services and would allow libraries to be seen as places where people could go to for customer service solutions.
- The Deputy for Mayor for Housing and Neighbourhood Services encouraged members to report any particularly problematic cases presented to them by residents accessing customer services.
- Greater consideration would be given to developing an improved virtual queuing system.
- It was vital that the service developed a stronger vision for the delivery of its services, and that this took into consideration the varying needs of Leicester's many different communities.
- Further information that set out trends against comparator authorities could be provided to members.
- A full equality impact assessment would be carried out if significant changes to the Council's customer services were proposed.
- The presentation did not focus on the staffing structure, the current level of vacancies or the budget attributed to the service. The Head of the City Mayor's Office and Customer Support Transformation would consider how this information could be provided to members.
- It was acknowledged that staff sickness and absence inevitably had a major impact on service performance, though there was not a generally poor level of performance across the service.
- In respect of terminology, some members felt that greater reference should be made to 'residents' rather than 'customers'.

AGREED:

- (1) That the report and presentation be noted,
- (2) That the comments of the committee be taken into consideration,
- (3) That responses be provided to members following several information requests outlined above; and
- (4) That consideration be given to inviting members to a tour of the Granby Street Customer Services centre.

45. BUDGET SAVINGS

The Director of Finance submitted a report that advised OSC of decisions Directors had taken to reduce revenue expenditure in advance of the 2024/25 budget, and thereby achieve savings as quickly as possible. This would reduce the requirement for managed reserves. The Director of Finance noted that the overall financial outlook beyond 2024/15 looked concerning.

In response to questions from members of the committee, the following points

were made:

- In terms of the status of the savings outlined in the report, it was confirmed that these were operational decisions taken at Director level though an Executive decision would be required to vary the budget accordingly.
- Regarding the significant overspend regarding CYP social care, it was noted that although the number of children in care had not altered significantly in recent years, there was generally a more complex level of need. A shortage of competition had resulted in private operators increasing charges excessively. Senior officers were reviewing alternative opportunities with a view to reduce the overall level of cost.
- The City Council did use independent fostering agencies, and it was stated that in some cases, foster carers had returned to local authorities who had previously left to work for independent agencies and we are looking at what agencies offer to make sure that the City Council's offer was suitably comparable and attractive.

The City Mayor responded to a question raised in respect of the future financial outlook for the City Council. He stated that the council had managed its finances extremely prudently though by the end of the 2024/25 financial year, it was likely that the council's reserves would be used up and the issuing of a Section 114 Notice could not be ruled out. The City Mayor briefly summarised what this process would involve and agreed to provide a briefing note to committee members with regard to Section 114 notices.

AGREED:

- (1) That the saving proposals outlined in the report be noted; and
- (2) That further detail on the process of issuing a Section 114 notice be provided to committee members.

46. OVERVIEW SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The committee noted the latest work programme and also noted the following items which were to be brought to the subsequent meeting on 14 December:

1. Revenue Monitoring Period 6
2. Capital Monitoring Period 6
3. Income Collection Report – Half -Yearly
4. Treasury Report – Half Yearly

47. ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of other business.