

Our Council Transitional Committee

Meeting held 14 October 2021

**PRESENT:** Councillors Dawn Dale (Chair), Zahira Naz (Chair), Christine Gilligan (Deputy Chair), Penny Baker, Simon Clement-Jones, Peter Garbutt, Julie Grocutt, Bryan Lodge, Cate McDonald and Tim Huggan (Substitute Member)

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**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Colin Ross and Councillor Tim Huggan attended as the appointed substitute.

**2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the public and press.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 Minutes of previous meeting held on 7 July 2021 were agreed to be a true record.

**5. INTRODUCTION TO TRANSITIONAL COMMITTEES**

5.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy & Improvement Officer about an introduction to Transitional Committees.

5.2 Present for this item was Alice Nicholson (Policy and Improvement Officer)

5.3 The report provided an update of a briefing to the Governance Committee which set out the role of Transitional Committees this year. It was clarified that they were advisory and temporary with a core focus to improve cross-party engagement working and decision making whilst transitioning to a committee system. It was also explained that whilst the Transitional Committees were temporary, the business being discussed was not and that they were an important way of testing how decision making might work in a committee system from May 2022. . The topics to be covered by Transitional Committees were very important and a high priority for the Co-Operative Executive. It was clarified that Scrutiny

would continue this year and that the Co-Operative Executive was still the decision-making body in this municipal year.

5.4 It was suggested by the Chair to have an opportunity to de-brief after the Transitional Committee meetings and suggestions were invited on how this would best work. It was suggested to use email following committee to allow uptake time following the meeting for thoughts to occur and that a prompt be given by the Chair or Policy and Improvement Officer.

5.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

(a) notes the contents of the report now submitted; and

(b) requests the Policy & Improvement Officer to make arrangements for a debrief following committee meetings.

## **6. OUR APPROACH TO PRIORITY BUDGETING**

6.1 The Chair announced the proposal that an urgent item of business be considered at this point in the proceedings. Council Procedure Rule 26 states that “An item of business may be considered at a meeting of the Council as a matter of urgency, where it has not been possible to give five clear working days’ notice, on the recommendation of the Chair, but the reason for such urgency must be recorded in the minutes. The Chair agreed to the inclusion so as to be in line with all Transitional Committee agendas in this cycle of meetings, giving all members of transitional committees equal opportunity to consider this overarching matter. It was not possible in time available to give appropriate notice and publish with agenda, and it was considered members would be at a disadvantage if not included for consideration.

6.2 Present for this item was Councillor Cate McDonald, (Executive Member for Finance and Resources), Eugene Walker (Executive Director of Resources and Laurie Brennan (Policy and Improvement Officer)

6.3 An introduction was given explaining that a conversation was to be started about priorities and how they were reflected in budget decisions for the future. The financial context was explained in terms of the September budget report to the Co-operative Executive, which set out the potential £40m plus overspend, resulting from the impact of covid pressures on income, planning, leisure but in particular social care and humanitarian issues. It was explained that the recent Government announcement on social care was mainly about the future capping of care fees and has not provided a solution to help with the current pressures and as a result it provides a difficult context for this year’s budget into next. It was stated that these difficulties make it important to have a clear sense of priorities to guide the allocation of budgets and that whilst Transitional Committees were not formally involved in the process, they had an advisory role. Looking forward to next year the budget would be done in a different way and built up through

committees.

6.4 It was explained that the One Year Plan sets out the Co-Operative Executive's ambition to have a 3–5-year corporate plan with priority led budgeting. It was stated that the meeting was an important opportunity to start a conversation about this. It was also suggested that a summary of key priorities could be produced by the Committee and Policy and Improvement Officer and then fed back.

6.5 Members of the Committee raised questions, and the following responses were provided:

- It would be very helpful to get feedback over the next coming months.
- Diminishing resources were being looked at to support key policies and looking how the committee system will work in the future. Also looking at how choices that are made on how money will be spent will work in the future.
- It will be considered how money might also be saved and this will be built into the approach.

6.6 It was stated that it is appreciated that it is early stages of working for the committee. It was suggested that the Policy and Improvement Officer, Alice Nicholson would email members of the Committee to enquire about meeting with the Chair, Councillor Dawn Dale and Alice Nicholson to draw up recommendations for officers.

6.7 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

(a) notes the information now reported, together with the responses to the questions raised;

(b) thanks Councillor Cate McDonald, Eugene Walker and Laurie Brennan for attending the meeting, and responding to the questions raised and

(c) requests the Policy and Improvement Officer to write to members of the Committee with regards to progressing this work and working on recommendations.

## **7. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: IMPROVING OUR CUSTOMER SERVICES**

7.1 Present for this item was Councillor Cate McDonald, Mark Bennett (Director of HR & Customer Services) and Rob Markham (Lead Project Manager).

7.2 It was explained that there was an opportunity with the committee to

focus on improving customer service. Mark Bennett gave a presentation on 'Improving our Customer Services' referring to the range of services delivered, what people in Sheffield have told us, previous efforts, online engagement statistics, what could be done, suggested approaches to improvement, what customer experience could be like, what staff experience could be like, what difference it will make and how it could be measured.

7.3 Members of the Committee raised questions, and the following responses were provided:

- It was acknowledged there are some significant issues around call wait times and performance and that customer expectations have shifted again. It was also acknowledged that there are issues staff turnover, retention and training and induction is taking longer. It was explained that the best way to make a difference to call wait times would be a holistic approach to how the organisation works so that services are designed around the needs of customers and not individual services. It is estimated that 30% of telephone queries are customers calling back to get a progress update on their initial query. It was explained that if volume could be reduced, then it would make a significant positive difference. It was also explained that improvement is needed where customer queries span multiple service areas, and this then would reduce call volumes and wait times. It was clarified that customers will not be forced to use online services if they are not able or confident to do so, but that they should be given the choice as we know many customers want this and as some services are not available, they make a telephone call. It was suggested that clarity and improvement in communication via letters would also be beneficial to reducing call volumes.
- A response was given around data. It was stated that more detail on call volumes across various strands was being provided to the audit and standards committee the following week. This data highlights that performance was currently not where it needs to be, and the challenge is around trying to avoid creating situations where people need to call; making some 'quick fix' improvements whilst at the same time focusing on longer term strategic change. Thoughts from the committee would be welcomed. The upskilling of staff is part of the solution, and the hope is to broaden the range of queries with which staff can deal with. However, it was not feasible to expect staff to be an expert in every field. It was stated that the systems that are already in place are helping in making more information available to call handlers in an intuitive way. It was also stated that it was important to design the way in which systems were used to improve the service.

- If improvements can be made to web and phone contact, staff could then be released to support and deal with queries face to face in First Point. Many councils were already working in this way.
- It was acknowledged that it was difficult to retain staff in the contact centre due to it being an inlet into all areas of the Council. Some work was being done around the apprenticeship routes and career pathways in the contact centre. Recruitment had presented some challenges and a more creative approaches are being used. The latest round of recruitment trialled an approach of 'CV Only' and looking at transferable skills which has been quite successful. A cohort of people had been identified who want to specifically work in customer services.
- In response to a question about the performance of calls dealing with housing repairs, it was stated that the relationship between customer services and repair team is good. There are long term difficult issues to deal with but there are some short-term solutions that are being put in place to reduce current back logs. One example was taking calls over the weekend to reduce a peak in call volumes on a Monday morning which had been implemented.
- It was thought that a clear and consistent set of standards that the whole organisation can understand and work to are needed.
- It was stated that if Members wanted to get more involved in this work and a period of understanding to appreciate the issues from different perspectives would be very helpful and a visit to the call centre could be facilitated. Areas of challenge should be identified in order to work towards solutions. A view from the Committee on this would be welcomed to help produce solutions.

7.4 The outcome of the discussion on this item was summarised as follows:

- The focus of discussion in the meeting was around customer experience and the contact centre.
- There was a suggestion for members to visit the contact centre.
- There was a focus on standards and expectations regarding improvements.
- The importance of data around customer complaints.
- The relationship with housing repairs and maintenance.
- Members were asked to help set out what they feel would be good standards and expectations and finding a good way to do this. It was suggested this could be done in smaller groups or in carefully managed public gathering evidence sessions.
- Members would be asked which of the three areas they would like to consider which were improvements, customer complaints and repairs and maintenance and finding out more on standards.

Other issues related to the budget.

- Members would be asked to produce a list of what they see are key priorities.

7.5 RESOLVED: That the Committee:-

(a) notes the information now reported, together with the responses to the questions raised;

(b) thanks Councillor Cate McDonald, Mark Bennett (Director of HR & Customer Services) and Rob Markham (Lead Project Manager) for attending the meeting, and responding to the questions raised and

(c) requests the Policy and Improvement Officer to write to members of the Committee with regards to their feedback, how Members of the might work together and identifying key priorities in relation improving customer experience.

**8. WORK PLAN AND WAYS OF WORKING**

8.1 The Committee received a report of the Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) on proposed ways of working for the Committee and containing a draft Work Plan for the Committee for 2021/22. It was clarified that ways of working might include smaller groups, a single email which explains options and working virtually.

It was noted that as a committee, meeting in public regulations stated that meetings should be face to face as we were no longer in the period of Covid emergency regulations. However, smaller group meetings might be held virtually and the committee would determine the ways of working.

8.2 RESOLVED: That the Committee notes the contents of the report now submitted, together with the comments made.

**9. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS**

9.1 There were no public questions or petitions.