Minutes of the Scrutiny Overview Committee held in the Council Chamber at Walsall Council House

Monday, 9 December 2024 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present:	Councillor J Murray (Chair) Councillor K Hussain (Vice-Chair) Councillor P Bott Councillor M Follows Councillor N Latham Councillor K Sears Councillor M Ward
Portfolio Holder present:	Councillor M Statham – Deputy Leader and Finance Councillor E Lee – Internal Resources
Officers present:	Judith Greenhalgh – Executive Director of Resources and Transformation Shaun Darcy – Director of Finance and Assurance (Section 151) Elise Hopkins – Director of Customer Engagement Matthew Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

120. **Apologies**

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Hicken.

121. **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

122. **Minutes**

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on the 7 November 2024 was submitted [annexed].

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2024, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

123. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

124. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to consider in private session.

125. **Walsall Pound and Social Value**

The Committee received an overview of the proposals to retain the 'Walsall Pound' and the role of social value by the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance with support from the Executive Director of Resources and Transformation and Director of Finance and Assurance (Section 151) [Annexed].

Members were informed that social value was the quantification of societal impact beyond operational profit. This was measured by the impact on the economy, community and the environment which turned into social value. In tandem with this, the retention of Walsall Pound was a concept of keeping money within the Borough with targeted procurement. As part of this, it was noted that the Council already spent over 40% of direct supplier spends with locally based companies.

It was noted that applying social value and maximising the Walsall Pound, there was likely to have a significant positive impact for the Borough.

The Committee received numerous examples of social value, local expenditure, and strategies to optimise and enhance the Walsall Pound. In addition, the Council had procured a local needs analysis which identified key themes, outcomes, and measures that align with the domains of work, economy, community, and environmental sustainability.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Work on social value enabled focus to secure opportunities for residents especially for care leavers.
- Each Council directorate would be encouraged to uptake social value contracts, which would be advertised via the social value portal. In addition, there would be further work with services to apply a consistent, one team, one Council approach.
- The Portfolio Holder confirmed that focus would be on pre-tender procurement and an assurance of specific social value requirements which were weighted within the tender approach. This would enable services to procure based on social, financial and value-based information.
- Walsall pound spending was worth millions of pounds.

- As the social value project was in its infancy, it was expected that a full picture of the implementation of the proposals would become clear in June 2025. This would include information on how many individuals had been employed etc.
- Social value dashboard was expected in early 2025 which would provide transparent information on the website and the delivery expectations for social value across Council contracts.
- There was a suggestion for procurement to be relocated within the Council structure and moved into the regeneration directorate.
- The Council was dedicated to collaborating with suppliers and stakeholders for bidding on contracts advertised through the tender portal. Assistance from the procurement team was available to businesses and stakeholders to minimise any barriers to applications including working with the Council's legal team to streamline contract wording.
- There was a commitment to ensure that directorates and service areas were reviewing contracts to ensure value for money.
- Cross partnership work had commenced on community wealth building.
- Not every £ was spendable in Walsall. In this circumstance, the Council would look for a supplier within the West Midlands or hire someone local to support.
- There was a discussion regarding the employability of ex-offenders and the tracking of recruitment rates within contracts. It was noted that the Council had the authority to enforce contracts to ensure compliance with the stipulated requirements. The Council possessed the right to terminate the contract and engage an alternative supplier.

Following a lengthy debate, a Member recommended that a Social Value Working Group be established to monitor the Council's implementation of social value. This was duly seconded and agreed by the Committee.

Resolved:

1) **That, the progress of the Council's ambition to improve the retention of the Walsall pound in the Borough and achieving social value be noted.**

2) **That, a Social Value Working Group be established.**

126. **Customer Dashboard**

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Customer Engagement on the Customer Dashboard, which provided a clear overview of customer interactions via online channels, calls, emails and direct interactions with the Customer Experience Centre (CXC). [Annexed]

Over the course of Quarter 1 and 2 for 2024/25, there were over 322,448 contacts to the Council with 293,576 representing telephony contacts. Whilst there was a desire for all teams to be incorporated into the CXC with associated automated telephony and customer service systems, there were a number of services which still had direct contact with the public.

Members noted the average call cut-off times vary by queue and service areas and was ranged between 30 seconds to 45 minutes. As the dashboard was in its infancy, the Council was looking to increase the automation of data into the dashboard to fully gain an understanding of improvements to the customer experience.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Due to inconsistency across directorates and services, the Council needed to agree a consistent and sensible cut off time.
- The Council was encouraging the public to use self-serve options such as the website.
- The recent implementation of a translation service had received positive feedback and had significantly benefited the team. This service complements the translation support already provided by existing team members.
- A Member raised concerns that the Council had not communicated with the local disabled groups in respect of some of the issues in the town centre. In this respect, the Executive Director of Resources and Transformation confirmed that the Council was in the process of establishing lived experience panels which would feed into the consultation process of Council strategies and policies.
- There was a preference for Council services to use CXC as there was the option for a call back service.
- There was a suggestion that the Council Tax bill should incorporate a QR code to direct people to the self-service page on the Council website.
- Issues with wait times in respect of the Council's leisure services was noted. In this respect, it was suggested that a Council app be created to support the service and encourage the public to self-serve.
- CXC had developed specialist expertise in various areas across Council services. The knowledge and customer articles had enabled the CXC to fully provide a paramount service for all customers.
- During the recent storm, there had been exceedingly higher call times for the out of hours service which was provided by Birmingham City Council. The Committee commended the work of colleagues within the CXC, who offered to work out of hours to support the extra demand.
- The Council was in the process of understanding the role of AI knowledge base and how to improve knowledge within the system to understand customer issues and queries.
- It was noted that WHG and Council telephony systems were separate.
- There was an opportunity to gather information from the customer dashboard to understand trends within the CXC. Whilst some of the trend information was already available, further development would enable the Council to gain a greater understanding of the type of data.

The Committee thanked the Director of Engagement for their presentation.

Resolved:

That, the Customer Dashboard be noted.

127. **Member Enquiries Portal**

The Committee received a presentation from the Director of Customer Engagement on the Member Enquiries Portal [Annexed].

Members were informed that the following implementation of the Portal, there had been a number of changes following feedback from Members which included:

- Notifications to indicate a change to the enquiry status, including additional email notifications and in-app alerts.
- Ability to request a review of resolved enquiry.
- Introduction of an SLA timer, improvements to adherence of SLA.

Performance data from November 2023 to November 2024 was considered, which confirmed that 2,649 cases were submitted with 63.5% resolved within 5 days of submitting a case. There were proposals were centralising corporate complaints and member queries to CXC and supporting members on how to report service request to achieve faster issue resolution for first time requests.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- A Member requested the data received via the Portal to be broken down ward by ward. In particular, the data associated with Darlaston South. A response, would be provided in writing.
- There was a discussion about the response times relating to the corporate response time for queries. In this respect, it was observed that 5 working days was the standard corporate response time.
- A number of issues in respect of the Portal were raised by Members. In this respect, the Director of Customer Engagement advised that any issues should be raised with DATS.
- A Member raised concerns about the quality of responses and the seniority of the officer responsible for coordinating them. In response, the Executive Director of Resources and Transformation acknowledged the issue and confirmed that additional training would be provided to staff to address these concerns.

The Chair thanked the Director of Customer Engagement for her presentation.

Resolved:

1) **That, the Member Enquiries Portal be noted.**
2) **That, a data associated with Darlaston South be circulated in writing.**

128. **Scrutiny Chairs Feedback**

The Chair invited Scrutiny Chairs to present feedback from their respective Scrutiny Committees.

129. **Areas of focus – 2024/25**

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. [Annexed]

A Member suggested a report on the Council Local Plan (Development Scheme) at a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved:
That, the areas of focus for 2024/25 be noted.

130. **Forward Plans**

The Committee noted the forward plans as submitted by the Cabinet, WMCA and the Black Country Joint Executive Committee. [Annexed]

A Member queried the role and purpose of the Black Country Joint Executive Committee. In response, the Senior Democratic Services Officer confirmed that the body was slowly being wound down following the abolition of the Black Country LEP. However, further information would be circulated in writing.

Resolved:
1) **That, the forward plans be noted.**
2) **That, information in respect to the Black Country Joint Executive Committee be circulate to Members in writing.**

131. **Recommendations Tracker**

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items. [Annexed].

Resolved:
That the recommendation tracker be noted.

132. **Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be on 4 February 2025

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8.10p.m.

Signed:

Date: