

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board (1) held
at 10.00 am on Wednesday, 26 March 2025

Present:

Members: Councillor A Jobbar (Chair)
Councillor J Blundell
Councillor J Innes
Councillor R Lakha
Councillor G Lewis
Councillor J McNicholas
Councillor D Toulson
Councillor A Tucker

Other Members (by invitation) Councillor J O'Boyle

Employees:

Law and Governance G Holmes, E Jones, A Veness

People's Services L Waller

Property Services and Development R Moon

Apologies: Councillor P Male

Public Business

38. Declarations of Interest

The Chair, Councillor Jobbar, declared a Pecuniary Interest in the matter referred to in Minute 42 below (Home to School Travel Assistance Task and Finish Group). He left the room during consideration of this matter.

39. Minutes

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 12 February 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record. There were no matters arising.

40. #CovConnects Update

The Board considered a briefing note which provided an update on the #CovConnects Programme, highlighting the progress made in developing the #CovConnects Device Bank moving towards a digital reuse and repair model and social impact measurements.

#CovConnects is Coventry City Council's digital inclusion programme. Launched in October 2022, #CovConnects was a social inclusion programme tackling the digital inequalities experienced by our residents and communities. Its core aim

was to ensure that all Coventry residents should have equal opportunities to access digital skills, tools, technologies, and services. From this approach #CovConnects worked in partnership across sectors to ensure that meaningful, person-centred and holistic digital inclusion initiatives are co-created and embedded to meet our diverse community's needs.

#CovConnects had six key programme principles:

- Outcome based - Prioritising social inclusion not tech.
- Partnership led – Not setting the agenda but responding to it.
- Research focus - Gathering evidence to understand and adapt.
- Efficiency driven - Creating interest and excitement to find funding.
- Unique solutions - Recognising community differences and tailoring a response.
- Scalable core offer - Creating sustainable tech, skills and data offer.

The Briefing Note also summarised details of community connectivity, community skills and support device bank developments, the digital re-use and repair and digital inclusion as a wider determinant of health inequalities.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to the presentation including:

- That device recycling is being considered but has considerable complications, including data security, minimum specification. Consideration is ongoing of recycling chargers and screens.
- That work was being delivered with children and young people through community organisations, as well as a specific programme on digital aspirations which will hopefully be expanded but currently lacks capacity.
- That digital inclusion will never be resolved, issues such as mental health, health and economic disadvantage will always be an issue so by creating an ecosystem of support, this will aid to support people as their lives change.
- That the language used when communicating with communities is important so as not to reduce digital confidence, but to improve well-being and ensure the message is clear that moving to digital means is a personal choice. Assurance was given that staff were being trained to share those key messages.
- That although there are currently 140 digital champions, this work would continue to be scaled to partner organisations such as GP's and NHS trusts.
- That security processes and fear of being scammed were a barrier to digital inclusion, but from a Council perspective it was about ensuring processes are kept as simple as possible. For example, there was no requirement to create a MyAccount to access the Household Support Fund.

RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Board note the information relating to the broader #CovConnects Programme.

41. **Council Office Accommodation**

The Board considered a Briefing Note which provided an update and outlined key findings and recommendations following an occupancy study of Broadgate House, Friargate and the Council House.

Post pandemic, as employees returned to work from offices, it created opportunity for the Council to review the way in which we currently occupy our property portfolio, including office accommodation.

In January 2025, following an occupancy study of Broadgate House, One Friargate and the Council House, Leadership Board in consultation with Members decided on the closure of Broadgate House to deliver an on-going financial saving to the organisation and to further reinforce our One Coventry approach by consolidating staff into Friargate. These findings have led to the following actions:

- Move Children's Services, Education and Housing & Homelessness Team into Friargate and the Council House (House Project and Horizon/Youth Justice Teams).
- Move MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) into Friargate.
- Move the Customer Service Centre and Meet and Greet Team and Children's Conferencing Suite into Central Library, all other Customer Services teams would relocate to Friargate.

A comprehensive occupancy audit programme and findings informed a decision to explore potential rationalisation opportunities and/or a more efficient use of operational properties to achieve financial savings.

Continued monitoring of occupancy further presented an opportunity to:

Phase 1 - 2023/24 Reduce CCC occupancy in Friargate from 6 floors to 4, vacant floors offered up for commercial let, potentially generating additional income.

Phase 2 - 2025 Bring staff together, moving Children's, Education & Housing & Homelessness teams from Broadgate House to Friargate.

Phase 3 - Disposal of BGH once savings realised, to enable re-positioning of this building as a redevelopment opportunity noting and respecting its listed status.

The Cabinet Member for Jobs and Economy spoke about the purpose of the closure is to ensure the Council properly utilises its office buildings to ensure value for money. He reiterated that there had never been any plans to exit the Council House, but that there was potential to build on the heritage aspects alongside St Mary's Guildhall and the Police Museum, already located on the ground floor.

The Board questioned Officers and the Cabinet Member and received responses on a number of matters relating to the presentation including:

- That a wider audit of Council property had been undertaken as part of the One Coventry Services process.
- That the Lady Godiva Clock would remain the responsibility of the Council.
- The impact on letting Friargate 2 if more commercial lettings take place at Friargate 1, and that Friargate 2 is half let currently but will continue to be marketed.
- That the Council House is an important asset to the city but currently has a low occupancy rate.

- That community groups are able to book rooms at the Council House at a rate that covers costs.
- That the closure of Broadgate House is part of a wider modernisation programme with agile working increasing and enabling more inclusive work patterns.
- The savings made from the proposed sale of Broadgate House will cover any refurbishment required by the re-location of teams to the Library and Council House.
- That the wider portfolio of commercial property was always reviewed, but that smaller office units were more difficult to let, and the focus was on larger commercial sites which are more financially viable and contribute to the wider economy of the city.
- That there are limited additional costs of Broadgate House being empty as it is a listed building and exempt from business rates, but the hope is that it would be disposed of quickly.
- Overall, the initiative to move to Friargate has been a success, that has reduced the Council property portfolio, which will mean a reduction in costs.
- Members may want to consider the current use of offices allocated to them as part of a future review.

RESOLVED that the Board note the contents of the Briefing Note and Officer presentation.

42. Review Home-to-school Transport Task & Finish Group

The Board considered a Briefing Note which set out the recommendations from the Review Home-to-school Transport Task & Finish Group. Cllr L Kelly (Chair of the Group) attended the meeting to report on their recommendations. Cllr Kelly highlighted the key learning from the process and reiterated that by undertaking a task and finish review on this subject has aided an increase in capacity for officers encouraging service areas working together on a solution. The group identified that there were other areas of the Council where savings and efficiencies could be identified but there was a lack of capacity for staff to be able to review the work, therefore cross-service collaboration was encouraged.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1) Note the progress report on the Home to School Travel arrangements in the municipal year 2025-26 to review the changes and lessons learned ahead of the new procurement round prior to the next academic year.**
- 2) Agree to share the Coventry transport model with the LGA and request information on what other councils are doing to manage transport costs.**
- 3) Recommend that Cabinet Members for Strategic Finance and Resources, Education and Skills and City Services:**
 - a. Replicate the model of working in other areas of the Council business, emphasising the value of bringing in people who don't directly work in the service to support those who do.**

- b. **Continue exploring ways to increase the number of children being moved by the Council's own transport rather than outside bodies and keep the procurement process under review.**
- c. **Investigate the possibility of creating a formula to incentivise parents to transport their children themselves, ensuring fairness and consistency.**

43. Agency Staff and Staff Sickness Task and Finish Group

The Board considered a Briefing Note which summarised the content of the Agency Staff and Staff Sickness Task and Finish Group and set out their recommendations. The following documents were appended to the briefing note.

Appendix A: Scoping Document

Appendix B: Presentation Meeting 1

Appendix C: Absence Data Q3 Oct-Dec 2024

Appendix D: Comparison Data

Cllr Toulson, as Chair of the Task and Finish Group, introduced the item and identified the changing context of the workplace as well as the good practice in some areas to support mental health and well-being. The Board asked questions on a number of matters relating to the presentation including:

- The possibility of an internal pool of agency staff could be considered
- That good practice could be shared across the organisation.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1. Agree to receive regular performance reports on staff sickness and agency use.**
- 2. Recommend that the Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resource considers a more formal oversight and monitoring of Staff Sickness and agency use.**

44. Work Programme and Outstanding Issues

The Board received a report of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that detailed issues on the Work Programme for meetings of the Board for 2024/25.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1) Notes the issues on the Board's Work Programme for 2024/25.**
- 2) Requested an all-members seminar on AI to be arranged for this municipal year**

45. Any other items of Public Business

There were no other items of business.

(Meeting closed at 12.00 pm)