

**Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Wednesday, 27th March, 2024 at 6.00pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Priory Road, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor I Kettle (Chair)

Councillor M Hanif (Vice-Chair)

Councillors S Ali, H Bills, R Collins, T Creed, A Davies, J Foster, K Razzaq, D Stanley and E Taylor

Councillor C Bayton (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee – West Midlands Combined Authority) and Councillor J McNicholas (Chair of Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee - West Midlands Combined Authority)

Officers (Dudley MBC):

B Heran (Deputy Chief Executive), D Brennan (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager), N Owen (Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence), L Wilkins (Programme Partner – People and Inclusion) and S Griffiths (Democratic Services Manager/Scrutiny Officer)
M AbuAffan (Director of Public Health and Wellbeing) – attended via MS Teams

Officers (West Midlands Combined Authority)

J Hughes (Member Relationship Manager) and W Dunlop (Governance Officer)

36 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors J Clinton, P Dobb and E Lawrence.

37 Appointment of Substitute Members

Councillors K Razzaq, R Collins and T Creed had been appointed as substitute Members for Councillors J Clinton, P Dobb and E Lawrence respectively for this meeting of the Committee only.



38 **Declaration of Interests**

There were no declarations of interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.

39 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25th January, 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed.

40 **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

41 **Change in Order of Business**

Pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 13(c) it was

Resolved

That Agenda Item No. 9 (Improvement and Sustainability Programme 'Fit for the Future' Scope and Governance) be considered as the next item of business.

42 **Improvement and Sustainability Programme ('Fit for the Future')
Scope and Governance**

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive on the scope, timelines and key financial and other success measures and milestones of the improvement and sustainability programme, to be branded 'Fit for the Future', together with the governance arrangements, to ensure that the programme delivered the necessary benefits for the Council and its residents, to time, cost, and quality. The report was considered by the Cabinet on 20th March, 2024.

In presenting a summary of the report submitted, the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that regular updates would be presented to the Committee on the overarching Fit for the Future programme looking at the overall financial sustainability and the changes required to maximise the use of digital. The need to reduce siloed working by working towards single team working, where possible and maximising the use of building estates that were retained and the disposal of offices that were no longer required for redevelopment was also referred to.

Reference was made to the governance of the new programme, with the first meeting of the internal 'Fit for the Future' Programme Board held and chaired by the Leader of the Council and attended by the Leader of the Opposition Group. The Board received monthly Programme performance reports with the Leader of the Council and Leader of the Opposition Group monitoring and challenging officers to ensure that key outcomes in terms of financial sustainability and actions arising from external reports were being delivered.

Councillor S Ali sought assurances on the level of confidence in delivering the project governance considering the £37.4m reduction target in the Council's operating costs over 3 years, which was £20m more than the £17.4m previously reported. The Deputy Chief Executive advised that the £37.4m target was a stretch target, with the £17.4m already confirmed in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. The remaining £20m included a review of all functions delivered by the Council to identify efficiencies and new ways of working as single teams and maximising the use of digital to help deliver economies of scale. The additional £20m had been presented to the Programme Board and Independent Assurance Board with a view to savings being delivered and to help replenish the Council's reserves. The Committee was assured of the officer governance processes implemented to ensure targets were being delivered before submission to the Board, and that the £20m allowed some flexibility to meet any increase in demand of services and achieve the savings target. The challenges associated with the programme were acknowledged, however, the team was committed to considering new ways of working to help deliver a sustainable Council and services.

Councillor S Ali raised a further question regarding the consequences to the Council should the reduction in funding not be achieved. The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that one of the reasons for setting the stretch target of £37.4 million, was acknowledging delays in some programmes and any changes to demand levels of services, particularly for vulnerable residents. Monthly forecasting meetings would be scheduled to regularly monitor progress and identify any issues which could be investigated and resolved, as appropriate. Although acknowledging the challenging target for the Council, the team was confident in the delivery as careful measures had been considered in setting those targets, with some savings still to be quantified. Reference was made to paragraph 7 of the report submitted, outlining the measures for reducing operating costs through the 2024/25 change portfolio including an additional pipeline of projects and savings/incomes initiatives. Financial information would be updated monthly from the new financial year to identify progress made in achieving the additional £20m savings and further measures to support the delivery.

In responding to a question from Councillor S Ali, the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that the minimum savings/income target for the Council to achieve by 2026/27 was £17.4m as approved in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

Councillor D Stanley raised concerns of the costs associated with contractors working for the Local Authority and the automatic renewal of contracts without undertaking an efficient and competitive procurement exercise to ensure best value for the Local Authority. The need for a comprehensive process in assessing contracts that were due to expire was referred to.

The Deputy Chief Executive acknowledged the comments made and referred to the spending controls approved by the Cabinet and implemented in October, 2023. Exemptions in relation to recruitment, agency, interim appointments and contracts over a threshold were reviewed by the Spending Control Group consisting of the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Legal. It was confirmed that every interim appointment, linked to a specific piece of work, had been reviewed with some appointments terminated, and extensions applied to some contracts for a limited period of time. It was noted that interim appointments did not have the same employment rights as permanent employees. Members were advised that the Head of Procurement had been requested to review all contracts and ensure managers were trained to help better manage contracts and ensure best value arising from those contracts.

Since the introduction of the spending controls, £4 million savings had been achieved, and it was confirmed that any new external recruitment for both permanent and fixed term positions had been tested against the exception criteria by the Spending Controls Group. A report had been approved by the Cabinet in March, 2024 setting out a revised process, reflecting lessons learned and other considerations to ensure good and effective governance.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the Improvement and Sustainability Programme ('Fit for Future') Scope and Governance, be noted.
- (2) That the achievements of Phase 1 of the programme, as now completed, be noted.
- (3) That the detailed scopes of Phase 2, 'Fit for Purpose' at the first Programme Gateway, as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report submitted, be noted.
- (4) That the governance of the 'Fit for the Future' Programme, as outlined in Appendix 2 of the report submitted, be noted.

43 **West Midlands Combined Authority – Dudley MBC Activity**

The Committee considered a report of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) on the work carried out within the Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Area.

In presenting the report, J Hughes (Member Relationship Manager) advised that the report would be the first update in a series with a view to improving engagement with Constituent Authorities. The strong partnership work between the WMCA and Dudley was mentioned which was demonstrated by £514 million worth of investment, which equated to £1,608 per head within Dudley.

A detailed overview was presented in relation to allocated funding associated with HS2 and Network North; developing the Local Transport Plan called "Reimagining Transport in the West Midlands" and protection for existing bus network services until December, 2024, with approximately £40m of the transformational bus services Improvement programme funding repurposed to support the network to maintain the bus network across the region.

Members were also informed of the additional pothole funding for 2023/24 of £481,772 awarded to Dudley; the commissioning of an independent assessment for future bus policy delivery options; the recently launched Employment and Skills Strategy for 2024-2027 including building strong and inclusive communities and meeting future skills needs at level 3 and above through upskilling and reskilling. These priorities would also be supported across several funds including UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund and Multiply.

Reference was made to the Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal with the single settlement funding aligned to a spending period. This gave WMCA more flexibility over funding decisions and the Constituent Authorities more influence over how funding devolved was prioritised across the region.

The ongoing collaborative work with Dudley Officers on a District Heating Plan and the region's first net zero neighbourhood as part of a regional cohort with other constituent local authorities was referred to. WMCA continued to work closely with Dudley MBC in progressing and delivering housing, property and regeneration work.

Councillor D Stanley commented on the work that he had been involved in relating to the bus services supplied within the local area, and raised concerns about the 12% of bus services lost between 2020 and October 2023 with operators experiencing reduced patronage, reduced revenue and significant increases in costs and the impact this was having on the budget that had been allocated. He emphasised that people must be encouraged to use public transport and the need to maintain a good first quality bus service within the borough.

Councillor A Davies welcomed the Metro development, which he hoped would alleviate pressures of heavily congested roads. It was important to note, when considering regional reports, that Dudley was different to Birmingham in terms of topography and geography. It was suggested that data on car ownership would assist to identify where funding should be targeted to help improve the favoured means of transport by residents.

Councillor A Davies referred to the additional pothole funding for 2023/24 of £481,772 to Dudley in addition to highways maintenance and sought clarification on LNIP funding and whether this funding was in addition to funding that had already been confirmed. He also emphasised the importance of not disadvantaging the residents of Dudley Borough that were reliant on cars for employment, shopping and leisure activities.

The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that it was recognised that the WMCA was made-up of seven constituent councils, and what worked for one area might not work for others. This had been referenced in the Local Transport Plan with the collaboration work on developing Local Area Strategies setting out and assessing the impact of local proposals across the West Midlands. Members would have the opportunity to contribute and feedback on their experiences. The Member Relationship Manager agreed to provide further details in relation to the funding awarded for potholes, highways maintenance and LNIP funding, and car ownership data, if available.

In responding to a question from Councillor A Davies regarding the Local Transport Plan consultation, the Member Relationship Manager confirmed that work was ongoing and offered to present the engagement plan once confirmed.

Councillor S Ali welcomed the report and comments regarding greater consultation involvement with the constituent authorities, however recommended that due to the length of the report that future reports be condensed, as appropriate. Although welcoming additional funding, he considered that £481,772 to repair potholes was not sufficient and sought clarification as to how the funding was allocated. Reference was made to the Wednesbury-Brierley Hill Metro Extension, particularly regarding the updated Business Case which was required as part of the additional funding from Government, to enable the extension from Dudley to Brierley Hill which had not yet been approved. It was acknowledged that significant amounts of money were required to support the project and that the Local Authority was requested to identify an additional £15m to close the gap. Given the current financial situation at Dudley, Councillor S Ali queried whether the WMCA had any additional funding to cover the budget deficit.

Councillor S Ali referred to the Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund programme which would deliver 5 projects within Dudley; however, the report did not provide details on the type of projects or locations. Although welcoming the Jobs and Skills hubs which would be developed within deprived communities across the Borough, Councillor S Ali queried why St. Thomas's Ward had not been included. He also sought clarification as to whether there were any plans to increase funding to improve the ESOL and Functional Skills programmes take-up.

The Member Relationship Manager undertook to clarify how pothole funding had been allocated and referred to the detailed presentation provided by the Executive Director from Transport for West Midlands at the Corporate and Economic Strategy Select Committee in January, 2024 on progress with the delivery of the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro Extension. The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that he would also contact the officers responsible for the projects supported by the Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund programme for further details.

Councillor C Bayton confirmed that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (West Midlands Combined Authority), had received a report on the Commonwealth Games Legacy funding. A significant number of projects had submitted bids, however, no announcement had been made on which projects were successful.

The Member Relationship Manager also confirmed that he would consider the comments made regarding the Jobs and Skills hub in St. Thomas's ward and what support could be made available and also obtain further information in relation to funding for the ESOL and Functional Skills programmes.

Councillor J Foster raised a question in relation to the Network Performance and Reliability and the reasons why the region had lost 12% of bus services between 2020 and October, 2023; whether this also included bus journeys and whether there were any differences between the operation of the services and journeys. The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that he would discuss the details with the relevant officer. However, whilst there had been a loss in service as a region compared to other places in the country, the bus service was managed well and that there was a significant piece of work being undertaken on how bus services would be delivered in the future. It was noted that the WMCA intervened and ensured viability of routes where a provider sought to cancel a route, in accordance with a specific set of criteria.

Councillor J Foster referred to media and press releases that indicated that a scheme would be introduced under which passengers whose final bus of the day was cancelled or left earlier than usual could claim compensation for their alternative journey, such as a taxi fare, to their home, and sought clarification on any progress made. The Member Relationship Manager undertook to provide further information confirming how residents could access the service.

Councillor J Foster referred to Housing, Property and Regeneration and the importance of identifying adequate development land for affordable housing, however noted that some land, particularly in the Black Country, could be very expensive to remediate for developers and therefore presented challenges to persuade developers to build affordable housing due to the money required in remediating the land. It was understood that there was funding available to support this area and it was requested to what extent was that being taken up in Dudley. The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that a part of the WMCA's role was to encourage brownfield development, and where developers had a funding gap, further support would be considered to help bring forward brownfield development.

Councillor C Bayton then provided an overview of the scrutiny review undertaken by the WMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee to examine and assess how the combined authority exercised its powers and funding in respect of brownfield land, redevelopment and to assess the region's communities and how they had benefited. During the exercise, a company that had completed several schemes in Dudley, provided information about some of the difficulties they had encountered in securing funding, together with the National Brownfield Institute from Wolverhampton University for detailed background. Some emerging key themes related to the potential benefits of an enhanced brownfield land register covering all sites in the region, the integration of biodiversity in new developments and the importance of that on all brownfield sites, noting that certain brownfield sites were more ecologically beneficial than some greenfield sites. The WMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee would consider formulating a robust set of recommendations that would benefit local authorities and developers in accessing funding to redevelop brownfield sites at pace.

Councillor J Foster expressed her appreciation for the update provided and undertook to contact the Membership Relationship Manager direct regarding specific sites where concerns had been raised by residents in relation to developments within her ward area.

Councillor H Bills and the Chair (Councillor I Kettle) referred to the challenges faced by developers in building on brownfield land.

Councillor H Bills further commented on the importance of public transport and the need to ensure that when designing bus routes, that they served the community, particularly to allow residents to have easier access to local hospitals. It was also suggested that an extension to the Metro service from Edgbaston Village to Halesowen would be extremely beneficial. The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that he would forward comments made regarding public transport to the appropriate providers for consideration.

In responding to a question from Councillor H Bills regarding the possibility of building a velodrome in the West Midlands, the Member Relationship Manager confirmed that a feasibility assessment had been undertaken and further details had been referred to in a report which he agreed to circulate to Members for information.

The Chair (Councillor I Kettle) referred to the Adult Education Budget funding for Dudley for 2023/24 at December, 2023 being £2.71m which was 7% of WMCA funding during this period which he considered should be more in the region of 11% as this area affected the earning power of the individual throughout their working life and should reflect the needs of Dudley residents. The Member Relationship Manager agreed to provide a response on the allocation process of the budget across the region.

In responding to a question raised by the Chair (Councillor I Kettle), the Member Relationship Manager confirmed that Dudley residents accessed £614,400 of the free courses for jobs funding in 2022/23 and to date in 2023/24 had accessed £885,000, however there remained further funding available for residents. As part of the eligibility criteria, the annual wage limit had recently been agreed at £30,000 by the WMCA as this was the average salary in the West Midlands to provide a far-reaching package. The Member Relationship Manager undertook to provide further information on the budget available and the amount awarded to date.

In referring to comments made by Councillor H Bills regarding an extension to the Metro service from Edgbaston Village to Halesowen, Councillor D Stanley advised on the possibility of introducing a route with a dedicated bus line connecting the area along the Hagley Road, Birmingham into Halesowen.

Arising from previous comments made in relation to a velodrome in West Midlands, the Member Relationship Manager confirmed that an £80,000 budget had been generated by the WMCA for a Cycling Facilities Business Case for a velodrome, and that on 20th March, 2024, it had been announced that this would now progress to a feasibility study which would look at potential locations, designs and funding opportunities for a multi-purpose indoor and outdoor facility. This would also include facilities for BMX, mountain biking and track cycling.

In responding to a question by Councillor M Hanif, the Member Relationship Manager confirmed that the Housing, Property and Regeneration Team worked closely with officers regarding specific pipelines, with a pipeline tracker having been developed and circulated to the Committee prior to the meeting. The Tracker detailed what projects had been identified, their risk rating, and the support needed, where possible, to move projects forward.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the work that the West Midlands Combined Authority is carrying out in the Dudley MBC Local Authority Area, be noted.
- (2) That the Member Relationship Manager be requested to provide further details, additional information and responses to the specific issues raised by the Committee, as detailed above.

44 **West Midlands Combined Authority – Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report**

The Committee considered a report of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) on the work of the West Midlands Combined Authority Scrutiny function in the 2022/23 Municipal Year. The Annual Report 2022/23 was attached as Appendix 1 to the report submitted.

Councillor C Bayton (Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – West Midlands Combined Authority) gave an overview of the Annual Report which outlined its focus, key work activities and the outcomes achieved, with particular focus on the draft ‘Trailblazer’ Deeper Devolution Deal proposals. The importance and value of undertaking pre-decision scrutiny to make a difference was emphasised. Members were encouraged to read the West Midlands State of the Region report, which was a high-level annual review of the WMCA area, which was available online.

Reference was made to the deep-dive reviews undertaken in relation to brownfield land and skills and job opportunities, and the establishment of a Working Group to consider the recently published Government Scrutiny Protocols, in particular the 18 key principles contained with the Protocol for good scrutiny, benchmarking the WMCA’s performance against those principles and potential improvements. The importance of improving working relationships to benefit each local authority in understanding how the WMCA can support them and how authorities can be more proactive in putting ideas and schemes forward was noted.

The challenges associated with quorate meetings was referred to which had been raised the Government. Following a review of transport scrutiny during 2022/23, the WMCA agreed to establish the Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee to improve overview and accountability, with the same reporting processes as the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reporting to the WMCA Board.

Councillor J McNicholas (Chair of Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee - West Midlands Combined Authority) referred to the recent establishment of the Committee attended by a group of representatives from each district, including Councillor D Stanley who represented Dudley.

Councillor J McNicholas endorsed Councillor Bayton's comments regarding the difficulties associated with quorate meetings. Each Leader would be written to concerning attendance at meetings. With regard to improving bus services, consideration would be given to a number of options including the existing quality partnership system and franchising. It was not considered feasible to pursue complete ownership, however, operators were keen to investigate franchising. Councillor J McNicholas suggested there was an opportunity for Dudley's Overview and Scrutiny Committee to participate and contribute to the debate. The Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been requested to consider franchising ahead of the review by the WMCA in July, 2024 and welcomed any comments by Dudley Members.

Reference was made to the deep-dive reviews undertaken in relation to improving communications and ensuring the role of the WMCA was understood on a local level by the different districts, through the well-established officer networks to create the necessary systems to ensure that the work of the Combined Authority was being delivered.

Councillor D Stanley expressed his appreciation to Councillor McNicholas and the positive contributions he had made in his role as Chair of the Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor A Davies welcomed the report and the work undertaken throughout the year. He referred to the franchising of bus services and queried the preferred proposal for Dudley. Councillor McNicholas considered that franchising should be undertaken to support delivery of services, and he was of the view that the current service delivery was unacceptable, which was collectively agreed by several districts. Models operated in other Authorities, including Manchester, should be reviewed when considering future delivery, and pre-decision scrutiny was essential to ensure the best possible option for every district.

The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that an assessment was being undertaken on options for the bus network, including the possibility of franchising, which would be presented to the WMCA Board in July, 2024. Should the Board consider that franchising was the preferred option, a full audit would be undertaken, the outcomes of which would then be considered by the Board to consider moving forward with consultation. It was noted that the decision as to whether the WMCA moved to a franchise network would be a Mayoral decision. All Councillors across the region would be informed of progress made at each stage and any opportunities for Members to contribute to help inform future decisions.

Councillor McNicholas emphasised the importance of involvement of Dudley Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and strongly recommend that the Committee consider and debate the report, once published in July, 2024, and make any observations as appropriate.

Councillor S Ali expressed his thanks to those presenting the report and welcomed the report submitted. Reference was made to the challenges highlighted in the quoracy of meetings, and Councillor S Ali suggested whether a recommendation of the Dudley Overview and Scrutiny Committee for this area to be reviewed and looked at would add any weight to the issue. In responding, Councillor C Bayton confirmed that quoracy was a Government decision, as outlined in the WMCA Constitution, however, there may be opportunity going forward to negotiate a change. It was noted that the challenge was being experienced by other Combined Authorities across the Country.

The Member Relationship Manager confirmed that any changes to quoracy would require a change in legislation, and that views continued to be forwarded to the Government. It was noted that the WMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee had undertaken a piece of work in relation to member engagement. Encouragement was needed to ensure Member attendance and ensure that meetings were engaging and meaningful to enable Members to fulfil their roles and hold WMCA to account.

Councillor C Bayton advised Members that the Democratic Services Team at WMCA had written to each Leader for nominated Members, therefore any issues in a particular authority needed to be highlighted at an early stage.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the work of the West Midlands Combined Authority Scrutiny function in the 2022/23 Municipal Year, be noted.

45 **Employee Health and Wellbeing**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive on the findings of a review of the Council's employee wellbeing offer and the proposed action plan to address the issues identified.

In presenting a summary of the report through presentation slides, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager confirmed that Members were requested to note the importance of the Council having a defined employee health and well-being strategy and action plan, the success of which would be measured against Key Performance Indicators and metrics. It was expected that due to the financial challenges facing the Council, this would inevitably have an impact on employees. The need to focus on resilience and mitigation of risk and prevention was highlighted and Members were encouraged to promote and support the importance of developing an evidence-based understanding of absence within the organisation.

Following observations from employees, Dudley Council's current well-being offer was considered to be disaggregated, with the current provision reflecting the environment prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and not to the standard required for a large organisation. As identified nationally, further support was needed for issues such as mental health, with the existing mental health offer requiring improvements to effectively respond to the increased demand in this area. The provision of health and well-being support required clear ownership and leadership, therefore it had been agreed that the People and Inclusion Senior Leadership Team take responsibility for this area to ensure clear signposting was in place for employees, with an offer that accommodated all levels of the organisation.

Although acknowledging there was some pockets of good practice, these were not joined up therefore stronger governance and evaluation of the well-being offer was needed. Reference was made to the extensive information available on the Council's Intranet page that was accessed by employees, however, this was not organised in an accessible format, with information that was outdated with no ownership or responsibility for updating the information. A consistent approach was required to provide a more streamlined process.

An employee assistance programme had recently been introduced (Vivup) which would significantly improve the offer of support for employee mental health. Focus was being given to improving and ensuring consistent communication with employees. Feedback from an employee survey highlighted that employees were reluctant to use the mental health first aiders and there had been an acknowledgement that the current scheme had not been applied appropriately.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager reported that promoting well-being allowed for increased outputs and attendance and ensured sustainability of the workforce and Council, with the need for a cultural and organisational change that must include engaged and healthy employees regardless of their protected characteristic and provision. It was important to note the employer's legal duty of care and reduction of risk to the Council with regard to employees and how stress could be prevented by creating positive working environments where individuals and organisations could thrive and increase performance.

The Programme Partner (People and Inclusion) provided an overview of the key findings of the review and advised that consideration had been given to well-being trends both nationally and locally through statistical data from the Office of National Statistics, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and local data relating to Dudley. The latest Annual Health and Wellbeing Report produced by the CIPD identified that nationally mental health was the predominate cause of sickness absence, with Dudley reflecting that national trend.

Following benchmarking exercises with other Councils and public sector bodies, it had been identified that the best employee well-being provisions were wide-ranging, could be individually tailored to each person's needs, in line with a full employee life cycle and encompassed mental, physical, emotional and economic health requirements. It was noted that good well-being provisions were influenced by effective workplace relationships, resources and decisions and enhanced by a positive culture that helped prioritise well-being, provided clear tasks, motivation and benefits, through the development of an overall Council wide strategy. A mapping exercise was also undertaken to identify current offers and one to one interviews arranged with key stakeholders, providers covering health and safety and public health, together with a range of data and evidence including the employee assistance programme, staff counselling data, employee surveys, directorate surveys, exit monitoring and workforce analytics.

Reference was also made to the use of a NHS diagnostic toolkit to measure the current status against best practice elements with a number of key themes identified including management and leadership, relationships, individual responsibilities and physical environment support and strategy. An example of a survey that had been undertaken was presented at the meeting.

The Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence provided an overview of Dudley specific absence management data, and in doing so confirmed that all service areas held responsibility for absence management with managers responsible for ensuring that employees had access to services, as appropriate, to support them. Quarterly and monthly statistics on service areas and directorates was produced, together with monthly data reports issued to Heads of Service to allow monitoring within their teams. Monthly meetings were arranged by the People and Inclusion division to review absences to identify whether advice or support was needed in those areas. It was also confirmed that policies, processes and procedures were adopted as a result of absence triggers to help manage individuals who were absent from work.

An overview of Directorate data and evidence was presented. It was noted that the number of days lost resulted in financial implications as in some service areas, absences were covered by agency staff. Short term absence was reported against full time equivalent days lost and benchmarked both nationally and regionally. Long term absences were categorised by directorate and predominately included employees with underlying medical health conditions. It was evident that absence in Directorates such as Adult Social Care, Children's and Environment were slightly higher due to frontline services and contact with service users. It was reported that there had been an increase in work related stress and although there were mechanisms in place to support employees during absences, further consideration would be given to this area.

Other areas of focus included creating a safe and positive working environment; ensuring that working practises and conditions identified as contributing to poor mental health were proactively managed; support and strategy and coordinating the provision to ensure clear signposting to support when needed, with a strong focus on prevention and relationships and individual responsibilities. It was essential that the strategy was supported by all levels of leadership, who played a crucial role in creating and maintaining a culture where positive mental health thrived for employees. It was essential that individuals were aware of their contribution towards a safe working environment.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager informed Members of the Action Plan and next steps including a review of pages on the intranet site, communicating with the workforce on the plans for the new wellbeing provision and creating clear signposting on existing provision. It was noted that a well-being needs assessment survey would be undertaken anonymously across the organisation with some engagement with front line services, and include data sets linked to EDI, to gain an understanding of any disproportionate experiences at the Council based on protected characteristics. The data would help inform and create a health and well-being strategy and action plan. A Well-being Governance Board would also be established in line with the diagnostic tool kit and the Corporate Equalities Group was chaired by the Chief Executive. Re-engagement would be undertaken with key stakeholders to help drive forward the actions.

Councillor E Taylor referred to comments made regarding the workforce diminishing and roles not being replaced and the introduction of shared desk space, and queried whether this impacted stress levels on employees that remained. The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager acknowledged that due to financial pressures, some employees had already indicated that they felt stressed and overworked, therefore it was anticipated that in the interim, long term sickness absence might increase. Employee well-being was recognised as more paramount than ever in the current climate.

In responding to a supplementary question from Councillor E Taylor, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager confirmed that the datasets did not measure whether staff not being replaced resulted in mental health related absences which would be considered during restructure reviews. It was generally reported that employees working for local authorities felt overworked and under resourced, therefore the proposed Action Plan would measure in six-month intervals when some changes had been implemented to identify whether there was a direct correlation.

Councillor J Foster sought clarification on the rationale behind transferring this function from Public Health to People and Inclusion and whether this resulted in any financial implications. Councillor Foster understood the benefit of this function being within public health to have access to all the opportunities that existed to support employees, such as specialist mental health and other services that might be needed over and above what an employee support programme could provide, both internally and throughout the Dudley Borough. However, the transfer to People and Inclusion provided a link into what was happening across the whole organisation and identified the cultural issues that impacted on well-being. It was therefore requested how the organisation would capture the best practices in each of the directorates.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager undertook to provide further information on the rationale for the transfer of functions, however, it was acknowledged that employee well-being was usually managed within human resources at other local authorities. It was confirmed that the associated budget had transferred to the People and Inclusion Team in December, 2023 together with the management of the internal Staff Counselling Service.

The Director of Public Health and Wellbeing referred to the close working relationship and collaboration between Public Health and People and Inclusion, and that there were a number of employee services that continued to be led by Public Health including staff flu vaccinations and workplace health assessments.

Members were also advised that administration of the Occupational Health Contracts had also been transferred to People and Inclusion, which would be aligned with the health and well-being agenda and strategy to help the process to be more streamlined for employees and managers.

Councillor S Ali welcomed the comprehensive report submitted and suggested that the contributing factors in terms of mental health, anxiety, depression were internal changes within the organisation; increased workloads with reduced resources; culture; effects of the Covid-19 pandemic with employees working from home in isolation and challenges associated with the cost-of-living crisis. In view of this Councillor Ali fully supported a comprehensive well-being offer for staff as employees were an important resource in delivering efficient and effective services. It was suggested that further analysis be undertaken via surveys to learn from staff the causes of the triggers in terms of mental health and well-being issues. Regarding short and long-term absences, Councillor Ali sought clarification as to the reasons why the Housing Directorate had high sickness absence compared to other directorates.

The Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence confirmed that the Vivup referral service collected data including reasons for referrals, which would be fed into the strategy. Regarding sickness absences in Housing, further work would be undertaken to establish the root-cause, however it was apparent that there were ongoing issues with the management structure and some significant changes had taken place.

Councillor S Ali suggested that consideration be given to guidance on workplace health and mental well-being support that was available when developing any new strategies.

Following a question from the Vice-Chair (Councillor M Hanif) in relation to monitoring employees that were working from home, the Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence referred to the benefits associated with working from home including creating flexibility for individuals. The importance of managers establishing a good relationship with their employee and understanding their objectives and roles clearly and ensuring that work was being delivered was emphasised. The challenges were acknowledged; however, it was essential that managers were provided with the right training to support employees effectively.

Councillor A Davies welcomed the scrutiny of this area as it related to every directorate and activity of the Council and emphasised the importance of focusing on prevention. He suggested that workloads and capacity within teams should be central and realistic when restructuring the Council. The need to bring people back into the office and give them their own environment to help team building and social interaction was referred to.

In responding to a question on the employee survey feedback, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager confirmed that this had been categorised into what the leadership wanted to see more of and what employees wanted. The results focused on areas including appreciation and recognition; psychological safety and nurturing, and it was evident that there were similarities between the aspirations of leaders and employees generally.

Councillor H Bills suggested providing facilities to employees to help alleviate frustration or anxiety such as well-being rooms and the ability to express their problems. It was essential that the organisation understood that people were absent due to a variety of reasons. Councillor Bills considered that communicating person to person would be beneficial instead of via computers. Managers' understanding and sharing of information was paramount in supporting employees.

The Chair (Councillor I Kettle) referred to the findings and duplication in the support currently offered within different teams across the organisation and queried whether the referral for support should be centralised. The Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence confirmed that the referral process and well-being services would be centralised through the People and Inclusion division.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager confirmed that information highlighting the support provided in individual areas would be collated into one centralised area as part of the key stakeholders work. This enabled a clear strategy and pathway to promote the activities and support available.

The Chair (Councillor I Kettle) encouraged officers to ensure that any digital format being considered was not overly complicated and made easy to use. The Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence referred to the existing surveys that were circulated to employees with responses being returned, which allowed officers to identify any trends which would be considered through the well-being agenda.

Councillor J Foster commented that valuable data could be obtained from people leaving the organisation, including their experiences and health whilst working for Dudley. The Senior Manager Human Resources Delivery and Intelligence confirmed that exit interview data was collected which was reported back to the Corporate Management Team. Further development work in this area would be undertaken.

Councillor D Stanley endorsed the importance of gathering data to understand the reasons for people leaving the authority and raised concerns about the level of sickness absence. Employees should be appreciated for the work undertaken, which he considered was frequently not being recognised. He also raised concern that there was insufficient accountability for some employees who worked from home.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Vice-Chair (Councillor M Hanif) requested that a progress report be submitted in six months' time.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report, and as reported at the meeting, on the findings of a review of the Council's employee wellbeing offer and the proposed action plan to address the issues identified, be noted.
- (2) That the Committee note that employee wellbeing within the Council currently reflects the national trends of an overall increase in sickness and absence due to mental health related sickness.

- (3) That the work undertaken to review the Council's employee wellbeing offer and the findings be noted.
 - (4) That the need to strengthen the Council's wellbeing offer to employees to address the issues highlighted in the report be noted.
 - (5) That the Action Plan, attached as Appendix 1 to the report submitted, be endorsed.
 - (6) That a further progress report be presented to the Committee in six months' time.
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46 **Progress Tracker and Future Business**

The progress tracker and programme of future business for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was received and noted.

47 **Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8**

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

The meeting ended at 8.30pm

CHAIR