

MINUTES OF: SPECIAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – CALL-IN

Date of Meeting: 8th August 2022

Present: Councillor Johnson (Chair)
Councillors McInnes (sub), McMahon, Marriott, Morris, Procter, Rigby (sub), Rooke and Thompson

In attendance: Councillors Foxcroft and Woods (call-in members)
Councillors A. Barnes and Hughes (Cabinet representatives)
Adam Allen, Director of Communities (relevant officer)
Andrew Buckle, Head of Customer Services and ICT (relevant officer)
Neil Shaw, Chief Executive
Mandy Lewis, Director of Economic Development
Clare Birtwistle, Head of Legal (Monitoring Officer) - remotely
Carolyn Sharples, Committee and Member Services Manager

Also Present: Councillor Brennan
1 member of the public

By remote access:

Councillors Ashworth, Oakes, Smith and Walmsley
1 member of the public

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Eaton, Councillor Coogan (Councillor McInnes subbing) and Councillor Steen (call-in member).

Councillor Rigby also subbed for Councillor Foxcroft, as he was attending the meeting as a call-in member.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

3. Question Time

There were no public questions.

4. Call-in

4.1 The Chair introduced the item and informed members of the call-in procedure.

4.2 The Chair invited the call-in members to explain their reasons for the call-in. Call-in members went through each of the points as detailed in the call-in and also gave the following clarification:

- It was not in accordance with the Digital Strategy as customers were supposed to be at the heart of the strategy, as detailed in the vision.
- A large percentage of residents who responded to the recent survey were happy with the Council website, so the decision did not link back to the strategy.
- The report failed to explain alternative options and explain how residents would be supported in adapting to the new site.
- It also failed to explain how the Council would work with local businesses on local infrastructure as detailed in the strategy.
- There was no reference in the risks as to why we were using the same supplier, when the current website had only been in use since 2015.

- The report failed to highlight how the other Council websites would be consolidated, or what the future use or costs would be for the news site.
- There was no reference to other Councils websites.
- The Digital Strategy refers to value for money but there was no reference to quotes for similar work.
- Regarding the discontinuation of certain elements, there was no guarantee that the situation wouldn't arise again against the wholesale bespoke website cost.

Questions were asked of the call-in members and further clarification was given as follows:

- The call-in was about the procurement decision, the costs and why a new website was needed.
- 77% of customers had no problem with the existing website.
- It was not a necessity to spend on a website at this time and websites would always need to be improved.
- The call-in concerned 1.2 of the Cabinet report and the agreement to the procurement of a new website and digital improvements through the company Jadu using a procurement framework.
- There was nothing in the Cabinet report to detail why this was the right provider.

4.3 The Chair invited the Cabinet representatives to respond to the call-in and explain the reasons for their decision. The following clarification was given:

- The website was the most significant way in which customers interacted with the Council and this would need investment over time.
- It was right to consider investment in ways which allow ease of access for residents.
- 21% expressed satisfaction, which was not a great response. 60% thought it was poor or average.
- Focus groups indicated the current website was simple to use and this would be taken forward and continued.
- Changes were required on the number of clicks taken to do certain tasks and changes were also required in relation to downloads. Redesign would make it easier to interact.
- More integration of back end systems would also make improvements for staff.
- The report outlined ongoing support challenges in relation to Jadu who were the provider for approx. 80% of Council websites.
- The £78k costs included a contingency element of £18,000 and the contract required pre-submitted costs to ensure it didn't go over budget.
- The report detailed the options and a redesign of the existing site would be costly for minimal benefit.
- The budget decision was taken by Council in February so the spend and costs were not valid in relation to the call-in.
- The Digital Strategy had been to Overview and Scrutiny in June 2021 and following financial concerns raised, further work was done to satisfy these concerns and a report was brought back in October 2021. The relevant member concerned had not attended, but should have been at the meeting if there were any concerns.
- No one had raised additional concerns and there had been ample opportunity to have any relevant discussions.
- The decision on 19th July 2022 was around procurement.
- The changes would improve elements such as making direct debit payments as well as renewal of garden waste services, which were not currently functioning well.
- The information that went to Overview and Scrutiny in October 2021 detailed year 1 projects and costs which were subsequently confirmed at the Council budget meeting.

Questions were asked of the Cabinet representatives and further clarification was given as follows:

- A small percentage of residents think the current website is good, as a Council we should aim for much better than this.
- Covid had changed the way people interact so there was a need to provide an outstanding service.
- We would be judged by the level of service available by other providers of services (e.g. Amazon).
- There was always a need to improve services.
- Not liking a Cabinet decision was not enough for the purposes of a call-in.

4.4 The Chair invited the relevant officers to respond to the call-in and explain the reasons for their recommendations in the report to Cabinet. The following clarification was given:

- The website was fundamental to delivering the digital strategy and this was highlighted strongly in the strategy and in the first year action plan. Extensive consultation took place with members to explain the Digital Strategy and the importance of the website.
 - Officers attended Overview and Scrutiny on two occasions, the second one being to provide costs associated with the website as part of the 1st year action plan.
 - The decisions to have a new website and commit funding were taken at previous Council meetings.
 - The Cabinet report that was subject to Call-in was to seek permission to procure the website following extensive public engagement. The costs were repeated in the Cabinet report.
 - The website would be more interactive for the customer and have more functionality.
 - The public consultation was not designed to establish if the Council were to have a new website as this was an essential element of the Digital Strategy, the consultation was to identify key improvements that should be incorporated.
 - The survey had received over 700 responses and also focus groups were undertaken.
 - Maintenance was likely to be provided in the short term for the existing website, however the company were no longer doing any development on the existing Rossendale template. This severely restricted its future functionality.
 - Weaknesses had been identified with forms and downloads through consultation. At the customer focus groups reference was made to the number of clicks that was required to access information. The new website would provide a new download function that reduced the number of clicks required to access information.
 - The 2017 decision was based on the financial circumstances at that time and the website had a very low purchase price but was expensive to alter and update. This now caused more issues as changes that were more significant were needed.
 - This decision would build on security, future proof and would also enable flexibility to meet customer needs.
 - First year costs including the website had already been agreed by full Council in the medium term financial strategy.
 - The customer had been put at the heart of the process and officers were confident that the new website would better meet customer needs. The existing taxonomy would be replicated onto the new website, this would ease the website transition for existing customers.
 - The customer focus groups highlighted that customers prefer to have elements such as popular services, which is the tile structure to access services, these would be retained in the new website.
 - The Council had talked to other providers but the existing website was connected to so many other systems and Jadu was still the preferred provider. Through the G-Cloud 12 - CCS Crown Commercial Services procurement framework, the Council
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could be assured that the price was competitive and met all procurement requirements.

- Technology this changes rapidly and Rossendale have adopted a hybrid cloud approach to position the organisation against future changes in technology, as well as maintaining the most flexible and competitive infrastructure.
- As part of the change in technology, the Council website was now hosted via AWS (Amazon Web Services).

Questions were asked of the relevant officers and further clarification was given as follows:

- The first year projects had come to Overview and Scrutiny in October 2021 and a report on year 2 would be coming to Overview and Scrutiny in November.
- The local business element referred to in the Digital Strategy concerned broadband and infrastructure and was less related to the website. This would come forward in later years.
- This work was in line with the policy and what the Council had been working towards over the last 12 months.

Following a question by a committee member the Chief Executive confirmed that the purpose of the call-in was to determine whether the decision was in line with Council policy and the budget. Members had already agreed the policy and budget, so members of the committee needed to determine whether the Cabinet decision was going against these.

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that training on call-ins could be arranged if required. She also reiterated the advice given at the time of the call-in and confirmed that each call-in would need to be considered on its own merits.

N.B. Councillor Barnes left the meeting.

- 4.5 Members of the public and other members in attendance were invited to ask questions and the following clarification was given:
- The call-in related to the decision regarding 1.2 of the Cabinet report on Customer Services Improvement Plan and Website Development.

4.6 Following the representations, questions and clarification from all parties, the attendees left the meeting whilst the committee deliberated, with the exception of the supporting officers.

5. Determination

5.1 The Chair invited attendees to return to the meeting and advised them of the decision.

5.2 Resolved:

After considering the representations made and clarification given by all parties, the committee determined that the call-in was not valid, and that the decision made was wholly in accordance with Council policy and the budget and therefore no further action was required. The decision would come into immediate effect and there could be no further call-in. In making the decision the committee commented that the decision was both in accordance with the policy and also within budget.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and concluded at 8.02pm)

Signed.....

(Chair)

Date