

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 20 October 2022

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD on 20 October 2022 at 7.30 pm.

Present: Councillors: Kay (Chair), Ozdemir (Vice-Chair), Chowdhury, Jackson, Clarke, Chapman, Heather, Staff, McHugh, Nargund, Pandor, Ibrahim and Russell

Also Present: Councillors:

Councillor Jenny Kay in the Chair

36 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Graham, Nathan and Weekes.

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Ozdemir.

37 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)

None.

38 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)

None.

39 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)

It was noted that it was unfortunate that the committee was not able to consider agenda items C2 – C5 in detail at the previous meeting.

RESOLVED:

Subject to the above, the minutes of the previous meeting on 15 September 2022 be agreed as a correct record and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

40 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)

The Chair noted that the council was processing council tax rebates under the government's Energy Bill Rebate Scheme. Under the scheme, those in council tax bands A to D were eligible for a £150 rebate on their council tax. However, ratepayers could ask for this money to be paid to them directly, and around 1,000 households a week were asking for the rebate to be applied in this way. It was commented that this was particularly resource intensive for staff.

Further to the item at the previous meeting considering the impact of recent flooding caused by mains water bursts, the Chair had received a written update from Thames Water and summarised the contents. This is appended to the minutes.

At the previous meeting the Committee heard from Operose Health in relation to the findings of a BBC Panorama documentary, raising concerns about their services. The Chair noted that further information on GP details requested by the Committee had not yet been received.

41 EXTERNAL ATTENDEES (Item A6)

None.

42 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A7)

None.

43 MONITORING ITEM (COUNCIL FORWARD PLAN / SCRUTINY UPDATES) (Item C1)

The Committee requested an update on when responses to previous scrutiny reviews would be available.

44 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT (Item C2)

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance, and Cllr Ward, Executive Member for Finance, Planning and Performance, presented the report. It was noted that the primary financial challenge was the £21.7m overspend associated with energy inflation, demographic pressures and other factors.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Committee asked about the council's long term energy purchasing strategy and if the council would be joining a Public Buying Organisation (PBO). In response, it was advised that the council was seeking to join a PBO for up to two financial years; longer term options would be assessed with reference to advice from the council's energy consultants.
- With regard to the increased cost of purchasing energy, the committee noted that the council was in a difficult position and faced challenging consequences as a result. It was asked what lessons had been learned from the situation and what would the council's risk management strategy be going forwards. In response, it was advised that the Energy Team would be requested to provide a briefing note.
- It was queried if other London boroughs were facing the same scale of financial challenge to the increase in energy costs. In response, it was advised that the increased cost of energy was a significant financial issue for many organisations, however the council did not have comparative data on the energy purchasing arrangements or baseline energy usage of other boroughs. Officers across London were discussing how best to respond to the energy crisis.
- The Committee discussed the impact of increased energy prices for those on communal heating systems, and expressed concerns about residents being unable to pay bills. In response, it was advised that the council's financial planning factored in an element of uncollected debt. There were services to support residents experiencing hardship, including SHINE and the Income Maximisation Team. It was commented that the IMAX team were able to attend Ward Partnership meetings on request.
- On the increased cost of borrowing, it was advised that capital projects already underway were largely unaffected, however this may be a factor in allocating budgets to future projects.
- In relation to the upcoming decision on the Forward Plan on parking fees and charges, it was queried if the new fees and charges model would fully cover the cost

of providing the Parking service, or if the service would be subsidised through other income. It was advised that a response would be sent after the meeting.

- In response to a question, it was advised that the council was exploring the further use of e-cargo bikes as an alternative to cars and vans. This had environmental benefits, and would reduce spend on the cost of fuel.
- In relation to children's centre occupancy data at Figure 9 of the report, members asked for more information on why occupancy rates were falling. An update from the service was requested.
- Members asked for further information on the cost pressure faced by Islington Lettings. It was queried how many people were in the scheme, and the impact of the revised arrangements on residents.
- Members noted the overspend in Fairer Together included cost pressure to deal with complaints effectively and efficiently. Members requested details of what actions are being taken to resolve the complaints backlog, and how the recruitment and retention issues detailed in the report would be resolved. In response, officers advised that work was underway across the organisation to reduce overtime payments where possible. An update would be requested from the service.
- The Committee requested an update on spend on agency and interim staff; including details of which posts are filled by agency and interim staff, and why.
- The council had an ambitious new build programme and the committee queried the impact of budget slippage on previously agreed targets for building new homes. In response, it was advised that there would be a push for projects to complete within the financial year, and the council would be spending more than it ever has previously on building new homes.
- The Committee queried previously agreed savings that were now considered to be undeliverable. The Committee requested a summary of those savings, with analysis of why they could not be delivered. It was suggested that this would help to inform the budget setting process for 2023/24.
- The Committee asked for an update on the outcomes of the Consultation on the In-House Transformation Programme.

RESOLVED:

That the budget monitoring report be noted.

ACTIONS:

As detailed above, the Committee requested further information on:

- Lessons learned from the increased cost of energy, and the ongoing risk management strategy;
- The funding arrangements of the parking service, with reference to proposed changes to fees and charges;
- The reasons why children's centre occupancy rates were falling;
- The cost pressures faced by Islington Lettings;
- Actions being taken to resolve the complaints backlog, and how recruitment and retention issues in Fairer Together would be resolved;
- Spend on agency and interim staff;
- Which previously agreed savings were now considered undeliverable;
- The outcomes of the consultation on the Adult Social Care In-House Transformation Programme.

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Joana Dawes, Corporate Performance Manager, introduced the report. It was noted that the report summarised all corporate performance, and not just that of the Resources directorate.

The following main comments were made in the discussion:

- It was commented that a more detailed narrative and performance data would help members in focusing their scrutiny work.
- The Committee considered measures to reduce the use of temporary accommodation where the council does not have a statutory duty. The Committee expressed concerns about homelessness residents and queried the wider impact of this approach, particularly on vulnerable residents. It was requested that officers provide an update.
- It was welcomed that the council was reporting on the number of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions.
- The uptake of places on school holiday activities was lower than expected. Members suggested that the introduction of a waiting list may help to ensure that spaces are made available if a young person is not able to attend.
- The Committee welcomed the progress made on voids performance and requested further data on this, in particular in relation to the number of households choosing to downsize, and the time taken to process voids.
- The Committee requested further information on the recruitment challenges in the Early Intervention and Prevention Service and how this was being addressed.

RESOLVED:

That the quarter one performance update be noted.

ACTIONS:

As detailed above, the Committee requested further information on:

- Measures to reduce the usage of temporary accommodation, and the impact on residents;
- How to ensure that places on school holiday activities are best allocated;
- Voids performance and the number of households choosing to downsize;
- Recruitment challenges in the early intervention and prevention service.

46

ANNUAL WORKFORCE REPORT (Item C4)

Julie Foy, Director of Human Resources, introduced the Annual Workforce Report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- It was noted that over 1,000 working days had been lost to sickness absence for Covid-19; this peaked during the Omicron wave.
- In relation to the previous scrutiny review of performance management, it was advised that a new approach was being developed. Further detail would be available in early 2023.
- Officers summarised the council's 'Futurework' arrangements, detailing which staff were required to work in the borough, and which were able to work from home.
- Members queried the reasons behind the ethnicity pay gap and the council's actions to improve diversity in the top quartile of earners. Officers explained that this was a

priority for the council and a number of initiatives were underway as part of the Diverse Recruiter scheme. This included longstanding arrangements for anonymised applications, and new arrangements, such as the “internal first” approach to all job vacancies up to PO10 grade to promote career progression for internal staff. The Council had also introduced two leadership and management development qualifications and these had been specifically targeted at colleagues from Black and Asian backgrounds. The ‘Black on Board’ scheme also sought to improve the diversity of internal board meetings. The Inclusive Mentoring Programme had also been well received and a second cohort would be launched soon. The Director of HR had been asked to co-chair a London-wide Tackling Racial Inequality programme for HR professionals and it was hoped this would lead to the further sharing of best practice.

- It was asked that secondment and acting up opportunities be detailed in future workforce reports to the committee.
- Following a question on diverse recruitment panels, it was confirmed that there was a pool of staff available to participate in such panels where services were not able to provide a diverse recruitment panel from within their service.
- The Committee requested further information on the council’s use of the apprenticeship levy, and if we undertake any transfer to SMEs.
- It was queried how the council tracked improvements in productivity following the upskilling of staff. Officers explained how a new e-learning system was able to better track the training and development of staff, although it was not straightforward to attribute changes in productivity to particular development activities at an individual level. However, strategic discussions were underway on the skills staff need in order to increase performance across the organisation.
- The Committee referenced the work of a task and finish group on the BAME pay gap and suggested that it would be helpful for that work to be circulated to the committee. It was noted that the ethnic profile of different departments varied, and it would be helpful for future reports to track how this has changed over time. Officers advised that the work on the BAME pay gap was being reported under the Council’s Challenging Inequality Programme, and would consider how this could be best reported to the committee.
- A discussion was had on gender disparities in different job roles and the need for all workplaces to be safe spaces for women. It was commented that the staff Women’s Network had held discussions on these issues and how to make more traditionally male-dominated services welcoming to women.
- Around 24% of staff were Islington residents, and this had increased year on year. The Committee suggested that targets could be set for increasing this further.
- It was suggested that, due to an increase in remote working, council job vacancies were increasingly appealing to those living outside of London, and it was queried if this had an impact on the demographic profile of the council’s workforce. It was suggested that these issues could be taken forward through an Informal Working Group.
- The Committee requested further data on the reasons for staff leaving their post. Officers noted that staff leaving the organisation were invited to give an exit interview. Members requested details of the main reasons given for leaving the council’s employment.
- Members requested further information on the destinations and career progression of those on the council’s apprenticeship schemes, including those who had since left the council. The Committee also requested data on the destinations and career

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progression of those the council had supported into apprenticeships offered by third parties.

- Members noted that 'mental health' was the most common reason for sickness absence and requested further information on the wellbeing offer available to staff. It was queried if the council held data on if absence due to mental health was work-related or due to external factors.

RESOLVED:

- (i) That the Annual Workforce report be noted;
- (ii) That progress against the existing 'Islington as an Employer' workstream of the Challenging Inequality Programme, and plans to deliver outstanding commitments, be noted.

ACTIONS:

As detailed above, the Committee requested:

- Further information on the use of the apprenticeship levy;
- A further discussion on the ethnicity pay gap, with reference to the work of the member task and finish group;
- Further data on the reasons for staff leaving their post;
- Further information on the destinations and career progression of those on internal and external apprenticeship programmes;
- Further information on the staff wellbeing offer, and data on if absence related to mental health was work-related or due to other external factors.

47 **WORKPLAN 2022/23 (Item C5)**

It was advised that some items on the workplan may be rescheduled and an update would be circulated to members shortly.

The meeting ended at 10.15 pm

CHAIR