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London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 2 July 2020

Non-confidential minutes of the Virtual meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held on 2 July 2020 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Debono (Chair), Gallagher (Vice-Chair), Bell-Bradford, Chapman, Chowdhury, Cutler, Gantly, Heather, Hyde, Jeapes, Khurana, Nathan, Poyser, Russell, O'Sullivan, and Wayne

Also Present: **Councillors:** Gill

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

- 186 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**
Councillor Bell-Bradford for lateness and Councillor Chapman, leaving the meeting early
- 187 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**
None
- 188 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**
None
- 189 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A4)**
None
- 190 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A5)**
RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 January 2020 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 191 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions
- 192 **COVID 19 UPDATE (Item C1)**
The Chief Executive, Linzi Roberts-Egan was present for discussion of this item and outlined the report

During discussion the following main points were made –
- It was felt that the efforts of staff, Members and residents had contributed to a low rate of infection of COVID 19 in the borough
 - The sickness of staff had peaked at 25%, and that this enabled the Council to maintain front line services. Staff sickness had returned to near normal levels

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- There had been a significant increase in residents claiming Universal Credit, and that this is impacting on residents
- A Member enquired whether any additional measures had been put in place to address concerns around COVID 19, and BAME staff returning to work, including partner organisations. It was stated that 60/70% of staff were currently working from home, and where staff can work from home they can continue to do so at present. Front line staff have individual risk assessments before returning to work, and in one instance all staff in one area were BAME, and had underlying health conditions, however staff were redeployed to cover in this instance
- It was noted that a review date for staff returning to work had been set for 31 August, however work is still being undertaken to buildings/office accommodation to ensure staff are safe when returning to work. In addition, adaptations have been made to customer contact points with the addition of Perspex screens, and these adaptations are continuing to be developed
- It was stated that each department has a Trade Union based meeting, and issues are discussed on a 'case by case' basis. The recent staff survey showed that the majority of staff, around 80%, felt that the Council were listening, and were supporting them during COVID 19
- In response to a question, it was stated that the Council were communicating with Partner organisations, and also with businesses in the borough. It was pleasing to note that the 'R' number in Islington was the lowest rate in London, at present
- The Council needed to be prepared for a second wave of COVID 19. It was stated that modelling is taking place with NCL, and some of the Pillar 2 data that is essential to monitor community transmission is starting to be supplied, and it was stated that this information could be supplied to Members
- A Member referred to the fact that some parks in the borough had not reopened, and enquired the reasons for this. It was stated that work is taking place, in order to reopen play facilities and parks, however many had closed, due to the need to ensure play facilities were not used. A plan to reopen should be available in the next few days, and this could be circulated to Members
- In response to a question, it was stated that work is taking place with other London Boroughs, who have had higher transmission rates of COVID 19, to learn from best practice and offer information. Members congratulated officers on the efforts that had been made to keep infection levels low in Islington, given that Islington was in a high density population area
- In response to a question from a member of the Public, it was stated that information would be provided to him following the meeting, as to whether the Council would be provided with full disaggregated test result data for Islington, broken down to case contact details by the Government. This would enable any future outbreaks to be effectively traced and managed
- Members were informed that the Leader was of the view that data sharing should take place with Members and residents

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the member of the Public be provided with the information requested above, in relation to disaggregated test data
- (b) That the Pillar 2 information, relating to community transmission/disaggregated data, referred to above be provided to Members, once this is available
- (c) That the information on reopening of parks and play facilities be provided to Members once this is available

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David Hodgkinson, Corporate Director of Resources was present for discussion of this item, and outlined the report.

During discussion the following main points were made –

- The Chief Executive stated that whilst there were a range of reasons for spend on agency/interims/consultants, there is a clear intention to reduce agency spend and HR are looking at specific measures to reduce this. However there will always be a need for recruitment of these staff in certain circumstances
- A Member stated that the report did not contain the information in the form previously requested by the Committee, and there is a need to reduce agency spend. He added that the data presented needed to be in a clearer format. In addition, the target of 10% set for agency staff is one the Committee had made clear needed to be reduced to as low a figure as possible, and there was still significant spend in Environment
- The Director of Corporate Resources stated the aim was to provide information, as transparently and clearly to Members, and that future reports could be structured to provide as much clarity to Members as possible. He added that whilst it was felt the target figure could be reduced, there did need to be flexibility to achieve value for money
- A Member concurred that the report did not contain the information required for the Committee to effectively manage spend. He stated that he would wish to see, in future reports, each Directorate listing individual agency/interim/consultants employed, the timeframe for these posts, any overruns and the actions taken to reduce spend. This should be presented to Committee on a quarterly basis, especially in relation to the higher spending Directorates, Housing and Environment and the Chief Executive and Leader should keep an overview of this spend
- The Chief Executive responded that the intention is to provide as much information as the Committee requires, and that there had been significant improvements in some areas such as Housing, where restructures and sickness reductions has seen agency spend reduce
- A Member referred to two main issues, the lower paid agency staff, which were necessary for services to be maintained and delivered and that of higher paid consultants and interims, who were using umbrella companies/public service companies. The Chief Executive stated that information had been provided to the Committee prior to the meeting but she would recirculate this to Members
- The Director of Corporate Resources stated that measures were being taken to convert temporary staff into permanent staff, however sometimes specialist staff are needed in certain circumstances
- Members were informed that whilst there was a overspend of £3.3 million in Environment Directorate. However, a significant proportion of this had actually been offset by developer contributions, and restructuring of the Parking Directorate was now coming to a finish, and would reduce agency costs. Sickness levels had also been reduced from 26 days per FTE to 14 days, with the intention to reduce to 10 days
- Members were informed however, that if there is a second wave of COVID 19 this may increase agency spend in Environment
- A Member referred to the fact that whilst recognising there may be seasonal impacts on agency staff, it may be worth considering 'ringfencing' a pre-approved budget that will limit spend
- The view was also expressed that the next report to the Committee, to be considered in December, should contain details of spend at present compared to the

December figure. In addition, information should be provided if this is available on the number of BAME staff appointed as interims

- The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for the information provided prior to the meeting in respect of additional questions in relation to the report

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the next report to the Committee should be structured in a format that is more easily understandable to Members
- (b) That future reports contain information relating to each Directorate and the reasons for employment of agency staff/interims/consultants the timeframes for employment etc. as referred to above
- (c) That details of current spend, as compared to December spend by Directorate, be submitted to the Committee in the December report
- (d) That details of the numbers of BAME staff employed as interims be provided to Members of the Committee
- (e) That consideration be given to a 'ringfenced' budget for agency/interims/consultants so that Members can effectively monitor such spend

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REVENUE OUTTURN 2019/20 (Item C3)

David Hodgkinson, Director of Corporate Resources was present and was accompanied by Steve Key, Service Director Finance

During consideration of the report the following main points were made –

- It was noted that the General Fund had a underspend of £8.405m in the previous financial year, there had been a underspend on the capital programme, and the HRA was at 'break even'. The General Fund underspend was welcome, due to the additional funding pressures arising from COVID 19
- The Council were projecting a £36m overspend in the budget, as a result of COVID 19, and a shortfall of £12m in the HRA. However, some additional funding had just been announced by the Government in relation to loss of fees and income, and loss of business rates, however the precise details were still to be finalised. The Council were also looking at an exercise to reduce spending on 'in year budgets', and it was hoped that a more precise position could be announced in the next few weeks
- In response to a question, it was stated that at present it is difficult to forecast the impact of the loss of business rates and Council Tax, however work is taking place, and the best estimate at present is that this could result in lost income of around £10m. In addition, there were implications for loss of income in respect of parking etc. and this is an area where more clarification is needed on Government funding reimbursement
- In response to a question, it was stated that it was also difficult to assess the impact on the HRA of non-payment of rent, however the Council had taken a decision to act sympathetically in certain circumstances, especially in relation to those tenants on Universal Credit given the circumstances of COVID 19

RESOLVED:

That the report and the Council financial position be noted

195 LEADER - EXECUTIVE PRIORITIES 2020/21 (Item C4)

The Chair stated that due to the length of the agenda, a written report had been submitted and that if there were any questions arising from such report these could be raised with the Leader following the meeting

196 PRESENTATION - EXECUTIVE MEMBER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (Item C5)

The Chair stated that due to the length of the agenda, a written report had been submitted to the Committee, and that if Members had any questions these should be directed to the Executive Member Community Development following the meeting

**197 MONITORING REPORT (Item)
RESOLVED:**

That, subject to the consideration of the addition of a Scrutiny Review into Performance Management at the September meeting, the monitoring and work programme be noted

The meeting ended at 9.05 p.m.

CHAIR

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