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London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 30 July 2020

Non-confidential minutes of virtual the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held on 30 July 2020 at 7.30 pm.

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

Also Present: **Councillor:** Gill

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

- 198 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**
Councillor Chapman and Councillor Wayne for lateness
- 199 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**
None
- 200 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**
None
- 201 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**
RESOLVED:
That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 July be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 202 **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (Item)**
A Member enquired whether a report could be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee in relation to updating the Committee on the position with regard to the increased number of Universal Credit claimants in the borough. She stated that there were now 28000 claimants whereas before COVID the figure was nearer 14000. In addition, there was a disparity between the number of claimants at the Barnsbury Job Centre, which was around 16000, and that at the Finsbury Park Job Centre, which was much lower
- RESOLVED:
- (a) That a report be submitted to the Committee with regard to the numbers of Universal Credit claimants in the borough, and with regard to the discrepancy between Job Centre claimants referred to above
 - (b) That an update on the Universal Credit Board be submitted with the report referred to above
- 203 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**

204 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)

The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions

205 PPS SUB-COMMITTEE - DRAFT TERM OF REFERENCE ETC. (Item A7)

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the establishment of the PPS (review of oversight of HR functions) sub-committee for the period necessary to undertake the review be approved
- (b) That the terms of reference be amended to open the membership to other Members of PPS Committee
- (c) That the quorum, as outlined in the report be agreed
- (d) That the following Members be appointed until the completion of the sub-committee's work, subject to changes in the Committee membership at Annual Council on 24 September 2020 when successors may be appointed
Chairs of Scrutiny Committees – Councillors Debono, Gantly, O'Sullivan, Cutler and Poyser
Chair of Audit Committee – Councillor Wayne
Chair of Personnel Sub-Committee – Councillor Khurana
Councillors Heather, Gallagher and Hyde

206 COVID 19 UPDATE (Item C1)

Linzi Roberts-Egan, Chief Executive was present and outlined the report

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

- Noted that the risk assessment of all Council buildings had now taken place
- Noted that focus groups are being arranged with LGBTQIA employees and disabled staff to see if there is any targeted support that can be put in place following the staff survey results
- Noted that it was felt that most staff had been supported during the COVID period to date, and risk assessments had been carried out for staff at work or returning to work
- In terms of productivity of staff during the COVID crisis, discussions were take place at CMB on this, but generally it is felt that the Council has coped well with the crisis
- In response to a question it was stated that the numbers of staff self-isolating had been low, and at the lowest point of the pandemic, there were still 79% of staff available for work, and this compared well to other London Boroughs. Essential services were all maintained
- The supply of PPE was initially a challenge, however PPE was able to be allocated to services and care homes, following Public Health advice. The Council had now purchased 10000 reusable masks, which are available in the event of a second wave of the virus, together with 30000 pairs of gloves
- In response to a question as to the reasons it was felt that Islington had had a lower rate of infection/deaths than other London Boroughs, it was stated that factors could include the relatively small number of care homes in the borough, and the small number of multi-occupancy households in the borough. Particular credit should also be paid to the care staff, and the excellent partnership work with local health providers. The Chief Executive stated that the Director of Public Health was preparing a report to share with other Local Authorities on this issue
- In response to a question on the effect of COVID on small businesses, particularly in the south of the borough, who depend on footfall of office workers, many of whom had not returned to work, it was stated that many of these businesses had been

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 30 July 2020

affected badly, and some had still not reopened. Whilst discretionary grants were available to businesses, these had not been claimed in a number of cases, despite publicity in this regard. However, the situation was worse in many other North Central London boroughs

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted, and that the Chief Executive would report to the October meeting on the latest position with regard to employment and the impact on the local economy of COVID 19
- (b) That the September report update the position relating to staffing productivity, and a report be submitted in relation to Universal Credit

The Chair thanked the Linzi Roberts-Egan for attending

207 **FINANCIAL MONITORING/BUDGET (Item C2)**

David Hodgkinson, Director of Corporate Resources, was present, and outlined the report. Councillor Satnam Gill, Executive Member Finance and Performance was also present

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

- Noted that the Council is currently estimating a budget shortfall in 2020/21 of around £62m, comprising £17m additional costs, and £45m loss of income. Whilst there had been some additional Government funding this fell short of the Government's promise to 'do whatever it takes' to protect services for residents. At present the situation is still unclear, although further funding has been promised, which would reduce the deficit to £11.5 m, however further information is required from the Government. Any residual shortfall not funded by Government would significantly weaken the Council's balance sheet, and reserves, which would then need to be replenished in future financial years
- Noted that if it COVID had not happened, General Fund budget would have been on course to deliver an in-year General Fund underspend
- The forecast for the ring-fenced HRA is a deficit of £5.490m, which relates to COVID pressures
- Departments have been requested to look at in year budgets to assess potential savings
- The COVID crisis is also expected to lead to significant slippage of the 2020/21 capital programme into future financial years
- The view was expressed that pressure should be put on the Government to fund the shortfall of £11.5m, as COVID was not of the Council's making, and that the Council were responding to Government guidelines during the pandemic
- In response to a question, it was stated that it is hoped that some income collection will now take place as Leisure Centres start to reopen, and there is more parking income collected. Council Tax collection is also at present better than originally forecast at the start of the pandemic. However, a second wave of the virus is possible, and the Council must adopt a prudent position, and plan for such eventualities

The Chair thanked Councillor Gill and David Hodgkinson for attending

208 **SCRUTINY TOPIC 2020/21 - DISCUSSION OF TOPIC/REVIEW COMMITTEES TOPICS - VERBAL (Item C3)**

Councillor Heather outlined his proposal for a future Scrutiny topic for 2020/21

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 30 July 2020

During discussion the following main points were made –

- A Member expressed the view that there is a need to look at how effective the current performance of the Council is before a review is undertaken. She added that she was unsure whether this should be a priority focus area for PPS at this time, given the situation of COVID, and the pressures on staff. It was stated that private sector performance is often no better than Local Government, and whilst there is always scope to improve, she was unsure this topic should be undertaken at the present time
- The view was expressed that given that the new membership of the Committee would be appointed at Council in September, consideration of this topic should be deferred, and a decision taken by the new Committee on scrutiny topics at the October meeting

RESOLVED:

That consideration of the scrutiny topic be deferred until the October meeting of the Committee, when the new membership of PPS has been appointed

The Chair thanked Councillor Heather for his presentation of the report

209 **MONITORING REPORT/WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21 (Item)**

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted subject to the following amendments -

17 September 2020 – the addition of an item on Universal Credit and Universal Credit Board feedback, and Staffing productivity and the deletion of the item on Scrutiny Review topic

22 October 2020 – the addition of an item Scrutiny Review 2020/21 topic discussion/approval and inclusion of a report on impact on local economy of COVID 19

- (b) That once the new membership of the Committee is appointed by Council in September, a meeting of the new membership of the Committee take place with a view to discussing, and determining, a list of topics for scrutiny review in 2020/21

The meeting ended at 8.55 p.m.

CHAIR