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London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 29 July 2021

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at on 29 July 2021 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Debono (Chair), Bell-Bradford, Clarke, Gantly,
Heather, Ibrahim, Jeapes, Khondoker, O'Sullivan,
Russell, Ismail and Wayne
Also **Councillor:** Comer Schwartz
Present:

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

- 300 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**
Councillors Chapman, Gallagher, Chowdhury, Nathan and Gill and David Hodgkinson –
Director of Corporate Resources
Apologies for lateness from Councillors Ismail and Khondoker
- 301 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**
None
- 302 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**
None
- 303 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**
RESOLVED:
That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 10 June 2021 be confirmed and
the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 304 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**
The Chair expressed the view that the COVID 19 report that appears on the agenda at
alternate meetings should now not be considered by the Committee given the amount of
business to be transacted at future meetings of the Committee
Members concurred with this view, however if the situation with the pandemic worsened the
Committee should review the position
- 305 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions and that due to COVID regulations
and restrictions on numbers present in person, any questions from members of the public
should be notified to the Clerk following the meeting as the meeting was being webcast
- 306 **SCRUTINY TOPIC - SID APPROVAL (Item D1)**
A copy of the draft SID had been circulated and following discussion it was –

RESOLVED:

That the draft SID for the Scrutiny topic be approved, subject to the addition of residents including tenants and leaseholders, TRA's, and businesses in the list of witnesses on the Employment part of the Scrutiny Initiation Document, and the inclusion of an expert witness for the Recovery plan

307 **REVENUE OUTFURN 2020/21 (Item D2)**

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance, was present and outlined the report

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

- Noted balanced financial position in the General Fund
- COVID will have a significant, ongoing impact on the Council's budget for the foreseeable future. There is a need to significantly increase the resilience in the Council's balance sheet and reserves to reflect hardening budget risks over the medium term
- There was an overall in year deficit of £13.5m on the HRA compared to budget assumptions, due to a lower than planned contribution to HRA reserves
- Capital expenditure has been delivered against the revised budget
- A Member enquired whether in view of COVID there was any anticipation of significant shortfalls in the budget, and whether the Council reserves were adequate to cope with any shortfalls. It was stated that it was felt that the Council finances were on a sustainable level going forward, however the reserves were lower than wished, and it was anticipated that the Council were well placed to cope with any unexpected issues. Some other Council's had made speculative investments and this had contributed to shortfalls, however Islington had not done this
- Noted that there was a COVID contingency and the Council had applied for tranche 5 funding from the Government
- In response to a question on Council Tax arrears it was stated that this had increased by about £1m, however this did not mean the monies were lost but there could be a delay in payment due to COVID
- A Member enquired about the renovation to Highbury Fields pool following the fire and the covering of the cost by insurance, and it was stated that this information would be provided to Members following the meeting
- Reference was also made to the variance on the Bunhill 2 Energy Centre and the reasons for this were noted

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and that Members be informed following the meeting with information relating to Highbury Fields Pool referred to above

The Chair thanked Paul Clarke for attending

308 **LEADER EXECUTIVE PRIORITIES 2021/22 - VERBAL (Item D3)**

Councillor Kaya Comer Schwartz, Leader of the Council was present, and made a verbal presentation to the Committee

During the presentation the following main points were made –

- Reference was made to the care leavers going into independence initiative, which provided free wi-fi for care leavers, and that this was an important initiative for the Council
- Noted the tree planting initiative for greening the borough

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- Noted measures taken by the Council to protect residents during the pandemic, particularly the BAME community, and measures to vaccinate the community, and that Council services had continued to be provided to residents during the pandemic
- Priorities for the Council continued to be affordable housing, decent jobs, being a London Living wage borough, a greener borough and extended licensing schemes for private landlords. Noted people friendly streets initiative and that the Council had been awarded the Healthiest borough scorecard
- Race equality work was taking place to lift young, black people and to lift residents out of poverty, and to assist residents in dealing with the disruptive effects of health due to COVID
- Noted the Council's net zero carbon 2030 programme, and the reduction of toxic air in the borough. The Council needed resources to implement the priorities outlined but the continuing financial restraints imposed by Government, which had resulted in reductions in services, severely impinged on this
- The Chair enquired when the additional tree planting would take place in Highbury West ward, and the Leader stated that she would inform the Chair thereon following the meeting

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted, and the Leader inform the Chair of the tree planting programme in Highbury West ward

The Chair thanked Councillor Kaya Comer Schwartz for attending

309 **ANNUAL WORKFORCE REPORT (Item D4)**

Julie Foy, Director of Human Resources was present, and outlined the report during which the following main points were made –

- Pandemic has impacted the way that the Council staff works with residents, and with each other, and there was a need to respond to the challenges of COVID
- Noted will continue to use apprenticeships and schemes like Kickstart to provide job opportunities for local people, and to use agency staff to supplement staff and address issues of capacity
- Noted the workforce strategy and challenging inequality programme and the Islington as an employer key actions, which are all either complete or will be delivered by the Autumn
- Data summary – noted information contained in Appendix 1 and that the headcount of employees was 4729. Islington has a similar sized workforce to boroughs such as Southwark, Camden, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets who have similarly retained services in house
- Race – Percentage of BAME employees is 40.9%, compared to 50.77% who are white, with 9.03% not declaring data. Islington population data shows % of Islington residents who were from a BAME background was 32%. Islington Council has a mean ethnicity pay gap of 10.3%. There is tailored support for BAME staff, and the apprenticeship scheme has attracted a range of candidates from diverse ethnic backgrounds
- Sex – women are slightly more represented amongst workforce at 52.76%, and this is a slight variation from the resident population which has 49.9% women. Women are more represented than men at all salary bandings, with the exception of the £20-

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30k band which includes predominantly male groups of public realm staff operatives and caretakers

- Disability – 8.9% of staff shared that they had a disability, and the lowest levels of known disability are at the lower pay grades. The staff survey indicates that 18.5% have a disability, in line with the resident population
- Age – average age of LBI employee is 46.7, which is marginally higher than the London average. 54.7% of long term sickness falls within the 50-64 age group
- Sexual orientation – 3.7% have recorded that they are LGTB, 51.6% heterosexual and the remainder have indicated no sexual orientation
- Religion or belief – data on religion shows 32.4% of workforce are Christian, 6.53% Muslim, 7.34% another religion, 11.57% of staff with no religion, and 39.37% of staff who have not stated
- Pregnancy/Maternity – During 2020/21 60 women commenced maternity leave
- In response to a question as to whether it would be possible to expand on the report in future in terms of the corporate learning management system, it was stated that in terms of the Council's public equality duties this would be helpful and that as data was improved this could be taken on board
- Reference was made to the number of casual workers employed, and that this information could be provided in the next report to the Committee. Noted that IT are exploring career programmes, utilising the apprenticeship levy, in order that more in-house staff were employed, especially in the area of technical project management
- In response to a question it was stated that there had been no changes to the IT services/contract provided
- Noted that more female staff had left the Council than men, and it was stated that the reasons for this were being looked at
- Reference was made to long term sickness levels, and it was stated that Islington's levels were consistent with national levels
- Discussion took place as to the breakdown of ethnic communities within the borough, and staff, and comparison with other boroughs, and it would be useful if this information was provided in future reports
- In relation to a question as to the number of applications from BAME staff and the resultant success rate, it was stated that that these applications were mainly for lower paid jobs, however this was an area that was being looked at
- Reference was also made to apprenticeships and whether these led to successful full time jobs. It was stated that this information could be looked at and provided in future reports. It was stated that the employment of apprentices should be discussed with organisations that the Council had contracts with especially Partners

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted and Appendix 1 be noted, and emerging areas of Focus
- (b) That the progress against the existing Islington as a Fairer Employer workstream of the Challenging Inequality Programme be noted, and the plans to deliver outstanding commitments
- (c) That the officers are currently carrying out a refresh of the Challenging Inequality Programme, and that this dataset, and further detailed analysis will inform new activities as part of that workstream

The Chair thanked Julie Foy for attending

310

COUNCIL SICKNESS (Item D5)

Julie Foy, Director of Human Resources was present and outlined in the report

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

- The corporate target for sickness absence is 7.5 days per employee and the 12 month period reported has been impacted by COVID which has increased the overall absence sickness figures. Despite this the average number of days taken as sickness has fallen to 7.4 days. If the COVID figure is taken out this reduces to 5.8 days
- If absence related COVID is removed this decreases to 5.4 days
- E&R is the Directorate with the most sickness with 35.76% of the total, followed by People, Housing and Resources
- Long term sickness is defined as absence over 20 working days and forms 79.41% of all working days lost. 67.3% fall within the 50+ days category
- Main causes of absence were stress and depression, COVID 19 infection, other musculoskeletal problems, other and back and neck problems
- Challenges – improved sickness management procedure is driving numbers downwards, coaching and support available to line managers, improvements being made to the HR system, and a full time HR Business Partner employed to assist E&R in order to address high levels of sickness
- Mental Health and COVID initiatives – broad range of new and contributing support is available to managers and staff, and wellbeing surveys were carried out. An online questionnaire and telephone consultation introduced to support any members of staff returning to the workplace. Council's health and wellbeing plan is being refreshed to take account of COVID
- There is also an occupational health contract, and employee assistance programme, Able Futures initiative, in place
- There are higher levels of sickness amongst older age groups in the workforce, and there is an ageing workforce
- A Member expressed the view that it was likely in future there would be more hybrid working, and that this would reduce carbon emissions by savings on energy and travel
- It was noted that campaigns were taking place to reduce the stigma of reporting mental health and future management training would include modules on mental health awareness
- Discussion took place as to the awarding of additional benefits to staff who had coped excellently during the pandemic and it was stated that this was being looked at
- Noted that the employee assistance programme had not been utilised as much as in the previous year, and it was stated that this was felt to be because other avenues such as Able Futures and mental health awareness programmes put in place had been accessed. Staff had been provided with equipment to work from home
- A Member enquired whether there was any data gathered on mental illness and stress in the call centre, given some of the calls were distressing or from irate residents. It was stated that whilst data was not collected on this, there was data collected in relation to transactions and any reports on specific incidents reported were collected, but this was not matched against sickness data. It was stated that it would be beneficial to collect this data if this was possible

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

The Chair thanked Julie Foy for her attendance

311 QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT (Item D6)

Ayesha Hakim Rahman, Head of Strategy and Change was present and outlined the report

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

- Noted that in line with other London Boroughs lower Council and Business rates collection had been experienced during the COVID period
- During COVID Customer Care centre has operated as an emergency only service. There has been no significant change to call numbers, and they have remained on target, however online transactions have risen by over 30000. Performance remains acceptable on percentage of calls into the call centre handled appropriately
- Sickness absence has reduced marginally over each quarter, and is on track
- Agency workers comprise 12.8% of the workforce by headcount, placing Islington in the first quartile for London Boroughs
- BAME staff in 5% of top earners is 21.9%, which is above the London Council average
- Target of 100% of new voter registrations achieved in quarter
- A Member enquired as to the backlog of Council Tax and business rates, and it was stated that the Council were trying to ensure that ways to pay were maximised
- Reference was made to the call centre, and that it would be useful to know waiting times for calls and it was stated that this could be provided in the next update to the Committee, in addition to information on abandoned calls

RESOLVED:

That future reports include details of abandoned calls and waiting times for the customer call centre

The Chair thanked Ayesha Hakim Rahman for attending

312 REVIEW COMMITTEES - SCRUTINY TOPICS (Item)

It was reported that the following topics would be considered by the Review Committees in the forthcoming municipal year –

Housing – Completion of reviews on Partners PFI 2, Triage system, Communal heating and new scrutiny topics on Cladding in private dwellings and Digital exclusion on estates
Children’s Services – SEND transition
Health and Adult Social Care – Health Inequalities post COVID 19
Environment and Regeneration – Net Zero Carbon 2030 themes and Informal working group on NLWA

RESOLVED:

That the above scrutiny topics be noted and approved

313 MONITORING REPORT (Item)

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

The meeting ended at 10.00 p.m.

CHAIR

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