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London Borough of Islington

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 2 December 2021

Non-confidential minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee held at on 2 December 2021 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** Debono (Chair), Chapman, Chowdhury, Clarke, Gantly, Heather, Ibrahim, Jeapes, O'Sullivan, Russell and Ismail

Councillor Theresa Debono in the Chair

- 12 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item A1)**
Councillors Wayne, Khondoker, Bell-Bradford. Gallagher, Nathan, Gill and Councillors Chowdhury and Heather for lateness
- 13 **DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item A2)**
Councillor Poyser stated that he was substituting for Councillor Khondoker
- 14 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Item A3)**
None
- 15 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Item A4)**
RESOLVED:
That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 November 2021 be confirmed and the Chair be authorised to sign them
- 16 **CHAIR'S REPORT (Item A5)**
The Chair stated that the first meeting of the Performance Management Working Group would take place on 7 December by MS Teams, and that the findings would be reported back to the Committee

RESOLVED:
That it be noted that Councillors Debono, Gallagher, Ismail, Khondoker and Heather had indicated that they wished to serve on the informal Working Group
- 17 **PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item A6)**
The Chair outlined the procedure for Public questions and that any Public questions could be notified to the Clerk following the meeting
- 18 **SCRUTINY REVIEW - EMPLOYMENT, BUSINESS, FINANCIAL POSITION - WITNESS EVIDENCE - VERBAL (Item C1)**
Hak Hussein, Vice Chair Archway Town Centre Forum was present and made a verbal presentation to the Committee

During the presentation the following main points were made –

- COVID had had a profound impact during the series of Government lockdowns. Initially there had been poor communication and the fact that businesses had to prove they were ratepayers to access grants, and that businesses had to contact the Council to obtain proof. It had proved easier in later grant applications to access funding, however the Council officers had been excellent in supporting businesses
- There was an initial problem in how to access grants, and the information that was provided on how to apply for loans, and it took time for businesses in order to access the loans
- Noted that there had been issues of complexity in completing forms initially and that this had mainly been as a result of the regulations set down by Government for applying for loans
- Noted that there had been different rules for the 11 lockdowns
- Noted that there was a need for the Council to learn lessons from how support was handled to businesses during the pandemic
- It was stated that the pandemic had brought businesses and the community closer together and there is now a Whats App group, which Council officers, businesses and Councillors had access to

The Chair thanked Hak Hussein for attending

19

SICKNESS ABSENCE MANAGEMENT REPORT (Item C2)

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

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

- Noted the corporate target for sickness absence for this period is 7.5 days per employee. The six month report has been affected by COVID, but despite this the average number of days taken as sickness absence for this 6 month period per employee is 3.53 days, 7.06 annualised. If COVID is taken out this reduces to 3.16 days, 6.32 annualised. Although the trend is down long term sickness remains an area of concern, along with an ageing workforce, in slowing the rate of improvement
- Noted differences in departmental sickness levels
- In response to a question it was stated that there were gender variances for mental health absence e.g. a higher level of anxiety amongst the female workforce and a higher prevalence for depression amongst the male workforce. More work was being undertaken on long term absence by gender. Sickness is often connected with the work that staff are undertaking and more back, neck and musco-skeletal injuries are prevalent amongst those who work in more manual jobs on the frontline where there is a higher number of older and male workers
- In response to a question on patterns, it was stated that more work would be done by the Employee Relations team to look at patterns e.g. staff taking Fridays and Mondays off, or whether there was an even spread. In addition it would be more helpful if future reports included case studies of how long term sickness is dealt with
- Noted that Occupational Health provided expertise and professional advice in assisting the Council in dealing with sickness
- A Member expressed the view that an Appendix should be provided to the report in future in order to 'drill down' into some of the data, and that this should include grades of staff and ethnic breakdown of sickness levels

Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee - 2 December 2021

- The view was expressed that staff should be congratulated at the low levels of sickness during the pandemic, given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, and the adjustments that staff had had to make
- In response to a question as to the effects of longer term COVID on staff it was stated that discussions were taking place with the Director of Public Health in relation to this as more clinical understanding emerges, as symptoms vary, however present cases were limited. One common symptom is fatigue, but it does not always present in absence. There is an issue of staff productivity due to the effects of long COVID, rather than long term sickness necessarily at this stage
- The view was expressed that there had been a shift to hybrid working during the pandemic and that going forward this method of working should be adopted, where appropriate, as this had proved effective
- In addition whilst some absence figures were very good, emphasis should be placed on long term sickness in a sympathetic manner given that this inflates the sickness figures considerably
- Reference was made to the employee assistance programme and that this should be advertised to staff more widely as staff may not be aware of this or reluctant to access it

RESOLVED:

That future reports contain details as to the breakdown of sickness by grade and ethnicity and that the next report include case studies of how long term sickness cases were being dealt with

The Chair thanked Julie Foy for attending

20

PERFORMANCE UPDATE - QUARTER 2 RESOURCES (Item C3)

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance outlined the report during which the following main points were made –

- Noted the summary of the Resources Directorate performance and impacts of COVID
- Noted the approach to KPI selection
- Noted that whilst some KPI's were not on target these had been adversely affected by COVID as targets had been set prior to the pandemic
- In response to a question it was stated that in terms of collection rates the Council dealt with any non-payment in a sympathetic manner, especially for residents who were suffering hardship. Advice and assistance was offered where necessary, including the creation of payment plans
- Noted that Council Tax arrears have increased during the pandemic year, which is represented by the reduced collection rates. A range of support is available to those residents suffering hardship, including the Breathing Space legislation. This has specific provision in terms of additional support to those suffering from mental health issues
- RESOLVED:
That the report be noted

The Chair thanked Paul Clarke for attending

21 **FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT (Item C4)**

Paul Clarke, Director of Finance was present and outlined the report and was accompanied by Councillor Gill, Executive Member Finance, Performance and Resources

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

- Noted the Council is currently estimation general fund pressures of + £23.04m which is a decrease of - £1.906m since month 5 primarily due to favourable movements in Adult Social Services, Children’s Services and E&R. After the allocation of available COVID funding and an assumed allocation from contingency, this reduces to a net overspend of + £0.511m on the General Fund
- The HRA is currently forecasting an in year deficit of +£8.841m a £23.893m increase since the previous reported position. The deficit is predominantly in respect of capital financing costs. These have increased due to capital receipts in respect of properties ‘built of sale’ slipping into the next financial year. A significant proportion of the HRA budget is funding towards the Housing capital programme
- At month 6 capital expenditure of £41.536m had been incurred against a 2021/22 full year forecast of £124.608m and against the revised 2021/222 capital budget of £203.332m
- In response to a question in relation to Appendix 1 of the report in relation to parking variances, it was stated that a revised version of the Appendix could be circulated to Members following the meeting
- In response to a question as to communal heating charge increases as a result of rising energy costs, it was stated that consideration would be given to this at the appropriate point
- In response to a question as to whether capital monies could be carried forward into the following year it was stated that this was the case and the HRA calculations were calculated on a long term basis

RESOLVED:

That Appendix 1 of the report be recirculated to Members following the Committee as referred to above

The Chair thanked Paul Clarke for attending

22 **MONITORING REPORT (Item)**

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

The meeting ended at 9.00 p.m.

CHAIR