

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 17 June 2019

PRESENT: Councillor

Councillor(s): S Ronchetti, J Wallace, R Beadle, D Bradford,
L Caffrey, D Duggan, S Green, M Hall, B Oliphant,
J Simpson and N Weatherley

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): J Eagle, J Kielty, C Ord and K Wood

CR1 CONSTITUTION

The Committee received notice of the Constitution of the Committee for the 2019/20 Municipal Year.

RESOLVED - That the information be noted.

CR2 MINUTES

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 April 2019 be approved as a correct record.

CR3 ROLE AND REMIT

The Committee received a report setting out the Role and Remit and the Terms of Reference of the Committee as previously agreed by Cabinet and Council.

RESOLVED - That the information contained within the report be noted.

CR4 ANNUAL REPORT - FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT PROCEDURE 2019

The Committee were provided with a report which detailed the number of requests for information received by the Council under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 between 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018.

The procedure has three steps, the first of which is 'providing the information' requested within the statutory timescale of 20 working days. There is an electronic tracking system which provides a full audit trail of how the request has been handled and provides template response letters which fulfil the statutory requirements of the Act.

The second stage requires the Council to have an internal review process so that, if a requester is dissatisfied, they have an avenue of complaint, which is separate from the corporate complaints process. The review stage involves the requester writing to the Strategic Director, Corporate Services and Governance within 40 days of

receiving a response, to request an independent review of the matter. The third stage gives the requester a right of appeal to the Information Commissioner if he/she is still dissatisfied, following the internal review.

Of the requests received 90.54% were dealt with within 20-day timescale. This represents an increase of 0.06% in performance on the 2017 figure of 90.48%, this is still high among other councils, Sunderland 98%, Newcastle 84.10% and Redcar and Cleveland, 85.82%.

Over the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018 the number of requests received was 1332, which represents a 17.63% decrease on requests received in the previous year and a 549.76% increase since the implementation of the Act in 2005.

Five requests have been subject to an internal review, in all cases the original decision maker's decision was upheld. Five requesters have exercised the right of appeal to the information commissioner. The Information Commissioner upheld the Council's decision to treat one applicant as vexatious. The applicant has now appealed to the First Tier Tribunal. The other four relate to treating the requester as vexatious, the Council is awaiting a decision from the Information Commissioner.

Most requests are now submitted by email, 1328 by email and 4 by letter. Requests for information vary considerably and are difficult to categorise, there have been a lot about preparedness for Brexit, lots from campaigners, some asking for policies and information about how decisions are being made.

In 2018 requests appear to have been made from the press, however, it is not always possible to identify the source of a request as the requester need only give a name and a return address.

Because of reducing resources and in an effort to improve the timeliness of responses and minimise the impact of any increase in requests the following measures have been taken

- Services are now proactively publishing more information online, as information published online is exempt from disclosure under the Act as it is 'information easily accessible by other means', all staff have to do is send the requester a link to where they can obtain the information. An example of where this has diminished the number of FOI requests is in finance where they now publish data about outstanding business rates on a monthly basis, we also publish information about public health funerals.
- Published data as required by the 'Transparency Agenda'.
- More information champions have been trained, this took place in November 2018 to replace staff who have left, another session was arranged for April 2019.

RESOLVED - That the information contained within the report be noted.

CR5 MAKING GATESHEAD A PLACE WHERE EVERYONE THRIVES - YEAR END ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE AND DELIVERY 2018/19

The Committee were provided with a report which provides the year end assessment of performance and delivery for the period 1 October 2018 to 31 March 2019 in relation to the Council's Thrive agenda.

The information contained with the report provides information to how well the Council is achieving against the strategic approach, Making Gateshead a Place where everyone Thrives. The report has been structured to show how the five pledges are at the front and centre of everything the Council does.

The following areas of performance were highlighted as areas of achievement, challenge and actions:

- Performance relating to the speed of processing housing benefit claims 6.2 days, compared to the previous year's performance of 7.5 days. This has primarily been due to the volume of new claims reducing following the full service roll out of Universal Credit and improvements in the use of IT.
- In order to support the Council's role as corporate parents to children and young people who are looked after, the Council has a strategic indicator to achieve a year on year increase in the number of young people leaving care who are supported to have an opportunity in the Council for an apprenticeship. The year-end figure for 2018/19 has reduced from 4 apprenticeships to 2. (In addition there is one apprentice – LAC in the Housing Company) There is the intention to recruit a further 2 LAC apprentices to be based in the Office of the Chief Executive and Care, Wellbeing and Learning directorates. Additionally, the process of recruiting an Apprenticeship Co-ordinator is underway and part of their role will be to explore apprenticeships for LAC and care leavers.
- Performance relating to council tax collection is slightly down at 95.7% compared to the previous year of 95.9%.
- For 2018/19 the indicator relating to business rates collection achieved 98%, which is 1% above the 2020 target, however this is slightly down on the previous year's performance which ended at 98.6%.
- There has been significant improvement in the Council's performance regarding the percentage of undisputed invoices paid on time, up from 78.9% in 2017/18 to 87.7%.

- The direction of travel continues to be positive in improving Superfast Broadband connectivity, which now stands at 97.5% (up more than 1% from the previous year).

Two new strategic indicators relating to Trading, will establish a baseline year in respect of:

- The amount of traded income achieved
- £ increase in new Services to Schools business generated.

Committee will be aware that due to the Council's own budgetary pressures the Council Tax payable by householders has been increasing over recent years. This has led to some residents finding it more challenging to pay their council tax as well as other household bills.

- Performance around Council Tax collection has also been impacted on by the rollout of Universal Credit (UC), which has resulted in UC claimants not fully maximising support while delays in payments to UC claimants from DWP has reduced disposable income to claimants and affected collection rates. Within the borough there are just under 10,000 households claiming UC. Some of those households are experiencing periods of time when they have little or no income due to the way that UC is assessed and paid.
- Promotion of help and advice to residents is offered via council correspondence. Some residents are also unaware of the need to claim Council Tax Support in addition to UC. This is an ongoing area of work to maximise the take-up of Council Tax Support.

What we've been doing

- To support and assist our customers to pay their Council Tax, employees are encouraged to work with customers, always show empathy and understanding and arrange payment schedules with residents that are affordable. Although challenges remain, customer satisfaction is high with continued receipt of positive feedback from residents who have received and appreciated how we have been able to support them. In the future, the use of new technology will help improve our performance and service to our residents with the introduction of online forms and SMS texting will improve how we communicate with residents.

There were several queries raised with regards to the issue of apprenticeships, for example, the length of apprenticeship offered, the types of apprenticeship, how the take up of apprenticeships for Looked After Children was so low.

It was noted that there are a number of barriers, including lack of providers, provisions and conditions attached to the apprenticeship levy.

It was noted that some funding has been secured to appoint a person to co-ordinate apprenticeships and to look to work with partners to assist in securing providers and to recruit employees onto apprenticeships in order to make the most of the Levy.

It was suggested that a more detailed report be brought back to the Committee at a future date to give a clear picture of the position with regards to apprenticeships. It was suggested that the Council make use of the Northumbria University Business Clinic to assist the co-ordinator.

It was requested that an update on the Anti-Poverty Strategy also be brought to a future meeting.

It was also suggested that something be brought to the Committee on how we incorporate Health and Wellbeing in all of the policies we adopt within the Council. The Committee were advised of a Members Seminar on 19 June on the subject of public sector reform.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the Committee agreed that the activities undertaken are supporting the delivery of the Thrive agenda.
 - (ii) The areas highlighted for further scrutiny be brought to a future meeting.
 - (iii) That it be agreed that the four out of six budget proposals no longer require monitoring as the Committee is satisfied that there has been no disproportionate equality impact following implementation.
 - (iv) That a composite report will be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 16 July 2019.

CR6 SICKNESS ABSENCE / HEALTH OF THE WORKFORCE - ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received an update report on the actions taken since the report brought to Committee on 3 December 2018.

Following a review of the Council's sickness strategies, systems and procedures in 2005, Cabinet requested that the management of sickness absence continue to be scrutinised, with a view to reducing absence levels within the Council's workforce and improving the health of the workforce.

The statistics quoted relate to a full year for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019. Some additional information is provide to allow a comparison for the full details.

Average sickness day per FTE for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 was 11.38 compared to 12.75 for the period April 2017 to March 2018.

Across the Council as a whole stress, depression and mental ill health accounts for 31.5% of all sickness and remains the largest cause of sickness absence. Post-op recovery and hospital treatment makes up 17.5% and other musculoskeletal conditions account for 17.5%. These three categories remain the main cause of sickness absence.

As part of the North East Better Health at Work Award (NEBHAWA) and the employee Health Needs Assessment survey, three task and finish groups were set up. The groups considered weight management, reducing stress levels, increasing physical activity, improving sleep, getting a better worklife balance and reducing back pain. The groups facilitated several health campaigns such as the 'step challeng', Nordic walking and Bewicks health eating options which were promoted in the employee bulleting. There are further activities planned such as taster exercise sessions for domiciliary care staff. There have also been some local success, stories where small teams have participated in weight loss and exercise programmes, with very successful outcomes.

The Council participated in a joint project with UNISON, the objective being to reduce work-related stress to improve wellbeing and to reduce levels of stress-related sickness absence. As part of the project the HSE management standards survey tool was used to seek information mainly within the Care Wellbeing and Learning Group. The key area of concern included the demands placed on employees, the support provided by managers, lack of clarity in respect of individual rols and responsibilities leading to lack of control and the negative impact of organisational change. Action plans continue to be monitored to ensure the agreed timescales are met.

The last OSC report advised that Leisure Services and Occupational Health were working together to explore the introduction of a medical referral service to the Council's leisure services. This would be on the basis that where Occupational Health identify that there is a need that an employee may benefit from an exercise programme they may be offered an introductory 12 weeks free or discounted GO membership to access leisure facilities. This programme has been implemented and to date 40 employees have been referred, 32 employees took up the offer and 12 have completed the 3 month programme with a further 20 still within their first three months of the programme. All of the services involved have received positive feedback in particular it was highlighted that one employee made additional effort to feedback and whilst the attendance at the gym helped with her recovery it also lifted her mental health and wellebing and her mood. This employee has gone on to purchase a gym membership and is continuing to be active. Training for managers has been implemented and 90% of managers have attended the training. An e-learning module will be available as a refresher for current managers and for newly appointed managers.

During 2018/19 there has been 360 referrals to the Council's counselling service which is an increase from 218 in the previous year. Referrals relate to various issues, including work related stress, difficult working relationships, personal issues and bereavement. A large proportion of the employees referred are still at work at the point of referral although many report that they are at 'tipping point'. As a result of counselling services many do remain at work and learn techniques to help them

manage their stressors and the personal circumstances in which they find themselves.

The Council signed the Time to Change pledge, a national campaign that aims to improve attitudes and behaviour towards people suffering with mental health problems which remains the largest cause of sickness absence within the Council.

The sickness absence management policy and procedure is currently being reviewed. A revised policy for schools is undergoing formal consultation with the trade unions. The Council's policy will be circulated for trade union consultation in the near future.

The HR Team will continue to provide data and dashboard information to services and provide advice and support so managers can take appropriate action to address sickness absence effectively and consistently.

The Council will continue to implement the action plan in relation to the Time to Change Pledge to reduce the stigma around mental health issues and enable employees to access appropriate support, hopefully before they feel a need to take sick leave.

Managing the menopause is a new theme where the Council is working in partnership with Unison to develop support, information and advice for women who suffer from menopausal symptoms, and for managers and other staff (male and female) with a view to mainstreaming this topic. It is important that employees are supported by the Council when they are managing their symptoms, equally important is being able to speak about the menopause as a normal medical issue without embarrassment.

An employee financial wellbeing scheme will be launched to complement the other staff benefit schemes already in place.

RESOLVED - that it be noted that the Committee is satisfied with the work undertaken in the last reporting period, and that the proposed actions for 2019/20 are a balance of support for employees against positive management action in tackling high absence levels with the aim of reducing sickness absence and maintaining good health of the workforce.

CR7 REVIEW ON HELPING TO INCREASE SUPPORT / CAPACITY OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR - INTERIM REPORT (FINDINGS)

The Committee received the Interim report on the Review of Ways to help increase the support and capacity within the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Gateshead. The view of the Committee were sought on the proposed recommendations which will be taken to Cabinet.

The Committee held 4 Evidence Gathering Sessions and heard from a range of

organisations. The Committee were provided with a summary of Gateshead VCS Infrastructure, and the Council support still available to the sector. The Committee heard that there are 876 organisations registered with the Charity Commission. There are also approximately 750 to 1000 similar organisations operating in Gateshead's communities. The Council offers significant financial support through grants, contracts and commissions and Non-Domestic Rate relief.

The Chair of Trustees at the Comfrey Project presented to the Committee offering an insight into the work of her charity in Gateshead and how working together with the Council is making a difference to the lives of Gateshead's refugees and asylum seekers.

The Committee at its second session heard from Brighten Ryton and Dunston Activity Centre.

The Chair of Brighten Ryton informed the Committee of its role in supporting the Council to improve the local environment in Ryton, highlighting examples of work in local cemeteries, parks and improvements for some local heritage sites. The Group has provided almost 9,000 volunteer hours and raised more than £30,000 in its first two years of operation. It aims to expand its scope and increase its impact in future years and highlighted some areas where its efficiency could be enhanced through an improved interface with the Council.

The Chair of Dunston Family Church talked about the Church's steep learning curve after taking on the responsibility for Dunston Activity Centre (and volunteer library) following a recent Asset Transfer from the Council. The Church through its volunteers and employees aims to improve the well-being of the local community through local activities and the provision the community space. The organisation also had to learn about Governance, due diligence, health and safety, financial and business planning, developing capacity and operating a community café. Whilst the centre is doing well, financial sustainability remains a challenge as the Church always looks to offer services at a lower cost or free.

The next session focussed on presentations from three key local funders (Community Foundation Tyne and Wear and Northumberland), The Ballinger Charitable Trust, and the National Lottery Community Fund). The funders covered:

- What they do and the opportunities they provide
- How they currently support the sector
- What outcomes/priorities they would like to see
- How Gateshead compares regionally/nationally regarding their funding programmes
- How could their impact in Gateshead be increased?
- What can partners (like the Council) do to maximize take up/increase effectiveness of their resources in Gateshead
- What can/should VCS organisations do themselves/collectively to increase take up/effectiveness – highlighting any common failings that restrict local take up.

Some of the key feedback and top tips from the session included:

- Always read the guidance thoroughly before applying – if in doubt get in touch.

- Ensure the organisation and the project are eligible.
- Have all information required ready at the time of submission.
- Ensure accounts/bank statements are timely and accurate and unrestricted reserves are beneath any eligibility threshold.
- Use data, local intelligence and consultation to demonstrate community needs (avoid duplication).
- Wherever possible try to get other funding to support your project.

A Members' Seminar is being organised for early July to offer all ward councillors a further opportunity to hear about some of the financial assistance available to Gateshead's Voluntary and Community Sector.

The Committees final session heard from Basis@Gateshead. The individuals that Basis supports are in need of information, advice and guidance, advocacy and practical support. They also need a safe space to work out what's causing their problems and how best to set about trying to tackle them. Now located at Progress House, Warwick Street, Gateshead. Basis has become the place where people with multiple, complex and overlapping needs go to begin their journey into housing, recovery and wellness. Basis is the only service in Gateshead offering day provision for people sleeping rough as well as assistance around accessing and maintaining housing.

As Basis is the only service in Gateshead providing day provision for rough sleepers the charity is in a unique position. Clients visit Basis because they want to, it is a safe space and a place of community for them. Over the last seven years staff have built up trust and a relationship with individuals who are considered hard to reach. This relationship enables help and support to be built around the individual rather than refer out and run the risk of traumatising them further or losing them as they fall through service gaps. This service is one example of the targeted collaborative provision required as part of the Council's Thrive agenda.

The review highlighted the following findings, issues and challenges:

- The review reaffirmed the need for a vibrant community and voluntary sector in Gateshead that is supportive and capable of meeting the challenges facing Gateshead's residents in the future.
- There is a need to ensure longer term support is available from the Council which cultivates relationships and reassures community and voluntary sector organisations that they can rely on the Council for advice and help.
- The community asset transfer programme has seen significant success in helping community organisations operate community facilities to deliver services for local residents.
- Need for dedicated interface/contacts within the Council – including key front-line services (particularly where the interface is integral to the work of the Group – for example some Street Scene Services/planning and highways?). This is required to ensure decisions can be made by the relevant service, relatively quickly – it also helps to build a positive working relationship.
- Annual plan or similar to be agreed and endorsed by the Council – including assigned responsible officers for specific activities, as above, (to agree any adjustments/amendments, etc) – would help with timetabling key decisions/permissions – allowing the Group to have more accurate plans. This

will also help the Council to plan its work if done effectively.

- Annual plan would facilitate greater synergy and timetabling of partnership approach – would maximize windows of opportunity for works to be undertaken (summer months, avoiding nesting season, etc)
- When Council and community efforts combine the synergy and impact can be fantastic (for example, coinciding cutting and strimming in cemetery)
- Speed/responsiveness of the Council – frustration with the time taken/delay in getting permissions/agreement to undertake works – sometimes legitimate due to legal process, sometimes multiple service involvement and sometimes staff sickness (as well as other things) – but could we be better?
- Perception of overbearing bureaucracy – particularly around Conservation and Licencing issues experienced – legalities, consultation periods, permissions, etc. Can this be mitigated with better information up front re realistic timescales (for both parties)?
- The Council's relationship/interface with (ethos towards) voluntary organisations needs to reflect a partnership arrangement (to maximize joint efficiency/shared resources and available skills, knowledge and capacity). Volunteers should be seen more as partners not as contractors or a threat to employment.
- Is there need to train/brief Council staff (particularly those in key interface positions) about how a better more productive relationship can be achieved? Remove any stigma, perceptions of job insecurity, etc) as above
- Review how the Council's Insurance arrangements work for/with volunteer activities – could this become more inclusive/less risk averse – redesigned to accommodate such work not respond to request for the work (turn it around completely).
- Organisation/rigour of the Group and its monitoring of activity was praised (and may be exclusive to Brighten Ryton currently) – whilst not necessarily required to the level of Brighten Ryton it is food for thought for other community organisations to become more organised and planned in approach
- Recruiting and retaining volunteers was still an issue for a number of community groups across Gateshead, especially where specific skills are required.
- Securing funding is becoming an increasing challenge for many community groups and charities across Gateshead.
- Specialist advice is required for a number of groups across the borough, in particular governance, legal advice, business and financial planning, health and safety to name some areas.
- Co-ordination between NCVS and Gateshead Council needs to continue to be managed to ensure the skills and expertise of the team compliments the work of the Neighbourhood Management and Volunteering Team and other support services
- This service hub approach is a central part of our future sustainability plans for Basis@Gateshead – and we also see this model as being potentially replicable across the NE: we are committed to it.
- This Basis model is helping us build the evidence base needed to show external partners that delivering out of Basis@Gateshead is a more successful and cost effective way of reaching those facing housing crisis either at their crisis point, or in many cases before things get too bad.
- Basis is a great example of how the VCS can collaborate and integrate with public services to reach the most vulnerable in our communities in a more efficient and effective way.
- As staff from partners will be based at Basis@Gateshead we anticipate they will save costs of being based in their own premises, and less money and time will be wasted signposting vulnerable people to different services, locations and experts.

The following recommendations for the Committee to suggest any amendments make comments:

Recommendation 1 – Commit to provide clear single points of contacts to community organisations, and explore providing the autonomy to provide advice, support and definitive decisions as required.

Recommendation 2 – Encourage community organisations that the Council is supporting to provide an annual plan, particularly relevant with Friends of or environmental groups.

Recommendation 3 – Be clear and more transparent regarding Council fees and charges, so community organisations understand the costs and the reasons why the fees exists.

Recommendation 4 – Explore ways to improve the relationships that exist between the Council and the community and voluntary sector to encourage greater collaboration / joint working, addressing common challenges faced by residents, avoid duplication or competition and enable the Council to consider where best to invest its community development and financial resources.

Recommendation 5 – Seek ways to encourage community groups to work together, support each other and share resources and ideas.

Recommendation 6 – Develop further the Council's Volunteers Plan – Helping Out - to ensure there is clarity about the roles of volunteers, the relationships with volunteers and paid employees.

Recommendation 7 – Assess the support required by volunteers to enable them to help out effectively, safely and with the knowledge, training, advice and relevant permissions – primarily aimed at volunteers that directly support activities delivered with the Council and on Council property.

Recommendation 8 – Review the Council's insurance arrangements to ensure volunteer groups are adequately covered for the activities they are participating in and the system to obtaining cover is as efficient as possible.

Recommendation 9 – Consider ways to increase capacity across the community and voluntary sector to better secure funds from a range of sources rather than be dependent on the various forms of Council funding.

Recommendation 10 – Ensure the Council's resources to support Gateshead's communities are targeted in a way that ensures the activity delivered as a result of the funding will support Thrive.

Recommendation 11 – The Council should continue to proactively liaise with external funding partners, to maximise opportunities to invest in Gateshead.

Recommendation 12 – Monitor the delivery of the contract to support the Community and Voluntary Sector (currently held by Newcastle Council for Voluntary Service) to

ensure it continues to provide the advice, support and networking required by the sector in partnership with the Council

Recommendation 13 – Within the current contract to support the Community and Voluntary Sector, continue to support the development of OurGateshead to ensure it provides the service required by Gateshead residents and the community organisations represented on the website.

Recommendation 14 – Review the Gateshead Offer – which provides guidance on where to seek support for community and voluntary organisations in Gateshead and define its commitment to find the most effective way to define its relationship and support to the sector to deliver Thrive.

Recommendation 15 – Increase publicity and communications through all means possible to raise awareness, share and celebrate the fantastic range of activities that take place across Gateshead.

Recommendation 16 – In line with the Council's Public Service Reform work, consider further place based / community hub opportunities for collaborative work between the Council, its partners and the community and voluntary sector.

Recommendation 17 – Consider increasing the capacity building resource within the Council to ensure the community and voluntary sector is adequately supported to meet the demands of Gateshead's communities in the future.

It was suggested that the wording in regards to the recommendation on Governance be amended slightly to introduce the possibilities of merger which would ease the governance burden and possibly help organisations sustain themselves.

It was suggested that with regards to recommendation 9 that we look at whether this is about self determination and that as a council we recognised that the Community and Voluntary Sector have a right to self-determination, is it something about what we do and what we enable them to do.

RESOLVED - That the comments of the Committee be considered for the preparation of the final report.

CR8 ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee's provisional work programme was endorsed by the Committee at its meeting on 1 April 2019. Councillors have agreed that further reports will be brought to future meeting to highlight current issues / identify any changes / additions to the programme.

RESOLVED - (i) that the provisional work programme for 2019/20 be noted.
(ii) that further reports on the work programme will be brought to the Committee to identify any additional issues which the Committee may be asked to consider.

Chair.....