

**GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING**

**Monday, 12 June 2023**

**PRESENT:** Councillor J Eagle (Chair)  
  
Councillor(s): C Buckley, R Beadle, D Bradford, D Burnett,  
B Clelland, T Graham, J Green, S Green, M Hall,  
I Patterson, J Turner, J Wallace, D Weatherley

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Councillor(s): S Ronchetti

**APOLOGIES:** Councillor(s): D Duggan, J Simpson and K Wood

**CR1 CONSTITUTION**

RESOLVED - That the constitution of the Committee for the 2023/24 Municipal Year be noted.

**CR2 MINUTES**

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 April 2023 be approved as a correct record.

**CR3 ROLE AND REMIT**

RESOLVED - That the role and remit of the Committee be noted.

**CR4 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK - YEAR END PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23**

The Committee received a report and presentation on the end of year Performance Management and Improvement Framework reporting on the delivery of Council priorities for the period April 2022 to March 2023. It also provided an overview of the performance relevant to the role and remit of this committee.

Cross-cutting key areas already being highlighted are:

- MTFS estimates a £55m financial gap over the medium term due to significant pressures manifesting over the last twelve months in inflation, pay, utilities and costs of living.
- The continuing impacts of rising costs facing local people, families, and businesses, as well as in the delivery of services.
- The demand pressures being faced by services such as in children's and adult social care continue to increase, as well as expanding demand for debt advice.

- Staffing pressures are still impacting performance across the Council including recruitment, retention, and sickness.
- Progress in key areas such as workforce strategy, climate change strategy and customer experience.
- Inequalities continue to widen. Thrive data shows a shift (over 2 percentage points) compared with the previous year-end, towards more people being vulnerable, moving from the just coping and managing categories. There is minimal change in the proportion of people 'thriving'.
- Additional support is still being sought and provided to local people and businesses through various grants, although this is affected additionally by burdens relating to central Government's initiatives. Household support grant is to continue for a further 12 months.

Following a request in June 2022 for additional support in relation to the Performance Management and Improvement Framework, the Commercialisation and Improvement team are working with the Workforce Development team on a focussed training session for councillors. A training brief had been drafted and is being shared at the next meeting of the Councillor Support and Development group.

The Committee received a presentation on the current position with regards to the Workforce Strategy.

Michelle Brown (Service Director for HR, Workforce Development and H & S) took OSC through an update of the Workforce Strategy which included an update on progress in the last 12 months, work in progress, and what's coming next for 2023. It was highlighted that some of the action plan for 2024 is underway also. Some of the work completed so far included, but is not limited to; delivering the apprentice awards, organising the leadership keeping in touch sessions, creation and rollout of the Smart Working Framework, launch of the cost free employee benefits platform – VIVUP, the development of a policy review schedule to update current key people policies and develop new ones, a new modern approach to the layout of job descriptions, the launch of the new learning system Learning Hub, developing and negotiating the Construction Joint Local Agreement and skills gap/multi-skilling framework, the opening of the new learning venue – Kingsmeadow, changes to low pay, refreshing the corporate induction scheme, launching of the jobs fair at the Gateshead International Stadium and much more.

A detailed update was given on sickness absence which highlighted some interesting trends, for example, during Covid post operations sickness absence went down along with viral infections and post Covid when NHS appointments are now being facilitated and people are socialising as normal again, the Council has experienced an increase in post operation sickness absence and viral related absences also.

A query was raised in relation to stress being identified as personal or stress and how the Council can know that. It was advised that either the GP will confirm that on the employees sicknote or the employee themselves will advise if the reason for their stress is work or personal.

It was asked what happens if an employee is stressed and it was confirmed that each case may be different, and meetings are held with the employee to understand how the Council can help. Where stress is work related a stress risk assessment is undertaken.

A number of queries were raised in relation to sickness absence data, specifically:

- At the next update could the Committee have a breakdown of grades for stress related absence figures - Is it mostly lower paid employees?
- Can the data be split by service?
- Is it possible to understand if there is a correlation between sickness absence in hybrid areas v's non hybrid areas?

It was advised that absence by grades should be possible, data by service should be also and understand which absences are for staff who work in a hybrid way may not be as employees are not identified in the HR system as a hybrid worker or not.

The top four reasons for near miss reporting across the Council remains unchanged. Work has been underway to change the culture in relation to reporting near misses as reporting near misses prevents accidents longer term as learnings and actions can be taken from a reported near miss. There has been a 231% increase in near misses reports for the same period in 2022/2023. This is a positive trend in mitigating harm, learning from what could have happened and preventing accidents. The increase in reporting demonstrates a shift in behaviour to one of trust in reporting.

Half of the near misses reported were cases of threatening behaviour with the majority occurring within Adult Social Care and Housing. Reference was made to repeat offenders and that H&S are working with the services to try and find ways to reduce the incidents and mitigate risk.

A number of queries were raised in relation to H & S which included:

- Can the number of accidents be included
- Can an update be provided in relation to risk assessments.
- Can an overview of how accident reporting is undertaken including the timeframe for reporting and completing an accident report form?
- Could the Council explore having a recorded message for callers to hear, when they ring the Council that to say that the Council do not tolerate any kind of aggressive or abusive behaviour towards our staff etc?
- Could we have a detailed overview of school near miss reporting figures for the previous 12 months and how schools report?

Employee turnover was covered and that the current leavers form only allows for people to provide a high-level reason for reason and no specifics. For example, an employee can confirm that the reason for leaving is resignation, but not specifically why the employee has resigned. A more detailed and modernised approach to capturing leaver information has been developed and will be rolled out in July 2023. The data captured will be stored electronically allowing the Council to analyse the feedback and consider changes to ways of working to improve recruitment and retention.

An update was provided on apprenticeships, outlining that there are currently 108 apprentices employed in an apprenticeship role and 123 who are completing additional apprentice qualifications for personal development. Reference was made to the apprentice awards and that there had been 109 nominations made and the standard of nominations was very good.

It was queried whether we have compared pay and conditions with other authorities if we are unable to recruit and retain staff. Reference was made to the fact that while pay is important it is not the only factor that influences an organisations ability to recruit and retain and that all elements of the employee life cycle play a significant role as a whole offer and package. It was noted that the Council have commissioned a piece of work to undertake a pay benchmarking exercise which is being undertaken by Campbell Tickell which will compare the Council's salary framework against the market, not just in the public sector but in the private sector also where there are comparable roles.

It was queried what the system was when someone handed in their notice in terms of completing an exit interview. It was noted that the exit interview process is not mandatory, it is paper based, an interview held with a Service Director and that the new format will provide for an online form to be completed, a paper-based form, an interview if requested and the use of a QR code if needed. This provided various options for an employee to provide feedback, all of which is aimed at increasing the number of interviews completed and to make it easy for an employee to say how they feel.

A request for staff turnover data to be provided as a percentage figure as well as an absolute number be provided at the next update.

It was also queried when you look at meeting rooms and facilities compared to other authorities, we are not up to modern standards, the question was asked as to whether to not this was going to be looked at as part of the plan.

It was explained that the IT Strategy is looking at modernising our approach, and if someone has a particular need, we can talk to that person to help them.

A queried was raised in relation to the appraisal process, specifically, what action does an employee take if they disagree with what is being discussed and recorded at an Appraisal and if there was an appeals process. The members of OSC were advised that an employee does not have to sign the appraisal if they do not agree with the contents and that there was no appeals process. However, if an employee

has concerns that their appraisal is not representative of them, their performance etc. then they can discuss this with HR, their trade union rep and where necessary and appropriate raise their concerns through a formal route.

It was queried whether a staff survey was going to be looked at in particular around employee wellbeing. We need to know why people are leaving in order to be able to put it right. It was noted that the new exit interview does include the detail related to exact reasons for leaving (a copy of which was handed to OSC members in the meeting), if we are going to do a staff survey the preference would be to use one which asks specific questions.

It was queried whether the fact that stress and anxiety going up could have something to do with the pandemic, peoples finances have had a pounding, could it be that lower paid members of staff are getting stressed. It was noted that a further examination of the figures could look at the grades to see whether this was linked. It was queried whether it would be possible to have the sickness absence figures by service level again, it would hopefully help us to understand the picture.

It was queried whether there was an issue for front facing staff who have to come into a workplace and whether the sickness numbers were higher than those who were able to work from home as if they weren't feeling too good they could still work from home and not have to ring in sick. Training is given to all managers to make sure the absence procedure is applied consistently.

It was queried whether we spend the full apprenticeship levy. It was noted that we don't, we have a high spend compared to other LA's but that we do have the ability to transfer the funding to smaller organisations within the Borough, including voluntary organisations.

RESOLVED - (i) that the comments of the Committee be noted.  
(ii) that the Performance Report be presented to Cabinet on 18 July 2023.

## **CR5 RESILIENCE AND EMERGENCY PLANNING ANNUAL UPDATE**

The Committee received a report to provide an annual update on the Council's Resilience and Emergency Planning Activities.

The Council's Resilience and Emergency Planning functions continue to operate in adherence with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (the Act), ensuring we perform our statutory duties in collaboration with our partners and communities. Within the Act the Council are categorised as Category 1 responders.

The Council's Resilience and Emergency Planning Team has recently been restructured following some recent changes in personnel. The Role of Resilience and Emergency Planning Coordinator was advertised and a successful applicant is due to commence employment during the summer. Should any further pandemic scenarios arise the Council will work closely with the team at the Integrated Care Board.

The Committee were informed that during out of hours periods, Strategic and Service Directors cover any incidents on a rotational basis along with a Duty Officer. All roles within the Emergency Response Team are on a voluntary basis and are provided by Council employees below the grade of service director. Team numbers are constantly monitored to ensure that a large team remains in place and to make sure effective arrangements can be activated.

The learning gained from the response to Storm Arwen in late 2021 highlighted the need for more robust and proactive response mechanisms to be in place for future incidents. As a result an escalation protocol has been drafted for use by the Emergency Response Team.

Role based refresher training was offered to all existing members of the Emergency Response Team and provided to those who expressed an interest in November and December 2022. Further training has been provided to new members of the Incident Director Team in May 2023 and to other new members of the Team throughout the year.

The following multi-agency exercises have taken place over the past 12 months.

- Exercise London Bridge – 24 May 2022
- National Exercise Flood-Ex – 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> November 2022
- Exercise Mighty Oak – 28-30 March 2023

The following incidents have been responded to by the team since the last report in June 2022.

- 1 – 20 July 2022 – Extreme Heat
- 8-19 September 2022 – Operation London Bridge

There have been recent reports of Avian Influenza outbreaks nationally, but fortunately Gateshead has not had any cases reported since February 2022.

Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) of which Gateshead Council is a member is the mechanism used to enable multi-agency planning arrangements to be documented, tested and exercised. In 2022 a restructure of the LRF resulted in the recruitment of an LRF Manager and supporting team of officers and administrators which replaced the previous structure of one administrator and a support officer.

These additional resources have benefitted all multi-agency organisations in the LRF's membership providing a much more structured and pro-active approach to potential threats to business continuity and the public.

The 'Protect Duty' has been in development by the Home Office over recent years, in response to the evolvment of terrorist threats in public spaces all over the world.

The aim of the Protect Duty is to ensure that people entering or using publicly accessible spaces, are better protected from malicious attacks via proactive

security mitigations to prevent an incident occurring. The Protect Duty has now been renamed Martyn's Law in memory of Martyn Hett, one of the victims of the Manchester Arena attack in 2017.

Government published "The UK Government Resilience Framework" in December 2022. This is the Government's new strategic approach to resilience and is based on 3 core principles:

- A developed and shared understanding of the civil contingencies risks we face is fundamental
- Prevention rather than cure wherever possible with a greater emphasis on preparation and prevention
- Resilience is a 'whole society' endeavour, so we must be more transparent and empower everyone to make a contribution.

The impact of Storm Arwen in 2021 highlighted the shortfalls of some areas of response which has led to the strengthening of single and multi-agency arrangements.

The Council has generic adaptable plans in place to provide a response for a multitude of scenarios, which means that we don't need a plan in place for every potential incident.

It was suggested that those who are registered as having poultry be written to as a matter of course to advise that there is likely to be an Avian flu lockdown to be prepared.

It was also suggested that we consider having evacuation plans in place for forest fires as we have some quite large areas of forest/woodland which are situated near to large suburban housing areas.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the comments of the Committee be noted.
  - (ii) That it be noted that the Committee are satisfied with the work undertaken by the Emergency Planning and Resilience Team
  - (iii) That a progress report be brought to the Committee in a further 6 months.

## **CR6 ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2023 - 2024**

The Committee received the provisional work programme report for the 2023/24 municipal year. The following were requested by members of OSC as topic to be included within the 2023-2024 work programme:

- an update is required on the company who are currently in residence at the Old Town Hall and the proposals for moving this item forward.
- as part of the Corporate Asset Management Strategy a look is taken into the empty buildings and why these buildings are still empty and what is the cost of maintaining them.

- an update on the position with the Dryden Centre.
- A review of the Leisure Services review is slotted in as soon after the Cabinet decision as possible.

- RESOLVED -
- (i) That the comments of the committee and annual work programme for 2023/24 be noted.
  - (ii) That the Provisional work programme for 2023/24 be endorsed and referred to Council on 20 July 2023 for agreement.
  - (iii) That it be noted that further reports will be brought to the Committee to identify any additional issues which the Committee may be asked to consider.

**Chair.....**