

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 14 June 2021

PRESENT: Councillor John Eagle (Chair)

Councillor(s): S Ronchetti, J Wallace, R Beadle, D Bradford,
D Duggan, T Graham, M Hall, R Mullen, J Simpson and
J Turner

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): L Caffrey, P Foy, S Green, I Patterson and
K Wood

CR42 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

- (i) The minutes of the last meeting held on 1 March 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

CR43 CONSTITUTION

RESOLVED:

- (i) The Committee noted the constitution.

CR44 IMPACT OF COVID-19

The Committee received a report and presentation setting out the impact of the Covid-19 response relevant to its remit.

It was reported that services have continued to respond and identify the impact of Covid-19 with a focus on supporting residents, businesses and employees. The Committee were also advised that a further Covid household survey had been undertaken and the results of this would be shared at a future meeting.

It was highlighted that supplies of PPE are consistent despite shortages and price rises in some areas; it was also noted that all business impact assessments and business continuity plans have been reviewed.

From the presentation the Committee were provided with a summary from officers in Customer Experience and Digital on the support provided to residents and local businesses. It was stated that the Council Tax support scheme had been agreed for 2021/22 in addition to a Council Tax hardship fund.

It was reported that since the start of the pandemic up to May 2021 59,694 Council Tax telephone contacts had been made in addition to 43,199 contacts for benefits. The Committee acknowledged that there had been high levels of contact so that

those who were struggling could receive the support they are entitled to. From the report, the Committee noted that additional support had been provided to residents via self-isolation payments, winter grants and the Covid local support grant.

An overview of work undertaken by the hubs in Gateshead was presented, the Committee noted that over 12,500 requests for help had been received via this channel. It was stated that over 9,500 emergency food parcels had also been provided and that partnership work with Citizens Advice and Age UK was taking place.

The Committee received an update on support to business up to 2 June 2021. From the presentation it was highlighted that 1,200 businesses had benefitted from a twelve-month business rate holiday. It was also reported that 12,528 payments totalling £34,624,345 had been provided to businesses that had been impacted or forced to close during the pandemic. The Committee received assurance that as grants were distributed there had been a thorough monitoring and audit process in place to prevent fraud.

A summary of additional support provided to business was also provided, this included support on business compliance and safe trading. It was noted that the Shop Local Shop Safe campaign had been launched and that specialist support had been made available for local retailers.

It was reported that the ability of businesses to thrive during the pandemic is heavily influenced by the sector in which they operate; it was highlighted that businesses within the hospitality, leisure and events industries had been particularly impacted. It was stated that larger businesses have been more resilient due to greater resources and capacity. The Committee also received information on the use of furlough which has been extensively used to suppress costs in response to reduced demand.

The Committee were advised that a quarterly business survey had been conducted in partnership with NGI and were provided with two case studies to illustrate the impact of the pandemic on different kinds of business. An overview of workforce support was also reported.

The Committee questioned whether the upsurge in online retailing had contributed to the decline of high street retail sales during the pandemic; it was also noted that some key high street retailers had been lost such as Debenhams. Officers advised that there is no direct insight into the viability of private enterprises, but that research has suggested that 54% of visitors to the region come for shopping. It was noted that high street shopping habits and customer expectations were evolving and that some retailers have struggled to evolve and that the pandemic had not helped this. It was highlighted that many shoppers now seek a more experiential transactions whilst shopping. It was also reported that the Metrocentre are aware of this change in trend and are working with retailers to improve.

The Committee were advised during discussion that the Gateshead Quays development had been mentioned in the national Tourism Recovery Plan. A discussion also took place over the viability of small businesses to survive without accumulating debts as a result of liabilities accumulated during the course of the

pandemic.

The Committee acknowledged that the Council has strong relationships with local businesses. The Committee noted its thanks to officers for the support they had provided to both residents and businesses but noted concern that not all businesses were eligible for support based on the Government's criteria.

A comment was also made that tourist destinations such as Beamish have reopened with limited capacity; it was acknowledged that whilst these businesses are open and are full, they are not yet thriving due to the limited number of visitors allowed in.

RESOLVED:

- (i) The Committee considered the impact of the pandemic and noted the contents of the report and presentation.

CR45 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Committee received a report and presentation with an update on the development and implementation of the new Performance Management and Improvement Framework for the Council.

It was reported that the Performance Management and Improvement Framework aims to:

- Enable the Council to know whether it is achieving its priorities
- Ensure that the Council's resources are being deployed effectively
- Make both short and long term effective decisions
- A whole system approach – embedded in partnership working to deliver the Health & Wellbeing Strategy

A summary of themes and measures applicable to the Committee was provided; this noted that most measures for the Committee focus around the Balance Scorecard which acts as an organisational health check. The themes of this were explained, these are employees, customer experience, finance, governance and risk in addition to external assessment.

The Committee were presented with an overview of each balance scorecard measure and were provided with a handout of the Performance Management and Improvement Framework as approved by Council.

The Committee asked that officers consider the following factors as part of the framework:

- The issuing of dog fouling fines and the use of income received for this
- Benchmarking the number and nature of insurance claims made against the Council with neighbouring authorities
- The volume and amount of income received from fines issued for flytipping and littering; it was suggested that Gateshead Council issue lower costing

- fines than neighbouring authorities
- The information gathered from exit interviews from staff who leave the Council's employment; how this is used to make improvements and changes to ways of working.
- To increase in online transactions offered by the Council; it was noted that increasing numbers of residents are choosing to interact and pay bills to the Council online

A comment was made suggesting that the term resident or citizen be used for reporting as opposed to 'customers'.

RESOLVED:

- (i) The Committee noted the progress made to date and the next steps.
- (ii) The Committee agreed to receive a further update at a future meeting.

CR46 GATESHEAD DISTRICT ENERGY SCHEME - OPERATIONS UPDATE AND 5 YEAR BUSINESS PLAN

The Committee received a report providing an update on the operation of the Gateshead District Energy Scheme by the Gateshead Energy Company. An update on the Gateshead Energy Company's five-year business plan was also reported.

A summary of the Gateshead Energy Company's journey since it was incorporated was provided; a breakdown of objectives was also highlighted within the report.

The Committee noted that the Gateshead Energy Company is a subsidiary of Gateshead Energy Holdings Ltd which allows for other ventures to be created if required. It was reported that following CMT agreement to increase Board membership from three to five members, two additional directors have been appointed.

An operational update was summarised to the Committee; this included an update on commercial connection offers to the Gateshead Quays (from 2024). From the report the Committee were also provided with a breakdown of network and financial performance. It was highlighted that the Gateshead Energy Company does not own any assets but rather leases the network and energy centre from the Council under the Concession Agreement. It was noted that a concession charge is payable to the Council for this.

The Committee were advised that as part of the five-year business plan there is no change to the company's aim to attracting economic growth. It was stated that improving air quality and sustainable transport was a new objective.

The Committee noted concern that fossil fuels (gas) continue to be used as a main fuel source within the company. Officers advised that there is a longer-term aim to reduce the use of fossil fuels in line with government guidelines. A comment was made that the environmental crisis needs to be addressed sooner than this.

A discussion took place on the use of renewable energies such as wind farms;

officers acknowledged and noted the Committees concerns on this and advised that feasibility studies would be need to be done but that this was not in the five-year business plan. The Committee asked whether the use of hydraulics was to be considered; it was noted that the infrastructure to support this was not available.

The Committee requested a future meeting dedicated to the subject of Gateshead's energy networks or a seminar. The Committee also requested that the 'green agenda' and planning for the use of renewable energy be factored in to the Council's Performance Management and Improvement Framework.

RESOLVED:

- (i) The Committee noted the progress made within the report.

CR47 ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22

The Committee received the Annual Work Programme 2021/22 report.

RESOLVED:

- (i) The Committee noted the information contained in the annual review.
- (ii) The Committee endorsed the provisional work programme for 2021/22.

Chair.....