

GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL
CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 28 November 2022

PRESENT: Councillor J Eagle (Chair)

Councillor(s): S Green, R Beadle, D Bradford, C Buckley,
B Clelland, T Graham, M Hall, I Patterson, J Simpson and
J Turner

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): D Burnett, L Caffrey, W Dick and J Green

CR86 MINUTES

RESOLVED - that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2022 be approved as a correct record.

CR87 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK 6-MONTH PERFORMANCE REPORT 2022/23

The Committee were presented with the 6Month Performance Report on the Performance Management and Improvement Framework. The report provides an overview of performance relevant to the role and remit of the Committee.

Cross-cutting key emerging areas already being highlighted are:

- Budget pressures continue to provide a significant challenge, there is an increased level of uncertainty about the government financial settlement, however, it is not anticipated the settlement will address the gap in Council budgets and future demand pressures
- Continuing demand pressures being faced by services particularly across social care
- The continued impact of Brexit and the increasing outcomes from the current conflict in the Ukraine impacting on costs facing local people as well as in the delivery of council services
- Widening inequalities, income and longer term anticipated impact for the future on issues such as health. Latest date shows an increase of over 2 percentages point increase in those people who are considered vulnerable.
- Staffing pressures across the Council including recruitment and retention and sickness continues to present challenges in delivering services
- Steady progress in key areas such as climate change strategy and engagement
- Continuing increase in the access of digital and online services
- Levels of support being provided to local people and businesses such as through various grants, for eg DWP Household Support Fund was aimed to prevent people from going cold or hungry.

Concern has previously been expressed over sickness absence increase and recruitment and retention issues where performance appears to be challenging. A separate item on the Workforce Strategy will be presented to the Committee.

It was queried how much it was costing us to tell Councillors we aren't meeting targets, it was appreciated that the inability to deliver is due to external factors.

It was noted that the purpose of the Corporate Performance Management and Improvement Framework is to ensure that the Council is focusing its resources on Council priorities agreed by councillors.

It was noted that the Council has a statutory requirement to report on performance; it is a requirement of inspection frameworks such as Ofsted and CQC and is a requirement of our external auditors. It is also a requirement when evidencing a good governance framework for a public organisation.

RESOLVED –

- (i) that the comments of the Committee be noted
- (ii) that the performance report be referred to Cabinet for consideration in January 2023.

CR88 UPDATE ON IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKFORCE STRATEGY

The Committee received a presentation on the current position with the workforce strategy.

The Committee were advised that the following areas are going well:

- The Pay Award has been agreed for green and red book colleagues
- The Workforce Strategy has been developed into a three year plan
- Union and Council relations are very good
- Some work is progressing to improve the employee experience and positively impact on recruitment and retention

The Council does still face some challenges:

- The percentage staff turnover was 12.74% in 2021/22 and whilst lower than the national average and lower than the average for public sector (15.6%) it still impacts on service delivery, moral and so on.
- Sickness absence per FTE has increased slightly
- We have an ageing workforce
- The conflict between budget and the aspiration to address recruitment and retention.

Progress has been made in the following areas:

- The workforce strategy has been transformed into a 3 year deliverable plan

- An employee survey provider has been identified and will progress subject to budget review
- A new occupational health system design is underway with implementation and launch in the first quarter of 2023
- Exit interviews and why stay have been re-designed in a more friendly tone with an online version to be launched in January 2023
- A new employee benefits system has been identified, contact to be agreed for launch in first quarter of 2023.
- Health and Safety culture trial in ways of working has begun in construction services
- New policy and procedure layout under design to be more modern and keeping it simple
- New job description layout designed
- Training for line managers on people management underway
- Corporate induction is being redesigned/modernised/refreshed
- Membership of LA's recruitment and retention improvement group
- Learning management system has been launched

It was queried whether we are setting the bar too high in relation to attracting apprentices and them having to have a minimum level of qualifications. It was noted that with regards to some apprentice roles there is a need to have a minimum qualification due to the nature of the programme which will be undertaken with the college. It was noted that we are looking at work placements and working with the Learning Skills Team to encourage those who want a career but would not necessarily be about their academic ability.

The overall development of the plan was welcomed it was however queried whether having interviews with people about why they stay would be time consuming and worth the investment. It was noted that if we have good managers people want to stay we need to know if we have poor managers.

It was noted that the emphasis on succession planning was welcomed as there has been a gap for years. It was noted that we have group directors who have worked there way up from the tools we need to show that this is an organisation where people can start to work their way up.

It was noted that the impact of Covid has been mentioned and a lot of people are signing up to agencies – is that because people find it easier to apply or is it the flexibility and easier to go through the interview process. It was noted that sometimes with agency workers it is about the lifestyle as they have the flexibility. Also we are looking to shift the arena to CVs, it shouldn't be difficult to apply for jobs. Currently for entry level jobs there is 4 pages of job description.

It is hoped that in 6months there will be some good news stories.

It was queried how many people have reduced hours and are still here. It was noted that we have acknowledged smarter working and people have had to live their lives differently but we also have to meet customer demand and have to be responsive – we are asking the workforce how would they like to work differently. We are actively asking people to come forward with ideas to make services better for the

communities we serve.

It was noted that at one time Gateshead was a place where people would fight for a position here. The problem is where there is no career progression Local Authorities are stuffy and old fashioned and it is easier to get rid of someone with skills to make it convenient for managers, do people understand career pathways when they enter the organisation and where the opportunities are for progression.

It was noted that there is lots of opportunity it is about how we sell ourselves as an organisation, we need to start telling the story.

It was noted that some kids are dyslexic or have other issues how do we legislate to make sure we are not excluding them.

It was requested that all HR staff and managers are made aware that veterans are now entitled to an interview for any job they apply for.

It was suggested that HR look at the work of Project Choice in terms of children and young people with disabilities including ADHD and Autism, it was also suggested that we contact Ross Lynott he runs Recite Me and has software which makes text into more accessible formats.

It was queried whether it was possible to find out whether the stress is work related or personal. It was noted that sometimes it is often started off with something personal then something can happen at work which brings everything to a head. We can help people.

It was queried about whether we have details of how diverse our workforce is. We never seem to attract anyone from the Jewish community, we don't seem to have a diverse workforce, it seems to have slipped down under the radar. It was noted that it is still on the agenda it is about the capacity of teams.

It was noted that the plan may take longer to achieve due to the challenging budgets. We have to design, deliver and embed and that takes time.

RESOLVED - That the comments of the Committee be noted in relation to the progress on the Workforce Strategy.

CR89

WELFARE REFORM/UNIVERSAL CREDIT AND REVIEW OF ENERGY FUND

The Committee received a presentation on the current position with regards to Universal Credit. The Committee were advised that 16% of the population live within the 10 most deprived area and this equates to approximately 30000 people. With regards to Local Council Tax Support, 21,112 people are eligible, 12,695 are of working age and 8,417 are of pension age. Over 7500 children are on free school meals. And 6070 of Council tenants are in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Demand from local people for financial support continues to be a priority; An average of 250 calls per day are received with regards to Council Tax and approximately 200 per day in relation to Benefit issues. A average of 25 calls per day are in relation to Housing Advice and Support.

With regard to Council Tax and Benefits we are reviewing recovery processes and letters to encourage more contact, we are working with Citizens Advice Gateshead to offer direct access to support. We are working with Adult Social Care Teams, Housing and Legal. We are looking to maximise benefits when people are contacting us. We are making sure every contact counts.

In terms of impact on Council tenants and rental income. It appears that the link between Universal Credit and higher levels of rent arrears is still very evident, the problem is that more people will be moving over from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit in future. Support currently for tenants has mitigated against the impact. Request from tenants for support have increased, the higher levels of requests are for help with energy costs, and issues. Higher incidences of direct debits failing. Some tenants who have previously managed are now struggling.

Over 2838 tenants were affected by the under-occupation penalty in 2013 when this was first introduced. 1,132 tenants are now known to be affected. This still represents a burden for those affected. 917 tenants currently in receipt of a Discretionary Housing Payment. In 2013 when Universal Credit was first introduced 15 tenants were affected by the benefit cap, now 130 tenants are affected.

With regards to Cost of Living Impacts in relation to Council tenants, a recent monitoring exercise showed a 60% increase in requests for support this year compared to last year, 147% increase in energy referrals, 39% increase in referrals for specialist debt advice and a 28% increase in direct debt payments failing. Out of 100 tenants contact in a sample exercise, 65 said that the cost of living was a reason for them missing a rent payment.

The Council are providing support and mitigation for tenants in the form of several options. There are debt advice officers within the team, we are also using partner organisations such as 2-Way Tenancy Solutions and Citizens Advice Gateshead. In 2021/22 we delivered over £1.7m in financial gains for tenants. It is expected that we exceed that level in the current year. We have also made referrals to Northumbrian Water to help reduce tenants bill.

We have provided energy support for tenants with emergency top ups for prepayment meters, grant applications to have energy arrears reduced and support for residents with prepayment meters with unexpected standing charges. We are developing a growing network of warm spaces (75 so far) and have energy roadshows arranged for across the borough.

The Household support fund has provided support for households with children who are eligible for free school meals, older peoples households and the remaining fund was to support residents through the support of voluntary and community organisations and warm spaces.

The teams have learned lessons from the administration of the scheme to date and there are still some challenges to be faced. The scheme has been extended to March 2023. There have been some changes to the scheme including:

- The application process
- Targeting of more vulnerable households
- Households not eligible for other support
- No set proportions for children or pensioners

The Council took part in the administration of the Energy Rebate Scheme so every household on Council Tax Band A-D would be entitled to £150 rebate. Over 86,000 payments were made, the majority of which were paid in the first 8 weeks.

Some of the lessons learned included:

- Cross council effort worked well
- Dedicated phone line
- Increased number of people paying by direct debits
- Quick to respond to the digitally excluded
- Post office payments worked well
- Additional support and advice needed was discussed if anyone mentioned they were having financial struggles
- Communication around the expectation
- Already had systems in place

The report highlighted the cases of two people who contacted the Council. The anonymised case studies were discussed. In both cases the residents had a positive experience in contacting the Council and had written thank you letters. It was queried that when people are migrating over from legacy benefits to Universal Credit will they be worse off. It was noted that it depends on what their circumstances are. In certain circumstances they can be better off if they are working/ or have children. It was also noted that transition protection may apply for residents migrating to Universal Credit.

It was queried whether we have information about whether the failed direct debit payments from Council Tax are from people who aren't necessarily in council property as this is affecting people across the Board.

It was noted that when the energy rebate scheme came in there was an increase in people paying by Direct Debit, there are people who are not typically known to the council as non-payers. We are doing some public service reform work in Council tax to see how we can understand the whole picture.

We are also doing some work with the National Innovation Centre for Data (NICD)– to understand need so that the Council is able to help and support as many people as we can. It was noted that in the past people in receipt of benefits were able to build up some resilience and rely on support networks, however, this is now stretched with the increase in the cost of living. Concern was raised around the implications for future generations.

It was queried whether any progress had been made with regards to the connection between benefits and free school meals. It was noted that this is DWP information and is not held by the Council. It was noted that we do have a good relationship with the DWP locally and that we lobby DWP nationally in relation to the better use of data.

It was noted that congratulations should be offered on the work being done. It was suggested that with regards to Citizens Advice Gateshead, in terms of the help being offered by them that we are as joined up as possible. One of the case studies mentioned IVA as a solution to the circumstances for that individual. It was noted that an IVA shouldn't be the first port of call to be offered when someone is in need of help as this would mean they would have to re-build their credit rating.

It was noted that we do have a debt officer in Gateshead and an IVA or bankruptcy wouldn't be where we would look to avoid that as an option. However, in some cases the only option is to go down the IVA or Bankruptcy route. It was noted that financial education is sometimes necessary so people know how to deal with the aftermath of an IVA.

The Committee commented on the issues relating to the cost of living increases and felt that the current financial situation and the level of financial support available from government was inadequate.

RESOLVED - That the comments of the Committee be noted.

CR90 ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received the work programme reports. There were no updates from the previous report.

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

Chair.....