GATESHEAD METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING

Monday, 4 March 2024

PRESENT: Councillor J Eagle (Chair)

Councillor(s): R Beadle, D Burnett, D Duggan, T Graham, S Green, M Hall, I Patterson, J Turner, J Wallace, D Weatherley and K Wood

APOLOGIES: Councillor(s): C Buckley, D Bradford, B Clelland, J Green and J Simpson

CR26   MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on the 22nd January 2024 were approved as a correct record.

CR27   REVIEW OF THE BUDGET MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The Committee were presented with a presentation of the Budget Management process of the Council.

The Committee were shown a breakdown of the Expenditure and Income of the Council for each directorate.

Each directorate is assigned a budget holder which is usually the service director however they can delegate these responsibilities down the structure. Gateshead currently have 94 budget holders.

Budget holders will meet with their assigned Finance Business Partner to review all their income and expenditure before quarterly performances are produced. Budgets are monitored on a risk basis based on size and volatility. Budgets such as Children's and Adult's services are monitored more regular due to the volatility of the service.

The budget management process is a key system within the Council; therefore, it is audited on an annual basis by Internal Audit and subject to external audit by Mazars. Over the last five years the results have been Operating Well with one year being Satisfactory. Mazars consider the effectiveness of the Council's budget management systems as part of the Value for Money assessment. No negative assessment has been given.

The Committee were shown the below breakdown of the quarterly performances over the last three financial years.

It was highlighted in 22/23 and overspend of £5.4m was recognised and was

deemed unacceptable, a review exercise was carried out, led by the Deputy Chief Executive and actions were taken to help reduced expenditure, which was successful as in quarter 3 the overspend had changed to a £0.87m underspend.

At the start of the financial year, it is more likely to capture known cost pressures and known income losses leading to a more pessimistic position. Such as;

- Staffing costs – vacancies are projected in full however there may be delays in the recruitment.
- Projections will be more accurate throughout the year.
- One-off unbudgeted income streams and additional grants are received through the year.

There are always way to improve and make financial monitoring processes more robust and ever more important with increasing financial challenges it is vital to be accurate. The following improvements have been identified for the new budget.

- As of 2023/24 the presentation of the monitoring has been reviewed to reflect the value of specific management actions taken to address budget variations.
- Work is ongoing to reinforce the ordering process across the Council this will ensure all financial commitments in relation to orders can be captured accurately within the monitoring.
- Overall financial awareness and training will continue to be rolled out to Services.

RESOLVED:
i)   The Committee noted the presentation.

CR28   DIGITAL AND ONLINE SERVICES

The Committee received a presentation on Digital Inclusion.

The Council have declared a digital declaration which is:

Putting users first: Our services will be tailored to fit our users' needs, prioritising users above professionals and the organisation.

Creating technology that connects: Our IT systems will join up effectively, using simpler and more reliable software with open standards to give our data a common structure.

Building trust in data practices: We will only ever share information safely and securely, building trust among our partners and users, and better supporting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Leading digital transformation: We will demonstrate digital leadership, creating the conditions for organisational transformation, and ensuring all those we work with embrace this Digital Declaration.

Fostering open and collaborative working: We will champion an open working culture that helps every colleague to succeed with working digitally, through sharing our plans and experience, working collaboratively with other organisations, and reusing good practice.

Gateshead Council current digital services available can assist and support the community by increasing digital skills for residents and employees.

In our workforce there is two dedicated IT trainers to support our training programs. Since April 2020 there has been 1,816 training sessions to employees and Councillors. Training is available through the Learning Hub, training documentation such as videos and FAQ's on iTrent. Also, IT offer be-spoke training sessions, one-to-one sessions, face to face and virtual training.

Gateshead currently have an ongoing project: Gateshead Digital Inclusion Project. The project started looking at the initial priorities of the workforce and the public such as; networks, connecting across different organisations, funding, influencing good practise and looking at new technology.

The Inclusion Project is now working with 20 micro, small and medium VCSE organisations with annual income under £300,000 and are based in Gateshead. The results have shown improved access to the organisations facilities and amenities. Grants of up to £3,450 each and including ongoing support and free training opportunities. The project will continue till March 2025.

Gateshead Libraries have been working on a 'Digital Inclusion Offer' which helps support members of the public gaining access to technology.

In Gateshead there is currently;
- 8 libraries comprise the Council's statutory service.
- Additional 6 libraries run by volunteer associations.
- Good geographic spread.
- Range of opening hours including evenings and weekends.
- Delivery from our Digital team in other community venues also.

Libraries across the borough provide free access to computers, secure and up to date software, free Wi-Fi, access to printers, charging points for laptops and device and data gifting.

There is a wide range of support available across the libraries which includes trained library staff, links to other services, group skill sessions i.e., jobseeker support and basic computer skills. There are also drop-in sessions for a variety of settings.

The library is an essential service to the public as it has helped a wide range of users ever more with the cost of living.

To make the Committee aware there will be a digital switchover, where the public switched telephone network (PSTN) will be retired by December 2025 and a new digital technology called Voice over Internet Protocol using a broadband connect. Once the PSTN is switched off, customers who wish to continue having a landline

phone, and do not already have broadband, will generally need to have a suitable connection – this is the case even if they don't use a broadband service. We expect that providers will have a range of options for people in this situation, so customers should not be forced to take out a high-speed broadband package if they do not want to.

RESOLVED:
   i)   The Committee noted the presentation.

CR29   WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee reviewed the work programme and noted the following changes;

Review of Community Wealth Buildings – Six Monthly Monitoring Report and Review of Regent Funeral Services will be added to future meetings.

Capturing of wider regeneration benefits of Gateshead Quays will be taken to a Corporate Advisory Group.

RESOLVED:
   i)   The Committee noted the proposed amended programme.
   ii)   The Committee noted the work will be brought to the Committee to identify any additional policy issues, which the Committee may be asked to consider.

                                                   Chair………..…………….…..