

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 3 December 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Martin (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, A Batey, J Charlton, B Coult, J Elmer, D Freeman, C Hood, L Hovvels, J Howey, A Jackson, P Jopling, C Lines (Vice-Chair), R Manchester, B Moist, K Shaw, M Stead and A Surtees

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Charlton-Laine, J Cosslett, R Crute, O Gunn, C Marshall and M Wilson.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members.

3 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2021 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising from the Minutes

Medium Term Financial Plan – Universal Credit

Councillor Crute had requested a report on the removal of the £20 uplift from Universal Credit. Members were informed that a report on poverty issues would be presented to the Board at its meeting in January 2022.

Quarter One Customer Feedback - Warm Homes

The response to the query from Councillor Hood regarding Warm Homes was circulated to Members by e-mail on 11 November 2021.

Quarter One, 2021/2 Performance Management

A composite response to the queries raised on the report had been provided to Members on 1 December 2021.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 RIPA Annual Review of the Council's use of powers - Report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which informed Members of the Council's use of its powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) during the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The report also informed of the changes to legislation, and policy and developments in respect of the Council's use of its powers under RIPA.

The Governance Solicitor informed Members of the outcome of an inspection conducted on behalf of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner which had taken place remotely in December 2020. The Inspector had concluded that the Senior Responsible Officer was instrumental in developing a strong ethos of compliance within the Council. The Board commended the Team for their achievements in this regard.

Resolved:

That the annual report on the Council's use of powers under RIPA be received.

6 Resources - Q2 Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2021/22 - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position for the Resources service grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget based on the position to the end of September 2021 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Lines noted that £11.98m was remaining in the Resources Capital Programme 2021/2022 and that in the first five months to August 2021 the actual spend was £1.8m. The Councillor queried whether the remaining budget would be spent by the year-end, noting in particular the underspend in the Digital Durham programme. The Board was informed that COVID-19

had impacted upon the roll-out of the Digital Durham broadband programme but the Finance Manager expected that spend would increase before the end of the financial year, and ICT had been asked for a year end profile. The Finance Manager assured the Member that any remaining budgets in the Capital Programme would be rolled forward to the 2022/2023 financial year.

Resolved:

That the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position be noted.

7 Q2 2021/22 Customer Feedback - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided an overview of information collected from the Council's customers which described their experiences of using our services in the 12 months to 30 September 2021, compared to the same period in the previous year (for copy see file of Minutes).

In the absence of the Head of Digital and Customer Services, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager provided a summary of the range of feedback received, noting that throughout the 12 months, almost 1.7 million contacts were made through the customer services team. Telephone contact remained the most frequently used channel for contacting the Council, however, the Council continued to see an increase in the number of customers choosing to interact via the digital channels.

It was explained that since the start of the pandemic, there had been a steady increase in the number of service requests received.

A detailed review of all service requests within the CRM system that were not currently assessed against a performance standard was currently underway. The initial phase of this activity had been completed and had identified a range of service improvements linked to systems, data and reporting, training, and member experience. An update of these improvements would be provided within the quarter three report.

There had been a 13% increase in the number of corporate complaints compared to the same period last year. Of those investigated, 49% were upheld. During the period the Ombudsman delivered decisions relating to 74 complaints, of which 19 were upheld. Of the 14 decisions delivered during quarter two, two were upheld (14%).

Councillor Elmer noted the increase in service requests received in the 12 month period regarding litter. The Councillor agreed that litter bins should be emptied more frequently but also was of the view that the Council should

take a proactive approach to address the problem, such as increasing investment in the Civic Pride Team. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that this issue was included in the work programme for the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Committee, who had looked at the work of the Civic Pride Team. He would feedback the Member's comments.

Councillor Manchester had recently encountered difficulties reporting a service request on the website and was aware that other customers had experienced the same problem. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that he would refer this to ICT and enquire with the Head of Digital and Customer Services as to whether this issue had been reported by a number of customers.

Members discussed the recent storm, Storm Arwen, and the clear up work required as a result of fallen trees and branches. Councillor Batey had received a query from a customer regarding the crowning of trees, and asked for data on the time spent by the Clean and Green Teams on clearing fallen branches in the aftermath of the storm. Members were informed that routine crowning was not included in the Council's Tree Policy. The Board appreciated the environmental benefits of trees but also felt that a programme of routine crowning, where appropriate, should be explored. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager suggested that this could be included in the work programme of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Coult asked if the number of complainants who were dissatisfied with the response to their complaints had increased or decreased in the 12 month period. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that he would seek the information requested and provide a response to the Member direct.

Councillor Stead noted the increase in customer interaction via the Council's digital channels and welcomed the introduction of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. The Councillor emphasised the importance of communicating the advantages of using digital options available in addition to the telephone. Councillor Lines also welcomed the addition of functions such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp for customer contact with the Council but highlighted that customers may have a different perception of how quickly they would receive a response compared to other ways of reporting requests. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that he would refer the Councillors' comments to the Head of Digital and Customer Services to address through Communications and Marketing. A copy of the Communications Plan could be provided to Members when available.

Following a comment from Councillor Howey regarding the importance of retaining the telephone as a means of contact, which had been essential in the aftermath of the recent Storm Arwen, the Member was assured that the telephone would remain an option for interaction with the Council.

Following a question from Councillor Surtees, the Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that repeat complaints were included in the overall complaint figures. The Council had a policy for dealing with repeat or vexatious complaints, and where a customer lodged a single complaint through more than one avenue, such as to the service directly and a Councillor for example, this was picked up by the Complaints Team.

Members made a number of comments and suggestions regarding the review of the CRM system, including how photographs were used within the system. Councillor Batey noted that some of the observations made by the Board had been discussed by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee review group previously and asked about the current position. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager advised that he would follow this up and advise Board members accordingly.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

8 Overview and Scrutiny Six Monthly report - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided Members with the six monthly update report which was to be submitted to Council on 26 January 2022 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Strategy and Transformation presented the report and paid tribute to Councillor Brian Avery who had sadly died at the end of October. The Councillor had held the position of Vice-Chair of Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved:

That the content of the report to be submitted to Council on 26 January 2022, be noted.

9 Refresh of non-statutory, non-voting Overview and Scrutiny Co-optees - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which informed Members of the arrangements for the refresh of the non-statutory,

non-voting co-optees who were appointed to serve on the thematic Overview and Scrutiny Committees (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Chair emphasised the importance of promoting the vacancies to attract a good range of interested candidates.

Resolved:

That the arrangements for the promotion of the non-statutory, non-voting co-optee vacancies and the appointment process in accordance with the relevant appointment protocol attached at Appendix 2 of the report, be noted.

10 Update in relation to Petitions - Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which provided for information the quarterly update in relation to the current situation regarding various petitions received by the Authority (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Strategy and Transformation advised that the schedule provided a list of those petitions that were active, and those that were to be closed and which would be removed from the list prior to the next update.

Since the last update two new e-petitions had been submitted, one of which had been completed and a response was awaited on the second. One new paper petition had been received and a response was awaited. A list giving details and the current status of all active petitions was attached as Appendix 2 to the report.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

11 Notice of Key Decisions - Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which listed key decisions which were scheduled to be considered by the Executive (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

12 Information Update from the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees - Report of the Corporate Director of Resources

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which presented for information an update of overview and scrutiny activity from October to December 2021 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Charlton informed the Board that Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee were planning to look at the Council's emergency planning arrangements in the next few months.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.