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KIRKLEES COUNCIL

CORPORATE SCRUTINY PANEL

Thursday 11th March 2021

Present: Councillor Andrew Cooper (Chair)
Councillor Mahmood Akhtar
Councillor Will Simpson
Councillor John Taylor

Co-optees: Philip Chaloner

In attendance: Terence Hudson, Head of Technology
Andy Simcox, Service Director for Strategy and
Innovation
Eamonn Croston, Service Director for Finance
Cllr Graham Turner, Cabinet Member

Observers: Councillor Elizabeth Smaje, Chair of Overview and
Scrutiny Management Committee

Apologies: Councillor James Homewood
Councillor John Lawson

1 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

That the minutes of the meeting held on the 1st December 2021 be approved as a correct record.

2 Interests

No interests were declared.

3 Admission of the public

All agenda items were considered in public session.

4 Deputations/Petitions

No deputations or petitions were received.

5 Questions by members of the public (Written Questions)

No questions were asked.

6 Technology Strategy

Terence Hudson, Head of Technology and Andy Simcox, Service Director for Strategy and Innovation provided the Panel with an update on the council's technology strategy.

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The Panel was informed that the technology strategy is one of the key enabling strategy for the organisation when considering people, access and assets as well as the IT. Since the strategy was discussed at informal strategy approximately twelve months ago, things have changed significantly, and the pandemic has really tested out the strategy.

The Panel was informed that the visions and ambitions of the technology strategy is to *“work together to deliver innovative, effective and sustainable technology services that are designed around our diverse places and the needs of our people, partners and businesses”*.

The ambitions include:

- **Getting the basics right:** In the last twelve months, in response to the pandemic, there has been investment in home working equipment for staff. The next stage was getting people connected and Microsoft Teams connects over 3500 people and partners every day. The focus also shifted to look at the service desk offer as face-to-face contact could no longer be undertaken; therefore, it was important to look at operations and it has proved successful resulting in an improved customer focus and support in service desk operations.
- **Enabling resilient and available infrastructure:** In March 2020, in response to the looming challenge posed by the pandemic, a decision was taken to make significant changes to the network to ensure that four and half thousand people could work at home and, within two weeks of the first lockdown, this was achieved.
- **Connecting people, business and technology** – This is the big story in terms of working with the DfE to provide over 5895 laptops to maintained schools in Kirklees (4595 DfE and 1300 Kirklees). Technology has also been deployed to a number of VCS groups to support their Covid response and devices have been provided to care homes. In general, supporting the fibre network builds across Kirklees.
- **Developing inclusive technology and skills** – An important aspect of this was work was getting 69 councillors online, enabling them to use Teams to attend council meetings virtually.
- **Delivering class leading internet services** – Over 90 virtual council meetings have been held and while occasionally there have been technical issues most of the time it has worked well, and engagement has been good in those meetings. Trusted Covid related content on the website has received over 1.5 million-page hits. In addition, 12,000 business grants have been processed and over 20,000 requests to support people and communities. It's great to know that people can go to the Kirklees website to get the services they require.

The Panel was advised of the lessons learned and next steps which include:

- The technology strategy provided the framework for the Covid response

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- Benefit gained from working closely with partners and the voluntary and community sectors
- Proved technology is an enabler for rapid change when needed
- Move from tactical responses to long term strategic planning and build on the value of partnership working

The Panel welcomed the presentation and thanked the officers for providing an update on the technology strategy and for the work undertaken to enable council meetings and business to continue during the crisis.

RESOLVED

That an update on the strategy be presented to the Panel in March 2022.

7 Council Financial Management Update

Eamonn Croston, Service Director for Finance attended the meeting to provide the Panel with an update on the Council financial management. The Panel was informed that the information being presented outlines:

- Information on in-year financial performance as at Quarter 3 (month 9) including COVID impact, and prospects for a balanced budget position by current year end
- Current and emerging national intelligence and potential impact on the Council's overall financial position; both current year and next financial year, following recent Budget Council approval of budget plans for 2021/22 and following years
- An update on the Council's medium term financial resilience is also included in this financial management update report

In summary, the Panel was informed that at quarter one the prediction was there would be a £7.7 million overspend, particularly in the early days of Covid and the financial pressures this was having on the bottom line. This reduced to £5.5 million forecast overspend by quarter two. As at quarter three, the projection is under £2 million at £1.9 million. From the last quarter and this time, there is confidence that the trajectory could go in the right direction to deliver a break even position as far as possible by year end.

To date, the Council has allocated in excess of £102m COVID business grants (includes £5.2m discretionary grants) across the borough to about 9,500 businesses. The Grant application process for these schemes went live on 17 November 2020. In total, in just 3 months, a further 12,032 payments have been made to over 2,000 eligible businesses, totalling a further £28m.

The budget plans for 2021/22 approved by council reflects the administration's commitment through the rolled forward of existing multi-year plans, in relation to outstanding children's services, investing in our places and tackling the climate

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emergency. This is as well as a strong and sustainable corporate centre; and re-profiling resources into tackling inequalities highlighted by the pandemic.

The Panel was informed that a report will be presented to Cabinet on 16 March affirming the Council's membership of a Leeds City Region Business Rates Pool for 2021/22, comprising the 5 West Yorkshire Councils plus York and Harrogate. The forecast levy income to be retained by the Pool in 20-21/22 is likely to be modest at below £5m, but in spite of the current economic uncertainty, is still considered relatively low risk for Council members to continue to be part of a Pool in 2021/22.

On 22 February 2021, Government published a four-step roadmap to ease restrictions across England and provide a route back to a more normal way of life. Each step will be assessed against 4 tests before restrictions ease, starting with the return of schools on 8 March. The decision on each stage will move cautiously to keep infection rates under control. The roadmap will also provide context for the Chancellor's forthcoming budget statement on 3 March 2021.

The Panel was informed that key highlights from the budget statements includes:

- The extended business rates relief introduced at the start of Covid has been extended into 2021/22 for eligible retail, hospitality, and leisure properties in England. That means 100% relief up to the end of June and 66% relief to the end of March
- Furlough is being extended to the end of September 2021 and the extra £20 per week Universal Credit payment has also been extended to the end of September 2021

A question and answer session followed that covered a number of issues including:

- The overspend on special needs which will put it into a negative reserve is there some indication that this will be address over the next year or two
- Is there a specific methodology to work out how much money the council should receive from the government to ensure the local authority is not out of pocket as a result of Covid
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RESOLVED

That Eamonn Croston be thanked for providing an update on the Council Financial Management.