

## **RESOURCES AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**MONDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2020**

PRESENT: Councillors Rahul Tarar (Chair), Vinay Manro (Vice-Chair), Steve Allsopp, Claire Crilly, Steve Heyes, Oladapo Ibitoye, Nick Martin and Adorabelle Shaikh

Also in attendance were: Councillors Robert Jandy (Cabinet Member for Organisational Excellence) and Maureen Penny (Cabinet Member for Highways, Maintenance and Waste Services).

No apologies for absence were received.

### **1. Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

Councillor Steve Allsopp made a personal, non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of agenda item 5 (Financial Inclusion) as he is a member of the Wiltshire and Swindon Credit Union.

### **2. Minutes**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 March 2020 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

### **3. Public Question Time**

There were no public questions submitted.

### **4. Financial Inclusion**

The Committee considered a report providing an update on Financial Inclusion in relation to the Council's priorities, and also in response to the economic difficulties created by the Covid19 pandemic.

Mr Andy Stevens, Head of Revenue and Benefits, introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- The Council is pledged to provide early support so that Swindon residents are financially included and avoid getting into debt (Pledge 17).
- The work that has been undertaken to achieve this pledge includes:
  - The appointment of a Social Inclusion and Enterprise Manager.
  - Providing assistance to the Wiltshire and Swindon Credit Union.
  - Working in partnership with the National Illegal Money Lending Unit to try to prevent loan sharks operating in the area.
  - Providing assistance to the Citizens Advice Bureau, and enabling them to continue employing a 'Money Mentor'.
  - Providing a grant of £51k in 2018 to help create a new charity, Swindon Food Collective, which helps feed over 5000 people per annum.

- Providing assistance to the Swindon Social Enterprise Network, which has helped with projects such as the Night Shelter and getting companies to employ people in a socially inclusive manner.
- Arranging for Financial Inclusion seminars to be given to front line staff.
- Working with Libraries to help run 'Job Clubs' and assisting people in making online benefit claims.
- Telephoning residents in an attempt to prevent summonses for Council Tax debt.
- The additional financial support and advice offered to residents as a result of the pandemic includes:
  - The processing of an additional 2200 new claims for Council Tax Support, with the overall total number of claims having increased by 441.
  - Awarding an extra £150 per working age claimant for Council Tax Support using a government grant.
  - Rescheduling instalment payments to February and March 2021 to assist those customers paying by ten monthly instalments who contacted the Council Tax office to advise they could not afford a monthly instalment payment.
  - Providing food to people isolating or shielding via the Live Well Hub and through the Swindon Emergency Assistance Fund.
  - Successfully applied for a Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs grant of £227k to help with food provisions. This will be distributed via local partners and the Swindon Emergency Assistance Fund.
  - Holding meetings of the Welfare Hardship Group, whereby different service areas liaise on what can be done to assist residents.
  - Updating the benefits and financial advice on the Council's website.

Following the introduction, the Committee discussed:

- The provision available to use the Emergency Assistance Fund to provide items to those in financial difficulties, and also to potentially guarantee any loans following referral to the Credit Union.
- The advice and support offered to younger people who may be getting in to financial difficulties as a result of Covid.
- The resilience of organisations which are reliant on volunteers to provide financial assistance services, and concerns over how any lack of provision as a result of volunteers being in lockdown is compounding the financial difficulties of residents.
- The reasons behind the numbers of missed appointments with the Citizens Advice (48%) and the steps being taken to reduce this number, the details of which will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.

Resolved – To note the contents of the report and the actions being taken in respect to Financial Inclusion.

## **5. Organisational recovery / response to Covid**

The Committee considered a report setting out how the Council responded to the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges of lockdown. In particular, the report set out

how corporate functions have supported Council staff and services to continue to work safely throughout the pandemic, and how a successful response and recovery from the pandemic is essential to ensure the Council is able to achieve its plans and priorities.

Councillor Robert Jandy (Cabinet Member for Organisational Excellence) introduced the report and referred to the exemplary way in which staff had adapted to new ways of working during lockdown, noting the steep learning curve for those who contributed to making it work. Councillor Jandy invited Ms Sam Mowbray (Chief Operating Officer) to give a presentation which highlighted the key elements of the organisational response to, and recovery from, Covid. A copy of the presentation is attached to these Minutes and on the Council's website.

Ms Mowbray began by offering some context around how the majority of the Council's services were maintained during the initial Response Phase (with only a small number of non-critical services having been paused on the basis of risk to residents and staff), and she highlighted how a significant amount of corporate support had been given to enable the Council to continue to provide critical services safely throughout the pandemic. Ms Mowbray also referred to the various work and projects undertaken by IT services throughout the pandemic.

Ms Mowbray was assisted by Sonia Grewal (Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development) who gave an update on how the 'Organisation' work stream had supported staff and services with a range of activities, and Mr Philip Avery (Head of Communications) who advised the Committee of the three communication campaigns that had taken place throughout the period. Ms Mowbray ended the presentation by setting out the next steps for the Council in assessing the impact of Covid and determining new, longer term working arrangements for services in the future.

Following the presentation, the Committee discussed:

- The IT projects agreed pre-Covid which had been deferred or cancelled, which included the decommissioning of Skype for Business. Information on further projects affected will be circulated to members of the Committee subsequent to the meeting.
- The IT projects brought forward as a result of Covid which included telephony work for the Contact Centre (to allow staff to work from home), and the projects delivered on time and to budget which included the launch of a new Children's Services Social Care system.
- The implications to staff and the Council's estate should officers continue to work more digitally.
- The support given to staff during lockdown which included Personal Development Plan's, monthly one-to-ones and surveys taking place via digital technology, and the monthly sessions held with managers to equip them to do their roles. The Committee noted that there are pockets of staff with less engagement and alternative ways are being found to reach them.
- The lack of potential risks and financial implications within Section 5 of the report, the details of which will be attached to these Minutes once available.
- The areas of focus and concerns which arose as a result of evaluation of the staff surveys which included the use of technology (and training for this) and the availability of Personal Protective Equipment.
- The key learning points from the actions taken to respond to Covid which will

help embed good working practices in future, and the skills, techniques and training programmes which will be required to deliver business as usual.

- Future plans for those residents with no digital access to the Council which may include unplanned non-emergency face-to-face contact being reduced.
- The need for realistic and authentic messaging from the Council regarding the economic recovery both within Swindon and the country as a whole.
- The additional IT costs and resources that had been required to respond to the pandemic which included: the purchase of an additional sixty laptops as part of the refresh programme which had been brought forward; the move to Amazon Web Services as the hosting platform for the Council's website at a cost of £1500 which had also been brought forward, and; around £34k spent on items such as chairs, risers and other desk equipment to enable staff to work at home.

Resolved – To note the work undertaken to respond to the pandemic and lockdown measures, and be aware of the planned work ahead.

## **6. Work Programme 2020-2021**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Legal Officer setting out potential topics for inclusion in the 2020/2021 Work Programme. Officers had already made suggestions for the Work Programme which the Chair had considered, and the Committee noted that these were included in the draft attached at Appendix 1.

Following discussion, the Committee agreed:

- That the Section 151 Officer would be invited to present an update on the overall impact from Covid on the Council's budgets to either the November 2020 or January 2021 meeting.
- That an item on Waste and Recycling Resources would be included in the Work Programme for this Committee should it not come under the remit of another Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved – That the draft Work Programme for 2020/2021, subject to the amendments as set out above, be agreed and adopted by the Committee.