

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

TUESDAY, 29 SEPTEMBER 2020

PRESENT: Councillors Lynne Jones, Julian Sharpe, Chris Targowski (Chairman), Leo Walters (Vice-Chairman) and Simon Werner

Also in attendance: Councillors John Baldwin, Gurpreet Bhangra, Mandy Brar, David Cannon, Gerry Clark, David Coppinger, Jon Davey, David Hilton, Helen Price, Samantha Rayner, Gurch Singh and Helen Taylor

Officers: Mark Beeley, Nikki Craig, Louise Freeth, Catherine Hickman, Shilpa Manek, Duncan Sharkey, Adele Taylor and Andrew Vallance

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the Part I minutes of the meeting held on 27th July 2020 were approved a true and accurate record.

ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REPORT

Nikki Craig, Head of HR, Corporate Projects and IT, gave the Panel a brief summary of the report. The report looked at the period March 2019 – April 2020. Over 2,100 contacts had been made with 400 of those being progressed as formal complaints. The main reason for a complaint was a lack of action, with 51% of complaints regarding this as the overriding reason for the complaint being made. Around 64% of complaints had been processed within timescales, which was an increase from the previous year. When a complaint was received, the complaint could either be upheld, partially upheld or not upheld. 61% of all complaints were either upheld or partially upheld, with learnings taken by the team on each complaint.

If a resident remained unsatisfied with RBWMs complaints process, they could take the case to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. In 19/20, there were 49 decisions made by the ombudsman.

Looking at compliments, RBWM received 555 compliments in 18/19 which was reduced to 440 in 19/20.

The Chairman commented on the lack of action being the main reason for complaints and asked what officers were doing to try and resolve this. He also asked how the learning process took place and whether the person who made the mistake was informed.

Nikki Craig explained that the report came to Heads of Service on a quarterly basis, with each area being looked at carefully. Team meetings and training were important to ensuring that lessons were learnt for the future.

Councillor Werner said that it was good to see the 'lessons learned' section on the report. He asked what made a complaint a complaint and how they were therefore counted and recorded.

Nikki Craig said that there were a number of different tools that could be used to submit a complaint and that it did not need to come in a form, complaints could also be received by email or by written submission. Complaints made through all methods were logged.

Councillor Werner further asked if there was a figure for the total number of complaints and also if there was any encouragement to residents who had complained to go through the process and submit a formal complaint.

Nikki Craig responded by explaining that the total number of complaints made was the total number of contacts that had been stated in the report. It usually depended on what the complaint was about, but a resident wanting to make a complaint was usually a conscious decision to do so.

Councillor Walters noted that non-statutory complaints were also included as part of the annual report and wondered if other local authorities also did this. He also asked if it was worth the time compiling this report each year.

He was informed that the information in the report let officers know what the issues were and what lessons could be learnt. The data was held centrally so the report was easy to put together. Referring to other authorities, this did vary as there was not a consistent way of reporting. It was statutory for RBWM to report Adults and Children complaints but not any of the other areas.

Councillor Rayner, Lead Member for Resident & Leisure Services, HR, IT, Legal, Performance Management & Windsor, said that RBWM was learning all the time and was currently undergoing a change of culture where things would be open and transparent. She said that officers were keen to resolve any complaints as quickly as possible.

Councillor Sharpe asked if there were any complaints that were important or significant, or potentially a cause for concern.

Nikki Craig said that all the data from 19/20 had already been through the Corporate Leadership Team and anything significant was highlighted and actions were taken.

Councillor L Jones said that there was significant staff turnover and queried what was RBWM putting in place to help slow turnover.

Nikki Craig explained that staff turnover was relatively low at just under 15%. There had been some areas that had been a challenge but this tended to be because of national shortages in certain roles. Any areas that were a concern then the team would work with managers to come up with a solution.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel notes the report and:

- i) That the report is published on the Council's website.**
- ii) That the annual report continues to be produced and presented at Overview and Scrutiny panels.**

Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

Adele Taylor, Director of Resources, explained that the report reflected RBWMs performance during the period April – June 2020. The impact of the pandemic on business rate collection was not seen in Q1 and was slightly above target. Percentage of calls abandoned after 5 seconds was performing well which was pleasing especially as the number of calls during the period had increased. Improvements were needed in improving the processing of housing benefits, this was due to an increase in demand and adapting to remote working arrangements. However, performance up until August in this area had improved significantly.

It was important to note that Covid would have a significant impact on the performance report going forward.

The Chairman asked if RBWM had anticipated the impact that the furlough scheme ending would have on the revenues and benefits performance and resources.

Adele Taylor said that they were aware of that but it was difficult to anticipate how much of an impact there would be but RBWM was able to be flexible with its use of resources. Louise Freeth, Head of Revenues, Benefits, Libraries and Resident Services, said that at the beginning of the pandemic there had been a significant increase in the number of claims but a number of these were not followed through. She was confident that RBWM would be able to handle any significant increase over the next few months.

Councillor Clark joined the meeting.

Councillor Werner said that RBWM needed to be agile in its response and that staff needed to be freed up to deal with demand if necessary. He asked if agile ways of thinking were in place.

Adele Taylor said that teams had been hugely flexible throughout lockdown and mentioned that library staff had been calling those on the shielding list. She passed on her thanks to the library staff for all their work. Louise Freeth said that many staff had been cross trained so that they would be able to take on new roles if needed. Staff had been fully utilised during the pandemic and more libraries were starting to reopen, with some offering click and collect as well as delivery.

Councillor L Jones commented on the calls answered within 60 seconds and how the volume of calls went down but so did the number of calls answered, which surprised her. Louise Freeth was not able to give an answer at the meeting but said that she would take it away and have a look at the reason for this.

Councillor Hilton, Lead Member for Finance and Ascot, said that a lot of learning had taken place and Louise Freeth and her team were to be congratulated on their work. He believed that by the next performance report, the revenues and benefits area would have recovered.

Councillor Sharpe also passed on his congratulations and gratitude to the team. He asked if there was anything in the report that was a cause for concern.

Adele Taylor said that performance was always monitored and that there were certain areas that officers kept a close eye on. Louise Freeth said that the report reflected the performance of RBWM from Q1 and that there was nothing in the report that officers were not monitoring or reacting to.

Councillor Rayner reiterated the amazing work that the Library and the Benefits team had done. The Customer Service Team had also acted bravely and given good advice to residents, with many doing extra hours to cope with the demand.

Councillor Werner asked if there was any pre-warning of things that could change. Louise Freeth said there was not, using the example that the government had informed the council they would be responsible for the self-isolation payment and that RBWM would need to get the system up and running quickly. Duncan Sharkey, Managing Director, said that it was a mixed area and that sometimes officers were warned but sometime not. Everything was happening at pace and so there was little time for guidance in many cases.

Councillor Werner believed that the council should be lobbying government for information to be given to the local authority in a timely manner. The Chairman said that it was something that could be looked at, with the Local Government Association a good option for lobbying.

Councillor Hilton said that the pace of action was fast and it was therefore a struggle for guidance to be published in time. The latest guidance had been released to the public at the same time as RBWM received it. He said that Covid had helped to deliver innovation.

Councillor Rayner said that future reports would be different but that the council was changing and delivering well on the services that it needed to provide.

Councillor Davey commented on digital transactions and that 75% of offline transactions had disappeared even before Covid. He asked what reason there was for this. Adele Taylor said that she could do a written response to this question.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel noted the report and:

- i) Noted the 2020/21 Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel Q1 Performance Report in Appendix A.**
- ii) Noted that from Q2 onwards performance of measures relating to the Interim Council Strategy will be reported, along with the measures included in Appendix A which will be grouped by lead service.**
- iii) Requested relevant Lead Members, Directors and Heads of Service to maintain focus on improving performance.**

BUDGET MONITORING REPORT

Adele Taylor explained that the report had been considered by Cabinet the week and it had also been requested to be considered by the Panel. The report included financial information up until the end of July, but it was important to note that did not include information on sales, fees and charges. There was an overspend of £11.2 million but that did include Covid costs. Once the grant that had been received from the government had been included the reserves would be at £2 million. When the fees and charges scheme started, Adele Taylor predicted RBWM would be able to claim back anywhere between £2-4 million from the government. The report also included information on the capital budgets and the collection fund. RBWM was making returns to government so that they could understand the financial impact that Covid had on the local authority.

Councillor Werner mentioned that the report claimed that car parking across the borough would be back to its original level over the next few months. However, he believed that they were not close to the capacity of pre-Covid. Regarding the free car parking that RBWM offered in the summer, would this amount claimed from the government be reduced or would it be covered by the Covid grant. Councillor Werner noted that RBWM could have had a £2.5 million surplus budget, and asked if this was realistic.

Adele Taylor said that the car parking levels were based on activity in July and lots of assumptions had been made about how much capacity levels would be at. These assumptions were not based on 100% occupancy of the car parks and were based on previous years, as well as the predictions at that point in time which is when the economy was starting to be opened up again. Other areas were looked at to find the saving needed to finance the free parking, as it could not be claimed back from the government. The £2.5 million surplus was not something that Adele Taylor had said so she could not comment on it, but said that there was underspend despite Covid rather than because of Covid.

Andrew Vallance, Head of Finance, said that the car parking was based on the daily usage but they did not expect season ticket sales on parking to increase to the levels they were pre-Covid.

Councillor Baldwin left the meeting.

Councillor Werner said that the next budget monitoring report should be brought to scrutiny. Adele Taylor said that the number of budget monitoring reports would be increased.

Councillor L Jones said that RBWM had received £13 million in funding due to Covid and asked if it was favourable on the cash flow and borrowing costs, as she was seeing 100% of the adverse costs associated with Covid but not 100% of the favourable. Regarding Achieving for Children, she asked if there was an estimation of any uplift in activity after lockdown, and also what losses would be evident in future years.

Adele Taylor said that the cash flow had been slightly positive and that the grants had been helpful, with the cash flow being monitored on a daily basis. Uplifts were included in the costs, but it could be a grey area whether something would count as a Covid cost or not. All funding received had been a one off and it was difficult to predict what costs would be accumulated next year at this stage. Loss of income was currently more damaging for RBWM than immediate losses as commercial income was not covered in the loss of income. Regarding the question on Achieving for Children, Adele Taylor said that they were predicting that they would use all of the funding that had been made available.

Duncan Sharkey left the meeting.

Councillor Hilton said that the document showed where RBWM was in every area and that contingency was an important part of the budget that could be used if needed. There was a favourable variance and Councillor Hilton believed that if nothing changed then the reserves would be closer to £9 million than the £6 million they were currently at. The loss of income was a big impact and was what was causing the most issues, but Councillor Hilton believed that RBWM was in a better position than he thought the council would be in.

Councillor L Jones said that significant costs were not highlighted in the report and asked to reach that level of reserves what amount of general reserves would need to be put into the budget.

Adele Taylor said that officers were not aware of any significant costs but new burdens would be coming soon, for example the self-isolation payment. This needed to be thought about particularly how it was managed in the budget. The general fund reserve was currently at £8.2 million. Next year, the Medium Term Financial Strategy would be revised, with any additional costs needing additional resources. Dialogue with the Treasury had been good but officers would need to make predictions on costs and income, the assumptions made would be explained to all members.

Councillor Walters asked how much rental income was. He was told that it was the ability to enforce as RBWM was a ceremonial landlord and therefore the council needed to work with tenants closely as they could not enforce if the tenants were not paying rent. Councillor Hilton said that it was about £1.6 million and explained that a responsible approach was being taken by the council, it was better to have tenants than empty spaces.

Councillor Sharpe asked which areas of the report were a concern and 'kept officers awake at night'. Adele Taylor said that it was the unpredictability, for example another national lockdown would provide more additional needs. The ending of furlough could also be a volatile area and could translate into costs in other services.

Councillor Hilton said that he slept better now than he did this time last year. He said that RBWM could only deal with what it knew about and that they had been doing well so far.

Councillor Price asked if there were any risks that members should be made aware of. She used the example of the council tax reduction scheme consultation being unlawful and having to be rerun, which would cost money. The report mentioned that there was an amount of £49,000 for wardens but this decision was taken in the previous financial year. Libraries had been referenced in the report and it was important to note that they provided more services to residents than just book loans. There was a children's hub also referenced with a £185,000

slippage, despite there being two consultations and Councillor Price wanted to understand why. She asked for an explanation on how the sales, fees and charges worked.

Adele Taylor said that the risks around the consultation would flow through the collection fund and that the scheme would be going back out for consultation. There was a potential risk associated with the scheme but this would not fall within this financial year. The wardens cost had already been included in the budget. Regarding the libraries, Adele Taylor said that they had focussed on this as it was a part of the service that had successfully been restarted. Explaining the fees and charges system, Adele Taylor used an example of the registrars budget being £100,000, with RBWM having to bear the first 5%. However, any losses incurred after that for every £1 the government would cover 75p.

Councillor Davey mentioned the capital programme and that there was £13.8 million worth of slippage in the report. He asked for this to be explained to him.

Adele Taylor said that in the budget was the expenditure for the year, but some projects could have issues with either delivery or completion and therefore the cost would go into next year's budget.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman asked if the Annual Governance Statement Progress Reports were ready to be added to the Work Programme. Mark Beeley, Democratic Services Officer, confirmed that these had now been confirmed and would be added into the Work Programme before the next meeting.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY; That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the remainder of the meeting whilst discussion takes place on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1-7 of part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

The meeting, which began at 6.15 pm, finished at 8.20 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....