

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held online, on Tuesday 27 October 2020

Present

Councillor M Mackrory (Chairman)
Councillor A Turrell
Councillor M Buckley
Councillor G Butland
Councillor M Garnett
Councillor J Abbott

Councillor V Metcalfe (Acting Chairman)
Councillor J Moran
Councillor M Platt
Councillor S Lissimore
Councillor D Louis
Councillor J Young

1. Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

It was noted by the committee that since the last meeting Cllr A Sheldon had left the committee, to be replaced by Cllr D Louis. The Chairman thanked Cllr Sheldon for his contribution to the committee and welcomed Cllr Louis.

Also in attendance for item 4 were Cllr J Reeves, Cllr A Brown, Cllr J Baker and Cllr L Wagland.

Apologies were received from Cllr Pratt.

No declarations of interest were noted.

2. Minutes

Members approved as a correct record Minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2020.

3. Questions from the Public

There were no public speakers

4. Home Working and Staff Wellbeing

Members received report CPSC/11/20

The panel for this item was:

- Cllr Susan Barker, Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities
- Pam Parkes, Director, Organisation Development and People
- Alison Woods, Head of People BP and Employment Practise
- Ben Unsworth, Head of Service Transformation

Members of the committee received a presentation from Cllr Barker and other officers. Key points raised included:

- Changes to the way we work at ECC were brought about because of lockdown. Many have been successful and there is some desire to keep them. This is however, dependent on what the service is, and whether or not it adversely affects services to our residents.
- Early staff survey and desktop research found that most (77%) employees felt they were able to do their work from home.
- A hybrid approach was found to be the best model in the long term.
- High level findings from research and survey results found that:
 - o Remote working works best when it's by choice and not everyday
 - o Managers lead by example to either help or hinder remote working
 - o The right technology can reduce stress and frustration amongst employees
 - o Companies that adopt remote working see an increase in efficiencies and business process
 - o Women spend more time on childcare responsibilities at home
 - o Reduced social interaction can lead to social isolation and impact job satisfaction
 - o There are issues around the suitability of spaces to work at peoples homes.
 - o Promoting wellbeing when working from home will take a change in approach from previous strategies.
- Following employee feedback, since March the organisation has:
 - o Created better plans for the safe reopening of our workplaces
 - o Developed a home-working support package
 - o Ensured risk assessments are carried out for employees working in our offices and remotely
 - o Launched the My Wellbeing Portal
 - o Launched the new ECC Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual network
 - o Launched the new Parents Network - a virtual network for parenting-related discussion and resources. It currently has 230 members.
 - o Launched O365 and Teams across the organisation
 - o Developed a package of holiday support for working parents
 - o Launched a second survey (open from 24th September to 15th October) to better understand shifts in needs, wellbeing and working experience overall

Following the presentation, Members of the committee were invited to discuss the item with officers. Key issues raised included:

- Induction of new starters – members raised concerns around how new members of staff would be made to feel comfortable in a new workplace outside of a physical office. This was particularly important with regards to young people and apprentices who likely had little or no

experience of working as part of an office team. Officers assured members that new teambuilding and training regimes would take this into account moving forward, while also building in semi-regular opportunities for teams to meet in the future.

- Risk assessments and suitable working environments – while employees have raised concerns around the suitability of space (noise, shared office space, no dedicated office space, childcare responsibilities at home etc.), members were assured that all employees had completed a number of health and safety/DSE assessments to ensure that they had all that they needed to work comfortably and safely. Additional budgets were made available to all employees to purchase items that they did not have at home.
- Customer service – member raised concerns around how our customer facing roles have adjusted to home working and the extent to which service might have suffered. Members were assured that line management processes had effectively adapted to ensure that productivity hadn't suffered. Certain services have obviously been paused (weddings etc.), but other services have seen a significant increase in engagement with online services (libraries etc.).
- New wellbeing strategy – members were informed that this was comprehensive and stressed healthy working patterns when working remotely and from home.
- The number of women ECC employs – ECC has a 75% female workforce. This has not changed materially since the last audit.
- Long meetings – guidance is being developed to ensure that regular breaks are ensured in all longer meetings and that agendas remain an appropriate length.
- Environmental/cost saving impact – this hasn't yet been adequately measured, but colloquially we're seeing marked improvements. Travel costs alone have fallen dramatically.
- Disposal of real estate – this is currently being investigated, but a new strategy has to come first.
- Home insurance issues with home working – members noted that a number of policies can be voided due to home working. ECC is investigating and will release guidance when more is known.
- Returning to the office – this will be taken on a case by case basis. The hybrid approach is favoured, with individual employee needs and wishes taken into account.

ACTION – Officers agreed to bring the results of the second survey back to the committee before any actions are taken as a result of findings.

Cllr Mackrory thanked officers for their time in attending the session and for their work throughout the pandemic.

5. Financial Overview as at the Half Year Stage

Members of the committee received report CPSC/12/20.

The panel for this item was:

- Cllr Christopher Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance
- Nicole Wood, Executive Director, Finance and Technology
- Adrian Osborne, Head of Strategic Finance and Insight
- Christine Golding, ECC Chief Accountant

Cllr Mackrory began by acknowledging the strain that has been placed on council finances as a result of the pandemic.

Members received a presentation from officers outlining ECCs current financial position.

Key points raised by Cllr Whitbread and officers included:

- Revenue over spend of £2m (0.2%) predominantly driven by COVID-19 pressures.
- Uncertainty – impact of COVID-19 on demand for services and future income means it continues to be challenging to provide a forecast for the year.
- Still some potentially significant unquantified COVID-19 commitments to come, including Home to School Transport and impact of the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.
- Emergency government funding of £73m has been received to date – does not cover the value of COVID-19 commitments we currently have. Allocation of £1bn fourth tranche of emergency funding recently announced a further £11.8m.
- ECC will receive £3 per head of the population for being a “High” level COVID alert area – “to support proactive containment and intervention measures”.
- Capital under spend of £5.8m (2.6%) against the latest budget of £228m.

In relation to the financial impact of Covid-19:

- Decisions totalling £76.1m made in relation to COVID-19
- £57m originally in relation to Adult Social Care – Q2 report returns £3.3m of reserves provided as demand lower than anticipated and income received from CCG, partially offset by loss of residential income
- £15.6m of decisions for loss of income – estimated income losses greater than original decisions – pressure reflected in Q2 over spend
- First claim made for Fees and Charges income loss compensation scheme – For April-July claim of £1.6m submitted
- Emergency funding to date is £73m – however latest allocation will take to £85m, should cover current pressures but impact is changing all the time
- Recommendation in the report adds £4.5m to the Recovery Reserve – support COVID recovery strategies
- Loss of Council Tax base a significant concern – current data estimates a £25m loss on collection fund for 2020/21, which will create

pressure in future years –still no guarantees have been given to support the loss of tax base in 2021/22. There are also no guarantees on continuation of the fees and charges loss compensation scheme in 2021/22.

Following the presentation, members of the committee were invited to discuss the item with the Cabinet Member and Officers. Key points raised included:

- The rolling over of capital underspends – members were assured that these are being reviewed.
- Future plans to meet budget gap arising from covid-19 spending – members were informed that there is still uncertainty around what future budgets will look like. The picture will be clearer once council tax receipts for the year are finalised.
- Council tax income – members were informed that, while there is still little clarity, early reports suggest that even from usually high collection authorities, the amount has dropped considerably. It is estimated that the drop in collection is around 2.5%. It is unclear what impact the government's job retention scheme will have on collection rates.
- Redundancies at ECC – no core employees were made redundant, but some staff from our commercial activities were placed on furlough.
- Funding streams associated with covid-19 – members raised concerns around how much money was coming in relating to covid-19 with little or no oversight over how it was being spent. Assurances were provided that greater and more timely detail would be provided in future.

ACTION – Members raised questions around what is happening with the waste reserve now that litigation with related parties has come to a conclusion. A confidential briefing note was promised to support future discussions.

6. Date of Next Meeting

The next full committee day was noted as Tuesday 24th November. In a change to usual time the committee would begin at 11.30, on the rise of cabinet.

7. Urgent Business

None received

8. Urgent exempt Business

None received

Close of meeting

The formal meeting closed at 12.30