

Overview Report

People Select Committee

Overview Meeting 2021

1 March 2021

The Environment, Culture, Leisure and Events

Context

The Council has a strong track record of sound financial management. In the current economic climate, finances are always going to be a challenge, and we work hard to make our budget go further. We have adapted to unprecedented funding reductions over the last eight years, saving around £53m. Our medium-term financial planning approach has allowed us to continually balance our budget through delivering savings and efficiencies but also to plan ahead and deliver invest-to-save schemes and innovative changes to service delivery models. We carefully target investments to stimulate economic growth, provide great assets and deliver financial returns to offset funding reductions.

Since the initial development of this Council Plan we have and still are experiencing the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. Coronavirus provides huge challenges for us to address in terms of community and economic recovery and dealing with the long-term implications of the pandemic. We have reviewed our priorities for the coming year and have adapted these to reflect the focus that is needed to respond to this challenge.

The challenge for all Members is to ensure that decisions about the basis on which services will be delivered are within the resources available, taking account of a number of factors such as the uncertain financial position, changing demographics, increasing demand, new national legislation and policy direction.

Members are reminded of the Council's Vision that supports decision-making:

- A place where people are healthy, safe and protected from harm, where
 - People live in cohesive and safe communities
 - People are supported and protected from harm
 - People live health lives
- A place with a thriving economy where everyone has opportunities to succeed, creating
 - A growing economy
 - Improved education and skills development
 - Job creation and increased employment
- A place that is clean, vibrant and attractive, creating
 - Great places to live and visit
 - Clean and green spaces
 - Rich cultural experiences

The Council plays its part in making sure this is achieved by being a Council that is ambitious, effective and proud to serve.

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Performance Reporting

Performance across the Council Plan was reported on a six-monthly basis to Executive Scrutiny Committee. Please see the link:

<http://www.egenda.stockton.gov.uk/aksstockton/users/public/admin/kab71.pl?cmte=SCR>

The Environment, Culture, Leisure and Events - Director – Reuben Kench

Relevant services include:

- Customer Services & Digital Transformation
- Museum & Heritage Service
- Events Service
- Libraries and Information
- Learning and Skills
- Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure

Council Plan 2020-2023

The Council Plan sets out the aims and objectives for all services and is refreshed on an annual basis.

The key priorities for 2020-21 for the Environment, Culture, Leisure and Events themes are attached at Appendix 1.

Emerging Issues

Service delivery is influenced by a range of internal and external factors that develop over time. Emerging challenges and opportunities are summarised as follows:

Customer Services & Digital Transformation - Priorities for the year ahead

- Provide leadership, guidance and support to encourage the adoption of the MS 365 toolkit and other digital solutions to enable effective working practices and to support the redesign of Council services.
- Develop and implement a range of digital customer solutions to provide a positive customer experience and to reduce the cost of service delivery.
- Redesign and implement Stockton Council's main website and the Stockton Information Directory, ensuring full compliance with WCAG 2.1 AAA accessibility standards.
- Sustain the Council's Customer Service Excellence accreditation.
- Deliver high quality, efficient customer services via the range of access channels through the effective configuration and deployment of the Netcall contact centre solution and the GOSS digital platform.

Customer Services & Digital Transformation – challenges and opportunities

Challenges

- Customers who are digitally excluded.
- Digital skills (workforce and customers).

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- Reliance upon third party suppliers to provide online solutions that are compliant with WCAG 2.1 AAA accessibility standards.
- Staff ability and / or willingness to respond positively to digitally enabled changes in working practices and new models of service delivery.

Opportunities

- Build on recent success with the GOSS digital platform by continuing to develop staff skills and capabilities.
- Exploit the capabilities of the GOSS Digital Platform to deliver more self-serve products.
- Exploit the capabilities of Netcall to provide efficient high quality customer contact experiences.
- Build on the increased take up of digital services for staff and customers during COVID pandemic.
- Roll out the Barclays Digital Eagles Programme to increase digital skills in staff and customers.
- Expand the contribution of Digital Services Group to support service redesign and the adoption of MS 365 and other digital solutions.

Libraries & Information Service - Priorities for the year ahead

- Development of an apprenticeship programme for Library and Information Workers to address the ageing workforce and to develop new skills for the future workforce
- Implement a new Business and Intellectual Property Centre at Stockton Central Library and work with other economic development teams to provide the people of the Borough and the wider Tees Valley with access to quality resources, advice and signposting to help them develop new skills and ideas into businesses.
- Replace our library management system with a more cost effective product and provide improved access to digital services and an enhanced, more efficient service.
- Plan for the replacement of our Mobile Library with a more environmentally friendly vehicle.
- Support the health of our communities through our continued partnership with Public Health, local support organisations and our Universal Health Offer resources.
- Continue to promote and to stimulate a love for reading and exploration through books, online resources and cultural activities.

Libraries & Information – Challenges and opportunities

The pandemic has led to a rapid change in the way the Library and Information Service works both physically and digitally. The lockdown in March saw a very significant increase in the use of eBooks (issues have doubled) and eAudio and in December, the service subscribed to an online newspaper and magazine service which has further increased the resources available to those who do have digital access.

The period of the pandemic has highlighted the value of the library service both locally and nationally in supporting health and wellbeing, combatting loneliness and providing support for education and learning to both children and adults. The challenge to us has been to learn, like most, how to utilise digital services to their most effective end and at a rapid pace. The libraries and information team has stood up to this challenge well, but it whilst it has

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brought new audiences in some ways, in others it has highlighted the remaining, significant digital divide in the community.

Opportunities

- embed the library and information service into the recovery of the Borough
- support people looking for new skills or employment ideas.
- support children and young people catching up with their education
- offer advice and information to support individual and community health and wellbeing
- develop an integrated physical and digital library and information service, building on the lessons we've learned over recent months.

Events Service - Priorities for the year ahead

The events programme contributes to a number of Council Plan priorities, including the economic objectives and those relating to community cohesion and wellbeing. The inability to deliver our 2021 events programme as planned, will have an impact on our key improvement areas/outcomes including vibrant town centres and supporting events in other towns.

In addition to the production of more on-line/ digital event work, the Events Service will need to focus on its Autumn/Winter events programme and assess what type of face to face event delivery may be feasible if some level of social distancing remains in place.

COVID safety standards will be further developed over the coming months, as we understand more about the ongoing effects of the pandemic and associated national guidance in relation to events. This work will also consider how we can assist and support other community and commercial led events who want to deliver events on Council Land.

Future priorities/themes for event delivery will be reflect the impact that the pandemic has had on residents and communities in respect of their wellbeing, isolation and inequalities.

Events Service – Challenges and opportunities

Challenges

- Given the current situation with the pandemic, the Council's decision not to allow large scale events on Council land has been extended until June 2021. We continue to review key planning dates, financial risk and anticipated schedule/ impact of the vaccination roll out programme.
- the protracted uncertainty for event work now in its second year, may result in some suppliers, artists and other self-employed event staff not being able to survive financially. This may have an impact on the Council's ability to deliver its events programme in the long-term and we will continue to monitor the situation.

Opportunities

- Whilst outdoor event work is currently at on hold, there are opportunities to build on the successful digital event work we delivered last year.
- Looking further ahead into the year, managing public expectations and the appetite for event type activities will be challenging, but there is likely to be a pent up demand for social and cultural experiences as restrictions are lifted.

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Museums & Heritage Service - Priorities for the year ahead

The service's main priority will be the transition back to an open and operational attraction. There is understanding that it will likely be a phased approach with continued restrictions and limitations for some time.

The pandemic has also highlighted the need for more robust digital solutions for our visitors. We will move ahead with online booking for admission, elements of retail, events and our learning programme. This will be utilising software already purchased and being used, but adapting it and training staff on these new functions.

Through the Spence Bequest Trust and also Tees Valley Museum Consortium (Arts Council grant) funding we will transform one of the gallery spaces in the museum. This will have a new focus on highlighting the nationally significant Spence Collection, as well as contemporising our display through community co-curation.

As lead partner to the Tees Valley Consortium we will continue to deliver the agreed objectives around improving access, learning and community engagement. We will also be shaping the visioning around the next round of funding, aiming to secure a larger grant.

We will continue as planned with minor repairs to the toilet block in the park to improve the facilities. We will also deliver phase 1 of the new wayfinding and signage in the park that ties together the museum and park branding, creating a more unified attraction.

Continued work will be developed around funding opportunities for the development of the site. This will include visitor centre, new collection store and exhibition space as priority.

Museums & Heritage Service – Challenges and opportunities

The biggest challenge we are facing is getting visitors to feel comfortable and safe in returning to the museum. This will inevitably be a phased approach but additional marketing and promotion will be required to get the message across. We also believe that events and activities will need to be reduced and this can be a challenge as our events programme attract our family audience. Ultimately this year we will likely see a reduction in income the service can achieve.

However we see this as an opportunity to re-evaluate our programming, ensuring it meets the new demands of our visitors. It will also allow us to focus on the core offer which is the collection and displays. Much work has already been done during the pandemic around redisplay, maintenance and interpretation but this will be continued.

The redisplay of the new gallery goes hand in hand with new research around our Spence Collection. The development of this work is of national significance and will lead to a strong application for the collection to be given designated. Through designation we are more likely to gain funding, as well as more national recognition.

The challenges around the park are the growing need for serious investment to improve the facilities. Current priorities are around the toilet block which has not been fully updated since the late 80s. Although minor repairs will happen, ensuring DDA compliance, further investment is needed. There is also growing issues with the aviary, particularly the redundant building around it that is now becoming an eyesore.

Visitors are regularly requesting improvements but due to the lack of funding opportunities and limited resource any work done is only small scale with limited impact.

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The service relies heavily on volunteers to support much of the visitor facing functions. A challenge this year will be the reintroduction of volunteers in the museum. Understandably many are nervous about returning, some are in the clinically vulnerable category. Also some have already expressed anxiety of working with the public due to being isolated for so long. It is worth noting that there will be a lot of work required to support them and also build up new volunteers. Therefore there will be a potential gap in resource that may need filling with staff in some capacity or reducing the offer.

Although the challenge is always to obtain funding for any developments, there may be an opportunity arising this year through Arts Council England for significant capital. The MEND fund was paused due to the pandemic but is likely to return in the coming months. The service will ensure all plans are ready for any new funding opportunities emerging.

Learning and Skills - Priorities for the year ahead

The Learning and Skills Service continues to deliver a range of lifelong learning opportunities to support residents and businesses to meet their full economic potential whilst also increasing opportunities, prosperity, wellbeing and cohesion in the communities we serve. This is done by maximising funding allocations such as through the Adult Education Budget and Levy/Non-levy apprenticeship funding. The extension of the Routes to Work programme until March '22 provides further opportunity to support those furthest from the labour market to overcome significant barriers and enter employment. Collectively this funding resource, together with an effective tailored curriculum to meet arising local priorities ensures the Service continues to be strongly positioned to support residents, employers and community organisations in the wake of the pandemic.

Learning and Skills - Challenges and opportunities

Challenges

Upon commencement of the 20/21 academic year in September, due to enforced COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, classroom capacities were limited which resulted in increased financial pressure on the Service to fulfil its contractual obligations.

Most recently in January '21, the latest restrictions has resulted in face-to-face classroom delivery being either suspended or converted to remote and online delivery where possible. Planning and adaptations made by the Service has resulted in over 80% of planned provision successfully being converted to continue outside of the traditional classroom. This has provided significant challenge in order to ensure learners have the necessary access to resources to learn online, such as IT and data. By utilising funding to issue the required IT and data allocations, this has allowed learners to continue their programme and enabled the Service to help address the digital poverty divide first witnessed at the start of the pandemic.

Opportunities

The conversion to remote and online learning has provided new opportunities with cohorts of new learners accessing the Service to enrol onto programmes to gain skills and qualifications to support their development. This is something which the Service is continuing to strengthen with the implementation of a new online learning platform.

Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure - Priorities for the year ahead

A review and refresh of a range of environment related strategies is required. Currently there are a plethora of plans and strategies that directly support environment and sustainability policy areas, they need to have be better connected and we need to find an improved way of collectively reporting our actions. A new Environmental Sustainability and Carbon Reduction

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Strategy will be developed which will refine/replace previous documents and align itself to the Government's new Environment Bill.

We will be commencing a major piece of work to agree management plans for our countryside and greenspace sites in conjunction with colleagues in all Directorates.

Strategic relationships will be reignited especially in the Healthy Lifestyle and Sports/Recreation elements of our work. These relationships will lead to significant developmental opportunities which will be pursued with vigour.

Environment, Leisure & Green Infrastructure – Challenges and opportunities

The Government is advocating an ambitious program of works in our efforts to mitigate the Global Climate Emergency. We are expecting significant funding which will need to be effectively utilised within short timescales. This is both a challenge and opportunity.

Monitoring and evaluation of all projects will be of considerable challenge. We need to develop Bio Diversity baseline data together with robust monitoring of all activities to be able to confidently report progress.

Potential Areas for In-Depth Review

Members are reminded that topics are being sought for the Scrutiny Work Programme 2021-22. Using the information provided as part of the performance updates and this Overview meeting, the Committee is invited to identify potential topics for review within this theme.

Potential topics will be considered at Executive Scrutiny Committee on 23 March.

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Appendix 1 – Council Plan - Key Priorities 2020- 2021 - The Environment, Culture, Leisure and Events

Making the Borough a place where people are healthy, safe and protected from harm means creating a place where:

- People live in cohesive and safe communities
- People are supported and protected from harm
- People live healthy lives

We have identified these key priorities for 2020/21 to help us achieve this vision. This year we will:

- Support voluntary sports clubs to build community capacity
- Develop and pilot a physical activity programme in target communities

Making the Borough a place with a thriving economy where everyone has opportunities to succeed means creating:

- A growing economy
- Improved education and skills development
- Job creation and increased employment

We have identified these key priorities for 2020/21 to help us achieve this vision. This year we will:

- Work with Tees Valley Combined Authority on regional skills development
- Develop routes to work to assist those furthest from employment
- Strengthen adult careers advice and guidance

Making the Borough a place that is clean, vibrant and attractive means creating:

- Great places to live and visit
- Clean and green spaces
- Rich cultural experiences

We have identified these key priorities for 2020/21 to help us achieve this vision. This year we will:

- Complete Ingleby Barwick leisure and library facility
- Deliver plan for additional tree planting

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- To develop and adapt our fantastic annual events programme to work well in the Coronavirus environment
- Improve the visitor facilities in Preston Park
- Develop the next phase of the River Tees enhancement
- Strengthen safety procedures for events on Council land and training for event organisers
- Improve facilities for playing pitch sports
- Continue to work towards carbon reduction targets at the Council and in the Borough