

Overview Report

People Select Committee

Overview Meeting 2021

1 March 2021

Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services

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

1. 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>
2. Relevant services include:
 - Administration
 - Democratic Services

Council Plan 2020-2023

3. The Council Plan sets out the aims and objectives for all services and is refreshed on an annual basis.
4. The key priorities for 2020-21 for the Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services are attached at Appendix 1.

Emerging Issues

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

Administration - Priorities for the year ahead

6. During this coming year we will ensure a smooth delivery for the transfer of the remaining Adult Services administration teams into the Corporate Administration Service. This builds on the existing work with our three administration teams who support Adult Services. The transferred teams will be welcomed into a multi-skilled and agile administration service, they will have improved development opportunities and an increased sense of belonging to a professional administration service, this will also bring improved opportunities to provide consistency in practice and resilience.
7. Following the completion of the Children's Service Review our plan is to align our services to meet the new administration requirements, we will invest further in digital innovations and solutions whilst maximising value and improved practice.
8. Furthermore, following the success of our Business Administration Level 2 Apprenticeships we have developed our Business Administration Apprenticeship Model. This model develops individual apprentices to have transferable skills and work experience in a range of Council Services, thus providing a widened opportunity for apprentices and for the Authority to have the ability to appoint someone who has progressed through the Councils Business Administration Apprenticeship Programme. Joining our programme this year are eleven newly appointed apprentices who will be working towards a Level 3 Business Administration qualification.

Administration – Challenges and opportunities

9. The Corporate Administration Service continues to focus on understanding and capturing the administration requirements across the Authority. Building on the successes of the introduction of the Corporate Administration Model our plan ensures services remain focused and effective so our customers feel assured of the support and resilience a

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Corporate Administration Service provides, which in turn allows them to focus on their core service.

10. Progress this last year saw the remaining nine administration teams transfer from the Children's Service to the Corporate Administration Service. Our range of services are presently across ten locations made up of twenty-eight multi-skilled administration teams, these teams are managed by administration professionals who are in a position which has an improved overview of work volumes and management information across the Council as a whole. Teams work effectively and where appropriate remotely and virtually in line with agile working principles. The implementation of our virtual Conferencing & Meeting Service and the introduction of our Standard Operating Processes have led to improved practice, digital innovations and simplified operations whilst building consistent processes.

Democratic Services - Priorities for the year ahead

11. Maintaining Governance support for both scheduled and ad hoc meetings of Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny, Quasi-Judicial, Police & Crime, Health & Wellbeing and Consultative bodies, as they continue to meet to respond to decisions required to be made by the Council, remains a constant priority. In addition, this is likely to include continued support in respect of the Council's Covid response providing Governance support where required.
12. We will seek to provide this support utilising the available technology where possible and building upon the capacity now in place among all members and officers who have embraced the use of IT to the extent that apart from a brief period in the Spring 2020 when everyone received training, all meetings of the Council, Cabinet and its Committees etc have continued to be held.
13. Following the forthcoming by elections scheduled for May 2021, we will seek to deliver a bespoke Member Induction for the 3 newly elected Councillors utilising technology to deliver remotely should social distancing measures still apply. Again this is possible thanks to the investment in necessary IT kit and support for members, which has now seen the delivery of Member Policy Briefings in a remote way, with evidence seen of an increased attendance by members thanks to the extra flexibility remote learning allows. We will continue to develop Members skills in this regard so that they can maximise the opportunities presented by technology.
14. This electoral change will also necessitate a review being carried out of the political balance of the Council and arrangements being made for appropriate appointments to be made by full Council, which should be confirmed at Annual Council Meeting on 26 May 2021.
15. Once our Annual Meeting is held and our new Mayor confirmed, we will strive to support the Mayor in delivery of their Mayoral Strategy, again set against the backdrop that some social distancing measures at least are likely to be in place possibly until the end of Summer 2021. We will do so taking advantage of the new digital 'footprint' we have been able to imprint over the last year which has seen the Mayor stream digital events such as Armed Forces Week, Remembrance Sunday and the Mayor's Carol Service; as well as communicate to an increasing social media audience via Facebook. The past year has highlighted the power to engage with a digital audience, as evidenced by the numbers that have come forward to support the Mayor and be part of the Mayor's 100 Heroes and raise funds for the Mayor's charities. It would be a retrograde step not to continue to utilize technology as part of the Mayor's strategy going forward, particularly as the Council has already declared that it cannot support live events until the end of July 2021 at the earliest.

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16. The Local Government Boundary Commission's Stockton on Tees Electoral Review is expected to conclude in the late Summer with the Commission's decision on council size formalised, agreed and published at the end of August 2021.
17. Spring 2021 will see the conclusion of the Council's support for the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Census 2021 with the 21 March 2021 being national Census Day.

Democratic Services – Challenges and Opportunities

18. The Local Government Remote Meeting Regulations have facilitated decision making continuing during the current pandemic; however, these were introduced by the Government for a fixed period which is due to end on the 7 May 2021. Whilst it is hoped that they will be extended by the Government, there is some doubt as to whether this will be possible as the Government have indicated primary legislation may be required to do so and they cannot guarantee time can be set aside to allow this.
19. This therefore presents an immediate challenge to all local authorities when considering how decision making can continue from the next Municipal Year; particularly within the context that some form of social distancing constraints are still likely to be in place from May onwards.
20. Venue availability and likely capacity limits are currently being considered as we await clarity on whether the remote meeting regulations are likely to be extended. This includes consideration of how, and in what format, the Annual Meeting of the Council may be held on the 26 May 2021.
21. Prior to the pandemic, the ambition had long been held to gradually reduce reliance on hard paper copy as we sought to embrace technology instead. The enormous strides made in the use of technology by both members and officers has demonstrated and highlighted what is now achievable, and we will seek to build on this and provide an opportunity for our meeting arrangements to become more paperless .
22. In the same vein, as everyone has become more comfortable in using technology on a daily basis, the opportunity exists to automate several administrative procedures officers and members are expected to undertake (e.g. officer and member Declarations of Interest and Gifts & Hospitality) through software available on E-Genda.

Electoral – Priorities for the year ahead

23. **Canvass** – Next year will be the second year that we have operated under the reformed canvass model. The new arrangements utilise a data led approach matching the Electoral Register against Central Government records and focusing resource on properties were a match has not been achieved. The new model also allows for the greater use of digital communication channels.
24. At the end of the canvass 2020, a 94% response rate was achieved which is in line with previous years. Although like for like comparisons are difficult, the rate of change appears to be lower than in previous years which raises some concerns about the impact of the reformed canvass model on the completeness and accuracy of the register.
25. In order to reduce this risk, we continue to supplement registration activity with pro-active data mining of other records and this year, as in previous election years, we have carried out a Household Notification Exercise ahead of the statutory election timescales.

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26. **Registration** – Registration levels continue to remain high in the Borough due to proactive data mining and democratic engagement. 94% of the adult population are currently registered.
27. **Attainers** (16/17 yr. olds) – This group is nationally an under-registered group. In Stockton, targeted approaches to attainers via schools have seen attainer registration increase significantly in recent years. A direct approach is adopted with letters sent via schools reminding 16/17 yr. olds of their legal responsibility to register; this is then followed up with text messages to parents via schools' systems where these exist. This exercise was carried out again during the last two weeks of October 2020. Attainer registration is now at 26%.
28. **Elections 2021** – In 2021, Stockton are the lead in the Cleveland Force area for the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections and in the Tees Valley for the Election of Mayor to the Combined Authority. In addition, we have a number of Borough and Parish By- Elections which were postponed by legislation to 6 May 2021.

Electoral – Challenges and Opportunities

29. **New ways of working** – Despite restrictions, all registration activity and statutory requirements have been carried out with no disruption to service delivery. Staff have worked from home with minimal on-site presence to deal with hard copy post where online, email or telephone lines of communication were not possible.
30. In addition, under the reformed canvass model, a telephone canvass was carried out where telephone numbers were held on the system. This further reduced the need for face to face contact; safe working practices were also put in place where a door knock was required.
31. To take full advantage of the ability to use digital communications under the new canvass model, households have been asked to supply contact details as part of this year's Household Notification Exercise. This will help to reduce the amount of printing and postage as part of future canvass activity.
32. The Electoral Team has recently recruited new members who have all taken part in on line training, which would have normally been delivered face to face. The team are making full advantage of Teams to continue the on the job training whilst working from home.
33. **Election Planning** – Project Plan actions are on track and particular consideration is being given to how the elections will be delivered in a COVID assured way taking account of Electoral Commission and Public Health guidelines.
34. Covid has added an unprecedented layer of complexity and risk to the forthcoming elections and risk assessments have been carried out in respect of every aspect of administering the poll. A wide range of mitigation measures have been put in place including PPE, staffing contingency, staff bubbles, individual risk assessments, remote training, electronic submission of nomination papers for informal checks, encouraging early postal vote applications, cleaning, signage, venue layouts etc.
35. Recruitment is always a challenge and has been more so this year, particularly bearing in mind that a bank of reserve staff will also be required.
36. Regular meetings are scheduled with Public Health and health and safety colleagues to keep risk assessments under constant review. We are also working with communications to ensure clear and consistent public messages.

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37. **Postal Voting** – In order to reduce pressure on polling stations as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and to avoid a predicted late surge in postal vote applications, we took the opportunity, as part of canvass, to send a postal vote application form addressed to every non-postal elector. Two postal vote application have also been sent to every household in January as part of the Household Notification Exercise. As a result, the numbers of postal voters has increased by 30%. Stockton now has around 45,406 postal voters.
38. **Ward Boundary Review** – The Council’s submission on Council size has been approved by Full Council and work has commenced on the next stage.
39. **Parliamentary Boundary Review** - The Boundary Commission for England has re-commenced its review of Parliamentary constituencies in England.
40. **ID in Polling Stations** – The Electoral Commission has published its statutory evaluation of the May 2019 voter identification pilots. The pilots have provided further evidence, but they do not allow for definitive conclusions to be drawn in all areas. Before introducing a requirement for elections in Great Britain, the Government and Parliament have been recommended to consider carefully the available evidence about the impact and proportionality of different approaches on the accessibility and security of polling station voting.

Scrutiny - Priorities for the year ahead

41. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the scrutiny work programme being paused between March and June 2020. When meetings resumed in July 2020, revised scopes and project plans for reviews were presented to Committees to take account of restrictions and new working practices. At present, all committee meetings, and pre-meetings continue to be conducted remotely.
42. Despite the challenges, Members and officers worked hard to get the programme back on track and four in-depth reviews (Cost of School Uniform, Business Support and Engagement, Public Consultation, and Fly-Grazed Horses) and one task and finish review (Planters in Residential Streets) have been completed. The first phase (discharge to care homes during the COVID-19 pandemic) of the Hospital Discharge review was brought forward given the importance of this issue and has reported to Cabinet. Reviews continue to be covered in the local press.
43. Progress updates continue to be presented to Select Committees on the implementation of completed reviews and the introduction of the ‘Evidence of Impact’ section to the progress update document, following Members’ request, has enhanced the monitoring element of the scrutiny function. The annual scrutiny report is available to view on the Council website.
44. Recognising that several reviews from the current year will carry forward into the 2021/22 work programme, it is therefore proposed that a focused 2021/22 scrutiny work programme is established with one main in-depth review identified for each Select Committee to be completed alongside their other work. Given current pressures, it is especially important that a realistic and achievable work programme is set which is relevant, adds value and complements other planned work. As usual, the scrutiny programme will accommodate any pressing issues through Task and Finish Groups.

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Scrutiny - Challenges and Opportunities

45. Although a challenge for us all, Members and Officers have now embraced the new technologies. In addition to utilising remote meeting technology, written submissions and online surveys have been utilised and evidence has been collected in different ways (e.g. using photographic evidence). These new approaches are helping us to deliver the same programme albeit in different ways. It is also important to recognise that key partners are dealing with additional priorities at the current time and the different ways of working are helping them to continue to provide input.
46. Looking forward to next year, we will undoubtedly continue to utilise new ways of working to gather evidence and secure wider engagement even with the easing of restrictions.
47. The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) has changed its name to the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). They continue to provide consultancy and support to Members and Councils and have produced a range of literature on scrutiny during the pandemic. This can be viewed on their website. CfGS have stressed that it is 'critical' to sustain a form of scrutiny amid the pandemic. In their view, scrutiny should be deployed to support the council and its partners in dealing with an 'unprecedented situation'. They advocate that the council, and councillors, should reach out to the local community to understand issues and challenges local people are facing.

Potential Areas for In-Depth Review

48. 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.
49. Potential topics will be considered at Executive Scrutiny Committee on 23 March.

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Appendix 1 – Council Plan - Key Priorities 2020- 2021 - Administration, Democratic and Electoral Services

We are committed to being a Council that is ambitious, effective and proud to serve. This means we will provide:

- Financial sustainability and value for money
- Dedicated and resourceful employees
- Strong leadership and governance

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

- Respond to the Local Government boundary review