

## Overview Report

# People Select Committee Overview Meeting 2021 - 1 March 2021

## HR, Legal and Communications Directorate

### 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, meaning we will provide:
  - Financial sustainability and value for money
  - Dedicated and resourceful employees
  - Strong Leadership and governance

### Performance Reporting

Performance across the Council Plan is 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>

## Overview Report

### HR, Legal and Communications - Director – Beccy Brown

Relevant services include:

- Human Resources
- Legal Services
- Communications, Consultation and Engagement
- Information Governance

### Council Plan 2020-2023

The Council Plan sets out the aims and objectives for the Council, it is refreshed on an annual basis. The key priorities for 2020/21 for HR, Legal and Communications are shown in Appendix 1.

### Human Resources - priorities for the year ahead reflecting emerging issues, current challenges and opportunities

The HR Service has an important role to play in delivering the Council Plan key vision of having “*dedicated and resourceful employees*” and, as a support service to the whole organisation, also plays a role in supporting all the priorities in the Council Plan. The following priorities for the year ahead have been developed from an analysis of our key challenges and opportunities:

1. The key challenge for the year ahead continues to be to support the SBC workforce to ensure they can keep working safely and effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic. We will continue to:
  - Ensure that the organisation retains Covid-Secure status. We moved urgently in 2020 to establish safe working practices and establish Covid-Secure status for the organisation. Our organisation-wide risk assessment sets out how we are delivering this <https://www.stockton.gov.uk/our-people/coronavirus-covid-19/covid-19-secure-workplace/> . This overall risk assessment is supported by:
    - Over 200 service-specific risk assessments including PPE guidance <https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/covid-19-risk-assessments/>
    - 8 building risk assessments <https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-in-the-office/>
    - an online checking-in process to monitor the number and location of staff who are working in offices for track and trace and maximum safe building occupancy levels.
    - An individual Risk Assessment process for all Clinically Vulnerable and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable employees to complete before they are able to work outside their homeAll risk assessments are kept under constant review and updated for new guidance. Reviews of the highest risk areas are undertaken by the Health and Safety and Public Health teams this will continue as long as required.
  - Ensure that we maintain the workforce tracking and monitoring process to support the ongoing effective deployment of employees throughout the pandemic. We will need to maintain and update this to ensure that, as far as possible, all staff can continue to work though the changing restrictions, can cover for isolation absences and deliver new Covid-19 services through redeployment. The latest weekly report to 12 Feb shows:

Working as normal	1,198
Working from home/adapted/redeployed/or combination	1,313

## Overview Report

Working at home with caring responsibilities	205
Self-isolating and working	77
Not working	50*
Self-isolating not working	91
Sickness absence	116
Other absence – maternity leave/holidays/flexitime etc	125
<b>Total SBC Employees</b>	<b>3,175</b>

\*This equates to 18 FTEs as most posts are very few hours per week – eg. STEPS supported employment roles and catering staff where school site is closed

- Maintain the HR policy which covers Covid-19 employment issues. The policy is working well and has been developed and agreed with Trade Unions but it is kept under constant review for the changing situation and we anticipate that this will continue through 2021 <https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/hr-advice/>.
- Continue the development of the guidance and support for those employees who will need to continue to work from home in the coming year. We have comprehensive guidance in place covering the home working practices <https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-from-home/> these will be developed for the remainder of the pandemic period and will also form the basis for longer term planning for future working arrangements. We will also continue to develop the comprehensive range of health and wellbeing advice and support for employees who are working at home because of the pandemic <https://intranet.stockton.gov.uk/coronavirus/health-and-wellbeing-advice/>.
- We will continue to support delivery of vaccinations for priority employees. Whilst the deadline for offering all 1,411 priority employees a vaccine by 12 February was met, we will still need to facilitate appointments for new starters and employees who were unable to take the vaccine due to sickness absence, maternity leave etc.
- We completed an extensive Covid Employee Survey at the end of 2020. 1,504 employees completed a survey with a range of questions about the impact of Covid on their working life. The results were extremely positive with employees identifying “**Operating as normal**” and “**Supporting our Customers**” as their top two achievements during the pandemic. They have also felt well supported:



However employees also reported a significant impact on their working lives. With the top concerns whilst working during the pandemic being:

1. Anxiety and worry about Covid-19
2. Impact of Covid-19 on my work / the Council
3. Loss of contact with co-workers
4. Isolation
5. Potential to spread virus to my co-workers
6. Cost of heating and electricity when working from home

## Overview Report

We will use a detailed analysis of these results to inform the ongoing development of employee policies and support in 2021.

2. We continue to face the challenge of Sickness Absence. Sickness Absence levels remain high at 6.3 days average per FTE in the first 9 months of 2020/21 this level is comparable with the same point in the previous year (6.2) and with other organisations but is higher than target. It is becoming increasingly apparent that absence due to Stress /Anxiety/ Depression/Mental Wellbeing is the most significant underlying cause, accounting for 37% of all absences this year. This is by far the most common cause of absence this year with the next highest cause being Covid-related illness accounting for 15% of absences. Covid-related illness is a concern for the future as we are potentially beginning to see signs of “long-Covid” cases with 31 cases over 30 days absence. We are reviewing our packages of support for employees affected by mental health issues, including a review of our early help, support and wellbeing services, the occupational health service, the impact of the Mental Health First Aid training and the evidence from the first year of the Counselling and Wellbeing service provided by Mind.
3. We still have a number of “hard-to-recruit” roles – we continue to face challenges in recruiting to Children’s Social Worker roles and some IT roles. We recognise that these are market challenges affecting the whole sector however we intend to carry out a review of our approach to recruitment in these areas. The replacement of the current PSE recruitment system with the North East Recruitment Portal (provided by NEREO) will take place in March 2021, implementation was delayed from last year due to Covid-19. This provides an initial implementation challenge, however also an opportunity to implement new approaches and flexibility to the recruitment process.
4. We are still falling short of our aspiration to achieve a more diverse workforce. We aim to achieve a greater diversity in the age, ethnicity and disability profile of the workforce. This remains a challenge which we continue to tackle in the year ahead.
5. The planned 2020 Apprenticeship recruitment campaign was delayed due to the pandemic. However we have continued to recruit apprentices where we are able an additional 15 apprentices were recruited in 2020. We currently have 110 active apprenticeships in the Council and intend to run another large scale recruitment campaign again when we are able to support it. The current challenges and the ongoing restrictions associated with the Apprenticeship Levy mean that we will be unable to fully utilise all Levy funds.
6. We continue to review our pay and reward package as we recognise it is a key aspect of our ability to recruit and retain employees. The national negotiation of the 2021 pay award is still ongoing, the NJC unions (UNISON, GMB and Unite) lodged pay and T&Cs claims for local government staff for 2021 on 15 February seeking substantial increases (a minimum of 10% across all pay grades) and changes to working hours and support. Councils will be consulted during March at the regional pay consultation briefings, the National Employers will then respond formally to the unions in April/May.
7. We continue to deal with the challenge and consequences of the ongoing developments in the implementation of the £95k cap on public sector exit payments. Following introduction of the cap in November 2020 we have managed a difficult period as the associated LGPS Pension and Compensation regulations have not yet been implemented. On 12 February a Treasury Direction was issued which disapplied the legislation implementing the £95k cap, along with guidance on how exit payments which were capped during the period when it was in force should now be handled. The Treasury Direction was issued without any notice, the new uncertainty alongside the steps we will need to take to unpick the arrangements we have already made to manage the interim period is proving very difficult as we continue to manage organisational change.

## Overview Report

8. We continue to review the LGPS pension scheme as this is appearing to be increasingly less attractive to employees. There are currently approximately 15% of employees who are not members of the pension scheme and this is particularly marked amongst younger and lower paid employees. We will carry out a review of the pensions benefits and approach in the coming year to consider whether any improvements can be made.
9. We continue to deliver the *Shaping a Brighter Future* approach following completion of the initial 5-year period. Work continues in the 3 workstreams however work has been focussed this year on supporting employee Health and Wellbeing and adapting the Corporate Induction and Setting the Scene programmes to operate in the adapted working arrangements under Covid-19. This development work will continue this year.

### **Legal Services - Priorities for the year ahead reflecting our current challenges and opportunities**

The Legal Service remains focussed on providing a proactive legal service to the organisation through:

- The Property, Contracts and Regulatory team
- The Children's Social Care team
- The Adults & Litigation team
- The Legal support team
- And, through the delivery of Monitoring Officer and Proper Office functions.

The Legal Service has an important part to play in delivering the Council Plan key vision of having "*strong leadership and governance*" and as a support service to the whole organisation the Legal Service also play a role in supporting all the priorities in the Council Plan. The following priorities for the year ahead have been developed from an analysis of our key challenges and opportunities:

1. We continue to face operational demands arising from pressure across the Children's Social Care system. The high levels of demand (we currently have 96 open cases in formal legal process) is exacerbated by the pressure in the court process and the additional difficulties of operating under Covid-19. However we completed a successful recruitment exercise in 2020 and now have a full team in place.
2. The LGA work on a model Code of Conduct for Local Authorities was completed at the end of 2020 and Council agreed to adoption of the code in November 2020. Final drafting is now complete and will be incorporated in the Constitution imminently.
3. We have received confirmation from HM Land Registry that our work to complete transition of local land charges data to the national Land Registry has been passed and the migration will take place in March. The migration work has represented a significant time investment over the past year however we believe that it will provide long term benefits for customers through improved record management and online access.

### **Information Governance - Priorities for the year ahead reflecting our current challenges and opportunities**

The IG Service remains focussed on the development, implementation and maintenance of the Council's information governance framework, including key information governance policies and procedures and the provision of information governance advice and guidance. The Council's Data Protection Officer role sits within this team. The team also lead the preparation of responses to all external information requests, co-ordinate the Council's complaints process and lead on the

## Overview Report

Council's approach to records management including the Records Management Retention and Destruction policy.

The Information Governance Service has an important part to play in delivering the Council Plan Key vision of having “*Strong Leadership and Governance*” and as a support service to the whole organisation also plays a role in supporting all the priorities in the Council. The following priorities for the year ahead have been developed from an analysis of our key challenges and opportunities:

1. The priority for the team is to support Microsoft 365 roll-out by leading on the records management and information governance aspects of the project. The continued roll-out will allow us to maximise the opportunities available to the organisation from the Microsoft 365 products and to sustain and build on the developments made at speed during the pandemic.
2. A new Good Governance Guide was launched in December 2020 for the organisation, this will be developed and built on in the coming year.

## **Communications, Consultation and Engagement (CCE)- Priorities for the year ahead reflecting our current challenges and opportunities**

As a support service to the whole organisation the CCE Service plays a role in supporting all the priorities in the Council Plan. The Service remains focussed on the aim of being a vital and trusted team which sits at the heart of the organisation, providing excellent service which:

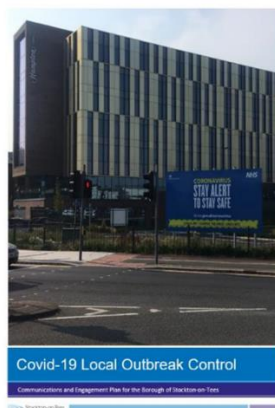
- Combines all consultation, communication and engagement activities
- The media and external stakeholders’ respect as the trusted “first port of call” for any information about the Council and the Borough.
- The VCSE sector respects and trusts as a supportive and honest friend.
- Generates new and exciting ways to enthuse the public, staff and Members to bring about a wave of involvement and engagement with what the Council does.
- Offers a calm voice of reason, sound judgement and informed external perspective on operational issues.
- Carries out sensitive, appropriate and worthwhile consultation, communication and engagement.
- Is absolutely clear about who we are and what we are about as an organisation and place, and acts as an ambassador, promoter and tireless champion of this brand.

The following priorities for the year ahead have been developed from an analysis of our key challenges and opportunities:

1. The key challenge for the year ahead remains the delivery of the comprehensive Covid-19 Communications and Engagement Plan. Delivery of the Plan is overseen by the Local Outbreak Engagement Group as part of their responsibilities Covid-19 Control Plan for the Borough. This work has been the main priority and focus of the team since March 2020. The plan has three main objectives:
  - **Communicate the Local Position** – To communicate the local position regarding COVID-19 in the borough in a clear, meaningful and accurate way.
  - **Prevention** - To encourage residents and businesses to follow public health advice to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus by amplifying the national messages. To communicate targeted preventative advice and guidance to key communities and settings in support of the Control Group Prevention Plans.
  - **Response** - To provide clear, consistent messages that are evidence-based and proportionate to the level of risk in the event of a significant outbreak in the Borough.

## Overview Report

These messages and engagement activity will include the provision of advice, information, reassurance and safety messages.



2. The continuing developments and changes in Social Media and the associated changes in traditional media present challenges and great opportunities for the Council. We continue to develop our Social Media presence with 128,801 followers across our 28 Facebook, 10 Twitter and 10 Instagram accounts and achieved strong growth last year with a 35% growth in the main SBC facebook following, 6% growth across Twitter and a 45% growth in the main Instagram following. A record reach of 1.3 million was achieved in November 2020. We will continue to develop and trial new approaches across all platforms in the coming year.
3. We continue to work closely with colleagues in Customer Services and Xentrall on the development of a new core Council website and improved online services for customers. The development of the new site and digital services will be made alongside a revamp of the Stockton Information Directory and is expected to be launched by the end of 2021.
4. The new Communities Strategy was launched in 2020 along with the new Community Partnerships approach. The new strategy sets out our vision and hopes for our communities and specifically that they will be cohesive, strong and welcoming and that they will join us in tackling poverty across the Borough and ensuring people across the Borough aren't lonely. The Communities Strategy is underpinned by a refreshed approach to delivery through 7 Community Partnerships which cover 7 geographical areas, the Infinity Partnership which brings together organisations in the Borough that are committed to promoting and progressing financial inclusion and the Housing and Affordable Warmth Partnership. The new approach is working well and following a virtual launch delivered a successful Christmas programme. The new approach provides a great opportunity to continue to build community cohesion and is well-placed for active and engaged growth in 2021.

### 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. A proposed review of the Tees Credit Union has been proposed in the previous programme and was delayed due to organisational changes there. Committee may wish to consider this topic for review again.

## Overview Report

### **Appendix 1 – Council Plan - Key Priorities 2020- 2021 - HR, Legal and Communications**

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 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:

- Deliver the Shaping a Brighter Future programme to ensure this remains a great place to work
- Deliver the 2020 apprenticeship recruitment programme