

PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

A meeting of People Select Committee was held on Monday 4 December 2023.

Present: Cllr Marilyn Surtees (Chair), Cllr Paul Weston (Vice-Chair), Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr John Coulson (sub for Cllr Niall Innes), Cllr Ian Dalgarno, Cllr David Reynard, Cllr Susan Scott (sub for Cllr John Gardner), Cllr Hugo Stratton and Cllr Barry Woodhouse.

Officers: Haleem Ghafoor, Margie Stewart-Piercy (AH&W), Jill Douglas, Rebecca Saunders-Thompson (CS) and Lorraine Dixon (CS, E&C).

Also in attendance: Sharon Bailey (Unite the Union), Ian Bartlett and Rhys Stephens (Stockton and District Information & Advice Service)

Apologies: Cllr John Gardner and Cllr Niall Innes.

PEO/21/23 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation and housekeeping procedure.

PEO/22/23 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

PEO/23/23 Minutes

AGREED the minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

PEO/24/23 Monitoring the Impact of Previously Agreed Recommendations: Progress Update - Scrutiny Review of Disability Inclusive Borough

The Select Committee considered a progress update including assessments of progress following implementation of the recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Disability Inclusive Borough. The aim of the review was to explore how Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council could contribute to a more disability inclusive Borough. This was the second time the update had been presented to the Committee. There were five outstanding recommendations.

AGREED that the Progress Update be noted and the assessments of progress be confirmed.

PEO/25/23 Scrutiny Review of Cost of Living Response

The Select Committee received a report on the Cost of Living work of the Council's Customer Services and Digital teams from the Assistant Director of Customer Services and Digital which included responses to the following key lines of enquiries:

- How has Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) responded to the ongoing cost of living crisis both internally and by working with external partners and agencies?
- How has advice and support been communicated to residents and SBC staff? Can this be improved?

- What are the main 'cost of living' issues facing residents? How have these changed over time?
- In what ways has the cost of living crisis impacted on staff retention and recruitment?
- How have SBC staff been supported if they are struggling financially and mentally as a result of the cost of living crisis?

The main issues highlighted from the report and discussed were as follows:

- There had been a 30% turnover in Customer Services staff over the past year.
- The Committee commended the valuable work of the Customer Services team and recognised the importance of training and supporting staff sufficiently.
- The Committee was pleased to learn that Customer Services staff were entitled to additional breaks at present when dealing with increasing pressures.
- It was confirmed that a stress risk assessment had been undertaken for the Customer Services team.

The Select Committee received a presentation on the Council's employee benefits and support, from the Assistant Director for HR which included responses to the following key lines of enquiries:

- How has Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) responded to the ongoing cost of living crisis both internally and by working with external partners and agencies?
- How has advice and support been communicated to residents and SBC staff? Can this be improved?
- In what ways has the Cost of Living crisis impacted on staff retention and recruitment?
- How have SBC staff been supported if they are struggling financially and mentally as a result of the cost of living crisis?

The main issues highlighted from the presentation and discussed were as follows:

- The Committee congratulated Council staff on their recent LGC Award achievement and thanked staff for their work on the Vivup benefit scheme.
- It was noted that several staff members had sought additional help following the Community Services health and wellbeing sessions. These sessions were held over a year with 7 compulsory sessions that were built into the working day.
- Members raised concerns about cases of agency staff struggling to obtain permanent contracts. Officers responded that agency workers were eligible to apply for internal vacancies and permanent contracts were offered to agency staff where possible.

The Select Committee received evidence from the Regional Officer, Unite the Union which included:

- It was noted that there had been an increase in signposting to mental health services.
- There had also been an increase in enquiries regarding loans over the past few years.
- It had been reported that lower paid workers, especially cleaners, had been undertaking more than one job. There were also reports that those with more than one job still needed to use foodbanks and pantries.
- SBC, as an organisation, provided a 'good level of support' compared to other organisations.
- At one of its offices, the union provided help with CV writing, interview techniques and suits and makeup were available for those in need to use for interviews.
- Upcoming projects included a workers uniform exchange and a baby equipment bank.

- Unite Community was highlighted as a community initiative to campaign for a more equal society.

The main issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- The Committee requested if there was anything further that the Council could do to support those affected by the Cost of Living. The Committee was informed that SBC was providing the most support to its residents and staff compared with other Councils across the North East region.

The Select Committee received a presentation from representatives from the Stockton & District Advice & Information Service (SDAIS) which included:

- How has SBC responded to Cost of Living by working with external partners and agencies?
- How has advice and support been communicated to residents and SBC staff?
- How does SBC approach compare with other Local Authorities?
- National Picture
- Local Picture
- How do Cost of Living issues vary across groups?
- Local Picture
- Local Picture – Top 5 Enquiry Areas
- Debt Advised on Stockton-on-Tees
- Cost of Living: sample enquiries National v Local Increase over 3 years – Q2
- How do Cost of Living issues vary across Borough: Cost of Living – sample enquiries (44) – Increase over 3 years – Q2
- How have SBC staff been supported through Cost of Living crisis?
- What can SBC learn from VCSE (benefits of joint SBC/VCSE working)?
- Other Issues

The main issues highlighted from the presentation and discussed were as follows:

- The Committee thanked SDAIS for their work in assisting residents and providing an invaluable service.
- SBC staff were commended for referring members of the public to a specific contact at SDAIS and other services for help and ensuring that they received direct support.

AGREED that the information be noted.

PEO/26/23 Chair's Update and Select Committee Work Programme 2023 - 2024

Consideration was given to the Work Programme.

The next Committee meeting would be held on Monday 8 January 2024. This would be an informal summary of evidence session held via Teams.

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.

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