

ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 16 July 2020

PRESENT – Councillor Durham (Chair), Bartch, Boddy, Crudass, Harker, L Hughes, Mrs D Jones, McEwan, Paley, Renton and Tait

APOLOGIES –

ABSENT –

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillor Johnson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Elizabeth Davison (Assistant Director Resources), Luke Swinhoe (Assistant Director Law and Governance), Anthony Sandys (Head of Housing and Revenues) and Shirley Wright (Democratic Manager)

ER7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor McEwan declared an interest in Minute ER8 below as a lay member of the Darlington Primary Care Network. There were no other declarations of interest reported.

ER8 COVID UPDATE

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) advising Members of the actions taken within the service areas of this Scrutiny Committee over the previous months in relation to COVID-19, including the financial implications to the Council, the implications on Darlington businesses and the overall economy, how services had operated during the pandemic and the fundamental way in which and employees had adopted to new ways of working.

It was reported that, although, to date, this Council had received a £6.231 million grant as part of the Governments £3.2 billion funding provided to support local Council's COVID 19 response, there was still an anticipated shortfall of £8 million this financial year. The submitted report highlighted four main pressure areas in relation to this Council's finances as a result of COVID-19 ie additional expenditure, loss of income, an increase in applications for Council Tax support and Council Tax and non-domestic rates income losses.

The Assistant Director Resources emphasised that the figures within the report were based on the assumption that there would be no further income from the Hippodrome during 2020, a graduated return of income in relation to the Dolphin Centre and a return of car parking charges later in the year.

Members were advised that there was still a significant amount of uncertainty with regard to future budget pressures and the projected pressure was significant in the context of the Council's Medium-Term Financial Plan, however, at this stage, the deficit in 2020/21 could be met from the general reserves fund.

In addition to the above, the Assistant Director Resources reported that, on 2 July

2020, the Government had announced a further package of support to Council's to assist with spending pressures and had launched a new scheme to help reimburse lost income, where 75 pence of every £1 lost over and above the initial five per cent of planned income from sales, fees and charges would be covered, however, as details of how this funding would be allocated had not been agreed, it had not been taking into account in the figures included within the submitted report.

In relation to Council Tax and Business Rates collection, Members were advised that despite the challenges faced to residents and businesses, collection levels were only slightly lower than the same period in 2019/20 with £10.9 million of Council Tax and £3.6 million of Business Rates collected.

Following a question by a Member, it was reported that the Council Tax Support Scheme was in place to assist residents and that there was an option to defer payment for two months if needed, however, most residents were continuing to pay

It was also reported that, during the lock down period, there had been a significant increase in the number of residents applying for Housing Benefit and Council Tax support with the overall total at 11,992, (an increase of 12 per cent) the highest level since May 2016.

The Assistant Director Economic Growth updated Members on the work undertaken to support businesses both financially and operationally during the pandemic and reported that Officers had worked hard to ensure that the business grant funding which had been received was distributed to those businesses eligible as quickly as possible to assist them and, in doing so, placed the Council in the top 10 quickest payers in the Country at one stage during the process.

Following a question by a Member in relation to those applicants who did not qualify for funding under the Discretionary Grant Scheme, an explanation was given as to the possible reasons why i.e. funding being received from elsewhere, small organisations and to the signposting to other areas of support. It was reported that although a number of business in the town were now open safely, it was not yet known how many businesses may not re-open.

The submitted report also highlighted the work done by Building Services in relation to urgent and emergency repairs during the lock down period and comparable information for the same period last year was requested; the current position of the Customer Services area within the Town Hall, which largely remains closed and a review which had been undertaken of the current capital programme to prioritise those projects in relation to the ability to restart them in accordance with relevant guidance.

Members were also updated on the significant work undertaken by HR, which included inter alia, ascertaining employee skills over and above their usual job roles which could be used in an emergency and which could be maintained on an annual basis in future, absence levels and testing, staff well-being, the application of the Government's Furlough Scheme for some employees who could not work due to the closure of facilities and the support given by the Health and Safety Team to assist Managers with reviewing work practices and risk assessments to ensure the safety of staff and members of the public. Following a question by a Member, it was also

confirmed that employees who were working from home were required to undertake the necessary DSE risk assessment and that any equipment such as desk, chairs etc which might be needed could be taken to be used. Support would also be given to help staff adjust to returning to work if needed. It was also highlighted that to assist staff with caring commitments etc at home, flexible working patterns were being encouraged with the focus being on work output.

It was reported that the RIDDOR Regulations had been updated in April 2020 to include COVID-19 as a notifiable disease and that the Council was required to investigate any cases where an employee had tested positive for COVID 19 to establish whether it was likely exposure because of their work and therefore reportable to the Health and Safety Executive. To date seven employees had been subject to an investigation, however, none of those employees had been deemed to have contracted the virus from the work environment.

Particular references were also made to the re-instatement of the democratic processes of the Council and the work undertaken by the Democratic Unit to equip and support Members with remote meetings, the work of the legal team, procurement, complaints and information governance and the registrars service.

Reference was made to the rough sleepers grant which was still to be claimed through a bidding process to assist local authorities with the cost of providing accommodation and services for rough sleepers; the detail of the Government's scheme to re-imburse 75 pence of every £1.00 lost over and above the initial planned five per cent of planned income from sales etc and how long that might be in effect for, the lobbying by the Association of North East Council's for additional Government support to assist Councils with the cost of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme and the continuation of the Council's flu vaccination programme for staff which was funded by Public Health

Following discussion, it was confirmed that a 'lessons learnt' feedback record was being maintained by the Civic Contingencies Unit and that work was on-going to prepare for a second wave should it occur. It was suggested that the lessons learnt log could be something which could be looked at by this Scrutiny Committee

RESOLVED – (a) That the submitted report be received.

(b) That the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be extended to all staff for the way they have adapted to the challenges faced during the current pandemic.

(c) That this Scrutiny Committee continues to monitor and scrutinise the effect of COVID -19 on those areas within its remit.