

Performance, Finance and Customer Focus Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 17 March 2021

PRESENT:

Councillor Jordan, in the Chair.

Councillor Vincent, Vice Chair.

Councillors Buchan, Corvid, Derrick, Hendy, Mrs Pengelly, Tuffin and Wigens.

Also in attendance: Alan Knott (Policy and Intelligence Advisor), Councillor Sue Dann (Cabinet Member for Environment and Street Scene), Katrina Houghton (Head of Services (Street Scene & Waste), Chris Avent (Green Estate Manager) Philip Robinson (Service Director for Street Services), Councillor Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance), David Draffan (Service Director for Economic Development), Brendan Arnold (Service Director for Finance), Melanie Haymes (Finance Business Partner – Commercial), Andrew Loton (Head of Governance, Risk and Performance) and Helen Rickman (Democratic Advisor).

The meeting started at 2.30 pm and finished at 5.00 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

8. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made by Members in accordance with the code of conduct.

9. Minutes - to follow

Agreed the minutes of 17 February 2021 as an accurate record of the meeting.

10. Chair's Urgent Business

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

11. Policy Brief

Alan Knott (Policy and Intelligence Advisor) presented the Policy Brief which included information upon the Spring Budget 2021 Briefing, the Levelling Up Fund, Community Safety and the Safety of Women and Girls and the Safer Streets Fund.

Key questions from Members related to the following areas:

- what did the funding streams mean for Plymouth, were the allocations known, and what would the impact be?

- that Councillors needed to be sighted on the bids relating to the panel's terms of reference;
- what the Government's immediate response was with regard to the violence against women and girls?

Members noted the policy brief update.

12. **Grass Cutting Briefing**

Councillor Sue Dann (Cabinet Member for Environment and Street Scene), Katrina Houghton (Head of Services (Street Scene & Waste) and Chris Avent (Green Estate Manager) presented the Grass Cutting Briefing and talked to a presentation.

Key points highlighted to Members included:

- the Council responded to the Climate Emergency in March 2019 and made efforts to manage operations in order to have a green sustainable city that cared about the environment;
- when the nation went into lockdown in response to the Covid19 pandemic it was decided that the Council would follow the National Trust's 'No Mow May' campaign with only the priority amenity areas having one cut during the month to maintain condition and access for the public. This left more green spaces to grow wild, increasing biodiversity. The Council increased its percentage from 15% to 40% of green space managed for nature, with 60% being managed for people to enjoy in their urban environment;
- the Council managed 1300 hectares of green space with over 560 hectares of grass; closely mown grass limited species diversity. Covid brought this to the forefront especially as the Council was required to prioritise resources;
- the Council maintained several categories to differentiate its grass cutting regime, including sports pitches and greens (which had closely mown grass), formal play areas, high intensity and amenity (for example Plymouth Hoe), highway verges that were less than 2 metres (which were very narrow sections on residential streets), and highway verges that were more than 2 metres (like Western Approach);
- the Council had received national recognition from conservation charities and the National Trust because of how it approached the grass cutting regime to encourage biodiversity; on a local level the majority of feedback from local residents was largely positive.

Key areas of questioning from Members related to the following:

- the Council's biodiversity programme and if anecdotal evidence regarding increased plant and bug diversity was being measured in a quantitative way;

if people were categorising and cataloguing frequency of special and biodiversity outcomes as a whole; if this information was available could it be shared with the Committee?

- had the Council investigated the possibility of planting a variety of seeds along verges and in meadows that bloomed at different intervals in order to maintain more attractive wild flowers?
- an update on the re-categorising of land in the city which was used by residents as a sort of garden for their properties other than green space;
- did the Council have plans to bio-diversify grass verges?
- if the Council had considered putting more colourful flowers into areas where jut tall grass had been left to grow?
- that it was important to encourage local residents to let their gardens grow wild to encourage wildlife;
- that the Council should ensure they cut paths through fields and open spaces where grass was left to grow;
- that the Council should be encouraged to put information boards out to say it was a community meadow, if applicable, as it would help to engage people and educate them as to what was happening;
- short grass also had benefits as Thrushes feed from the ground and couldn't feed from long grass;
- were Officers aware that Pyramid Orchids were growing along Billicombe Road?
- with regards to baling – were bales used to re-seed other areas?
- were officers investigating sites with dual management in terms of grass cutting?
- had the Council been able to baseline the carbon sequestration associated with grasslands and tracking in terms of carbon capture?
- areas still used for general playing areas – how often would the grass be cut in those?

Members noted the Grass Cutting Briefing update.

13. **Garden Waste - verbal update**

Councillor Sue Dann (Cabinet Member for Environment and Street Scene), Katrina Houghton (Head of Services (Street Scene & Waste) and Philip Robinson (Service Director for Street Services) presented the Garden Waste Update.

Key points highlighted to Members included:

- the Garden Waste service launched in November 2020 with over 50,000 registrations received – this was up by 33%; bin deliveries were ahead of schedule with over 40,000 bins delivered so far;
- Katrina wrote personally to assisted collection customers to let them know they needed to register for the new garden waste service;
- the Council had issued 2% of properties with garden waste bags – this was done via exception however the criteria had changed;
- in 2020 missed garden bin reports had reduced from 33% to 5%. Check my bin day would open on 25 March 2021 to highlight when residents garden waste collection date was.

Key areas of questioning raised by Members included the following:

- the registration portal appeared to be closed until 5 April 2021 and this was affecting people being able to register for their garden waste collection;
- would the collection service go to a street to collect garden waste if only one house had registered?

The Committee noted the Garden Waste Update.

14. **Covid 19 Grant Funding**

Councillor Lowry (Cabinet Member for Finance), David Draffan (Service Director for Economic Development) and Brendan Arnold (Service Director for Finance) and Melanie Haymes (Finance Business Partner – Commercial) presented the Covid 19 Grant Funding Update.

Key points highlighted to Members included:

- a number of grants had been received by the Government in relation to the Covid 19 pandemic; approximately £85m had been received and £74.8m had been paid out so far;
- £74.7m was paid out in lockdown 1 (which was 100% of the grant), £9.9m was paid out in lockdown 2 and £17.7m was paid out in lockdown 3; additional grants of £5.4m and £5.3m had also been paid out. A number of schemes were still open and the team were encouraging those eligible to apply;
- the impact of the Government grants should be considered as part of the Council's wider recovery programme Resurgam; the process was co-designed with the private sector including the FSB, Chamber of Commerce

and Plymouth Manufacturers Group and weekly updates had been taking place since March 2020;

- by the end of the process the Council would have handed out the equivalent of half of the Council's net budget in 12 months; this had been a massive undertaking and enormous administrative task;
- with regards to outstanding grants, there were still two areas where there was still eligibility for businesses to apply – the Local Restrictions Support Grant (where businesses were mandated to close), and the Local Restrictions Support Grant (where businesses were able to stay open however their business was impacted by lockdown);
- re-start grants would be significant and would be processed soon;
- the auditors would be looking in significant detail into what had been done for the Government grants which had been advanced to the council.

Key areas of questioning from Members related to the following:

- deadlines for grant application submissions;
- circumstances where people benefitted from the £4.399m of grants to support individuals in times of hardship (the Council Tax Hardship Fund, Test and Trace Support Payments) and details of unallocated money;
- demographics regarding business owners that had not claimed grants they were eligible for – were there any characteristics they shared in common?
- grants given to Licensed Taxi drivers;
- how was the discretionary grant criteria drawn up?
- if there was any money left in the grant pot, what happened to it?

Members noted the Covid 19 Grant Funding update.

(Under this item Councillor Jordan declared an interest as he is a director of several charities and social enterprises in receipt of Government Grants)

15. **Work Programme - to follow**

Members discussed the work programme for 2020/21 and agreed to include the following item:

- Grass cutting – biodiversity detailed data report;
- Commitment to have community use options for Pounds House;
- Information request from previous meeting:

- variables measured and monitored in the highways department, specifically linked to highways and traffic, to be brought to a future meeting;
- data request for household waste to include a separation of commercial waste, domestic waste and domestic waste that was sent to the recycling centre, to be brought to a future meeting;
- community cohesion data, including split by ward, would be added to an agenda for a future meeting, specifically regarding a more in depth split of people feeling safe;
- Progress report – crematorium.

Members were advised to contact Jamie Sheldon (Senior Governance Advisor) with additional items to be added to the work programme for 2021/22.