

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Department for Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
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15 September 2015

Dear Secretary of State

Best Value Action Plan six month progress report

I have pleasure in submitting the six monthly update on the council's progress in delivering its Best Value Plan, submitted in March 2015. The report includes a section for each of the seven areas of the Plan including a narrative overview of progress and a detailed monitoring document with progress on each separate action.

I am of course relatively new to this but you will see that during this six months, and particularly in the last three months since I took over as Mayor, considerable progress has been made, and the foundations set for further improvement over the next few months.

We discussed a number of aspects of the plan when we met recently. My ambition as Mayor is to ensure that we satisfy the requirements set down in the Directions and overseen by the Commissioners but I should add that above and beyond the 'tick box' exercise of simply satisfying those conditions, and completing the individual actions in the Best Value Plan, I recognise that the Authority needs a change in its culture, both at a member and at an officer level too. The election of a new Mayor, who recognises this, together with the selection of a new Chief Executive Officer, and the strengthening in other ways of our management team, are necessary ingredients of this change. In the work I am doing with my cabinet, with the Commissioners, and with our officer team I intend to address the weaknesses which have been exposed. Rather than securing the departure of the Commissioners by satisfying the terms of their appointment I intend to work closely with them to bring about change.

Returning to the Best Value Plan, formal progress is strong with 91% of items complete or on track to be delivered by the target agreed. This has been achieved despite a necessary hiatus in decision making following the removal of the previous Mayor and prior to my election. Across the Plan some minor areas of slippage are in the main related to this necessary pause in decision making which has held up approval of some policies. In these cases revised targets have been agreed with the Commissioners and are set out in the attachment.

Progress has been regularly monitored by the Commissioners through the Best Value Board chaired by the Lead Commissioner and set up to monitor

progress in delivering against the action plans. This Board has undertaken in-depth spotlight reviews of each Plan and agreed the revised deadlines where necessary.

In addition, we have since March established key success measures for each plan. The proposed outcomes are set out in the accompanying progress report for each Action Plan. Progress against these outcome measures will be reported in our 12 month report to be submitted in March 2016.

I would like to draw to your attention some significant areas of improvement:

- Significant work has been undertaken to improve procurement practices, ensuring we have a clear corporate overview of all contracts, have further tightened controls and have analysed spend to reduce costs and identify opportunities for collaboration and savings. As Mayor I have been keen to ensure that the arrangements for I and Cabinet members to appropriately engage in procurement decisions are robust and my Cabinet members and I are meeting this month to review and finalise the implementation of these.
- A completely new Mainstream Grants Programme has been developed through an open, transparent commissioning process with a clear focus on third sector delivery of outcomes which progress the council's Community Plan priorities. A robust monitoring and performance management regime will ensure these outcomes are delivered. Several cross-party member meetings fed into this process and arrangements for formalising the approach to cross party engagement in grants are being finalised.
- Our key challenge for the next six months is the development of a new Voluntary and Community sector strategy which will establish a strong and appropriate relationship with the third sector for the future in order that the Council is in a position to take back grant giving functions from the Commissioners. Initial work for the strategy is in hand, including work to develop a Community Buildings Allocation policy, and consultation with the sector has begun. I am acutely aware, however, that alongside this formal progress, this is one of the areas where recent events highlight a need to change the culture and forms of decision making within the Council. I have been working with the Commissioners to design an approach to political involvement in grant making which is transparent, driven by rules and open to scrutiny.
- A clear decision making process in respect of property disposals has been established and used to sign-off a number of transactions. Disposals and lettings procedures have been amended and compliance will be tested through the council's rolling audit plan. I am also working with officers to develop a new Asset Strategy and a paper setting out our asset priorities will be considered at Cabinet in November with the intention of finalising a new asset strategy, which reflects the vision of my new administration within the next 6 months. Again, returning to the need for cultural change, I am working with

officers, my Cabinet and the Commissioners to develop an approach to the open and transparent use of council buildings and other assets by third sector and outside bodies.

- You will be aware that all three statutory officer posts have now been appointed to on a permanent basis. Two of these officers have now taken up their roles and the new Chief Executive is already engaging with me in discussions about the future. He is due to start full time by December but we are discussing an earlier start date. The Authority will benefit from this.
- Strengthened arrangements were put in place for the UK Parliamentary Elections in May and Mayoral election in June, particularly around ensuring good order at the polling stations, integrity of the electoral process and efficiency of the count. Positive feedback was received from the police, candidates, agents and residents on the improvements introduced. A Lessons Learned report is now being finalised with input from all stakeholders and will be submitted to Eric Pickles' investigation into electoral fraud by the end of September. A challenge for our new Chief Executive Officer will be to ensure that our electoral processes are in good order to ensure probity and good practice at future elections.
- In terms of publicity, a revised Communications Protocol has been established and disseminated, and staff and elected members have received briefings about their responsibilities. A digital communications strategy has been agreed and considerable work undertaken to develop online approaches to communicating with our residents. Progress with our publications, and specifically with East End Life, our weekly newspaper has however been more challenging. You will recall that we discussed this matter when we met. I inherited a review of East End Life setting out how it meets the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity in all aspects apart from frequency and demonstrating that the departure from the frequency requirement ensures a value for money approach to promoting our Community Plan objectives including promoting equality and community cohesion and publicising statutory notices and council and partners' services. I recognise that this approach, drawn up under my predecessor, was followed in good faith. I am however not satisfied that it is an adequate foundation for a publicity strategy. Nor of course is it 'code compliant'. I have therefore instructed that a more fundamental review of our communications, both in informing the community and other stakeholders and in consulting and listening to them, be carried out. This will consider the future of how the council best communicates with its residents in a diverse and fast-changing borough in a way that meets residents' needs, ensures we promote cohesion and our equality duty and offers best value for money. I expect that work to be completed within weeks and that we will move towards a new model from March 2016. I am of course aware that you and the Commissioners have ongoing concerns about the frequency of publication. We are locked into publication arrangements and a more fundamental change would pre-empt the review. I have alongside the

review and as an interim measure instructed that our weekly newspaper assumes a fortnightly frequency. Please however be assured that this will not be its final resting place, and that a lesser frequency is, in my view, inevitable. I recognise that 'code compliance' requires quarterly publication of such a publication. I respect this and will feed this expectation into the review and advise you, through the Commissioners, and in discussion with our Commissioners, of our overall conclusions.

- I have taken particular interest since being elected in turning round the organisational culture to rebuild trust and ensure transparency. I have personally addressed a conference of several hundred staff to promote these messages within days of my election, and will address another soon. I am also ensuring the council becomes more outward focused through meeting with key external partners and prioritising re-building relationships with these. I have already attended two meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, most recently to set out my plans around transparency to inform the Committee's Transparency Commission. Governance, constitution and code of conduct changes are being progressed. I recognise that processes alone will not change culture and that cultural change will not happen overnight. To assist the council with the process we are undertaking a review supported by SOLACE which is engaging with senior managers and elected members from across the political spectrum to identify additional actions we can take to ensure positive and trusting working relationships to enable delivery for local people. And in addition to this, and as stated at the start of this letter, I am taking responsibility for political leadership in this area. As stated, this is in my view about political leadership but also about the internal officer and member culture and behaviours in the council and about our commitment to transparent and accountable decision-making.

In summary, the council has made substantial progress in delivering a challenging action plan. I recognise that over the next six month period I and my senior officer team, and my political colleagues, and ideally all parts of the Council too, need to look to embedding change and ensuring full compliance. One aspect of this will be an audit review which is considering compliance with delivery of the Best Value Plan and due to report by the end of 2015.

In view of the progress made, I look forward to working with the Commissioners to consider how best I and my new senior officer team can take back responsibility for all council functions, a necessary requisite for the council in demonstrating its credibility and enabling us to focus all our energy on maintaining best value and meeting the very real needs of our local community.

Yours sincerely

John Biggs
Executive Mayor