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# RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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**Tuesday, 12th December, 2023**

**Present:** Councillor Paddy Short (in the Chair),  
Councillors Danny Cassidy (Vice Chair), Mike Booth, Andrew Clegg and  
Judith Addison and Bernard Dawson  
Co-optees: Stacy Walsh and Miles Parkinson

**In Attendance:** Councillors Peter Britcliffe, Kath Pratt and Zak Khan

**Apologies:** Councillors Joyce Plummer and Scott Brerton  
Co-optees Doug Hayes and Richard Downie

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## **226 Apologies for absence, Substitutions, Declarations of Interest and Dispensations**

There were apologies for absence from Councillors Joyce Plummer and Scott Brerton.  
Councillor Bernard Dawson substituted for Councillor Scott Brerton.

Apologies were also received from Co-optees Richard Downie and Doug Hayes.

There were no declarations of interests or dispensations.

## **227 Minutes of Last Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023 were submitted for approval as a correct record. No questions were raised.

**Resolved - That the minutes of the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023 be approved as a correct record.**

## **228 Chair's Update**

The Chair provided a verbal report. At the Council meeting in November, Doug Hayes, Richard Downie, Miles Parkinson and Stacy Walsh were appointed as Co-optees to this Committee. The Chair welcomed them and spoke briefly on their role.

It was also reported that at the same Council meeting, Councillor Judith Addison had been appointed to this Committee in place of Councillor Josh Allen.

## **229 People Strategy Update**

The Chair welcomed Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and OD to the meeting to present this item.

Kirsten summarised the report and highlighted the following:

- Learning and development
- Apprenticeships
- Workforce equality
- Employee survey results

- Recruitment and retention difficulties
- Replacement HR/Payroll system

She also drew attention to the appendices to the report, which included an update on the Council's People Strategy and the 2023 Workforce Report.

The Chair thanked Kirsten for the report. The following questions and detailed responses and were submitted and answered.

To what extent are skills shortages and recruitment an issue for the Council? Is it a corporate problem or service specific?

*Answer: It is service specific, especially in teams such as planning, legal and environmental health, as outlined in the report. This has become more difficult in the last decade or so with public sector pay restraint meaning that salaries have not kept pace with the public sector. Also, reduced funding has meant that teams cannot afford the costs of additional trainee posts, although in some cases this has been the only option and managers have worked creatively to grow our own in many cases. This same issue applies right across local government, meaning there is a simply far more competition for people. For example, some research by the Local Government Chronicle, reported in May 2023, showed that only 1 in 10 planning departments were fully staffed. The increased ability of remote working has expanded opportunities for people to find better paid alternatives.*

Staff turnover has increased. Why is this? What are the Council doing to improve staff retention?

*Answer: It has increased significantly in the last financial year. We have had a number of staff who have decided it is time for them to retire – there is a theory that the pandemic made people reflect on what's important to them and what they want from work and their lives. Members may have read or heard about the so called "Great Resignation". With cost of living increases far exceeding pay awards, people have also looked for jobs which pay higher.*

*A survey reported in People Management Magazine in May of this year showed the total labour turnover rate at 22.5 per cent, compared to 14.6 per cent in 2021. Some of our leavers have had incredibly long careers with HBC and some retirements were well past 65. Looking at the staff for this period, nearly half have been employed by Hyndburn for over 10 years, a quarter of all staff for over 20 years, and 10% for over 30 years.*

*I have looked for comparator info and note that RVBC had gone up to 26.69% over the same time period. The committee should note that we do have several instances of people returning to HBC after a short period elsewhere.*

Does the Council do exit interviews to establish why staff are leaving? Of the staff that resign, is there a breakdown of reasons given?

*Answer: We offer an exit questionnaire to all leavers and the opportunity to have a 1-1 discussion with HR. 92% of respondents said that, where they were leaving for another role, the pay was better. We are planning to review the process as not very many people are completing the questionnaires.*

The % of women top earners is down, why is this?

*Answer: This was a very welcome question! ON checking the data to understand what and who had changed, I noticed that one female chief officer had not been counted. The figure*

*is actually 35.4%, which means it went up. I can only apologise for this error and assure the committee that the report published on our website has not been changed. This does show how easily the percentage can change and the significance – in a small council like Hyndburn – one person being appointed. Obviously we recruit on merit, but we have many policies in place, as a well as working culture, which we believe remove barriers based on a person's sex. For example, we welcome flexible working at all levels.*

Kirsten responded to additional questions on the following:

- Employee survey results
- Apprenticeship levy
- Work with local colleges to recruit apprentices
- Staff retention and comparison with other Councils
- Reviewing the current process for exit surveys
- Staff communication and Cabinet on tour

The Chair thanked Kirsten for the report, which was noted by the Committee.

### **230 Derelict Buildings**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Kath Pratt and Zak Khan, alongside Mark Hoyle, Head of Regeneration and Housing to the Committee to present this item.

Mark provided a brief overview and highlighted the wider subject area which this covered. He provided some background to the typical types of building found in Hyndburn, with many industrial type buildings built many years ago which are large, no longer fit for purpose and expensive to modernise, many of which have listed building status.

Councillor Khan reported that his role as Portfolio Holder for Economic Development was more focussed on commercial property rather than residential. Ultimately, the biggest issue with derelict commercial buildings as they are the responsibility of the owners, and the vast majority of buildings of this nature are in private ownership. His long term goal is for the Council to create an environment which encourages private investment in these buildings, and he is actively working with a number of businesses who are looking to relocate. He wants to meet with empty building owners and is arranging this. He said that the Levelling Up investment in Accrington should be a trigger for further private investment, but the Council needs to be more proactive rather than reactive to commercial building related issues.

The following questions were submitted by members and responded to as follows:

Does the Council have a strategic plan for dealing with derelict properties?

*Answer: The Council has a new Empty Property policy which will be considered by Cabinet early in 2024.*

Which buildings does the Council view as a priority to resolve and what if any action is taking place?

*Answer: The highest priority is afforded to unsafe buildings. Building Act legislation is used and is referred to in paragraph 3.9 of the report.*

*For housing standard issues and derelict non-housing property the priority properties are the ones which we receive service requests (complaints) from residents, elected members and the Member of Parliament.*

*The other priority is those that are a regeneration priority such as the Burton's building in the town square which forms part of the town centre levelling up project.*

*The Council serve a variety of enforcement notices in relation to empty properties. The main legislation used is listed in paragraph 3.9 of the report.*

*Where the above measures have been undertaken and the property issue is still not resolved or the property remains empty the Council will look at further enforcement action, namely:*

- *Works in default*
- *Prosecution*
- *Enforced Sale*
- *C.P.O (Compulsory Purchase Order) – subject to funding.*

*In addition this year the Council has taken prosecution cases against 6 properties. The Council has also successfully enforced the sale of 163 Manchester Road, Accrington.*

*Does the Council still employ an empty properties officers? Can you summarise their role?*

*Answer: The Council employs one empty property officer. The key duties are summarised as follows:*

- *To reduce the number of empty properties in the borough*
- *Where appropriate, to carry out enforcement action to prevent an empty property from being a nuisance and to support bringing empty properties back into use*
- *To liaise with empty property owners with a view to bringing empty properties back into use*
- *To monitor and record empty properties including action taken*
- *To develop policies, procedures and good practice for bringing empty properties back into use*
- *To identify sources of external funding to assist with bring empty properties back into use*

*Do we have data on the number of derelict and number of long term empty properties in the borough? Is there comparable information with other local authorities?*

*Answer: Council tax hold this information including the numbers of long term empties (dwellings, including those over 6 months). There is comparable information on the LCC website. Mark circulated a table which highlighted that Hyndburn has 3.4% vacant dwellings which is similar to average for Lancashire.*

*How many derelict or long term empty properties have the Council taken action against? Can a breakdown be provided of the specific actions taken over the last 2 years?*

*Answer: In 2021/22 The Council received 161 service requests in relation to empty properties. In 2022/23 The Council received 173 service requests in relation to empty properties. From April-1<sup>st</sup> December the Council has received 120 service requests in relation to empty properties. Housing Standards currently has 81 open cases.*

*Does the Council offer advice or support to private building owners who want to bring buildings back in to use?*

*Answer: The Council will always work with property owners who wish to bring their properties back into use including support and advice.*

*Are the costs of dealing with issues associated with derelict buildings (such as fire, vermin etc) in private ownership passed on to the owner?*

*Answer: Works in default in relation to empty properties are charged to the property owners. Typically this involves removal of waste from derelict land, or repairs to a property which are affecting a neighbouring property (for example roof repairs) The Council also incurs costs in relation to making empty properties secure from an anti-social/fire risk perspective. Where owners refuse to pay for works the civil debt recovery process is followed. Charges can also be placed on the property which allows the Council to recover debt at a future date, for example when a property is sold, or a charge can be used to enforce the sale of the building or land.*

Are there any examples of other Councils doing good work to tackle derelict properties that we can learn from?

*Answer: Housing Standards meet with our neighbouring authorities on a quarterly basis to network and compare enforcement work, including best practice. The Council is always willing to research and learn from best practice. There are many examples and solutions around the country and regionally. These solutions are usually dependent on either grant funding or private investment; or a combination for both.*

Councillors Khan and Pratt, and the Officer also responded to questions on the following:

- Unknown property ownership
- Speculative investors
- Opportunities to develop commercial properties in residential areas
- Eyesore buildings
- When the Council is able to intervene
- The Council's own empty properties
- Place First project in Woodhook as an excellent example of residential development

The Chair thanked Councillors and the Officer for the report and their responses to questions. The Committee noted the report.

Signed:.....

Date: .....

Chair of the meeting  
At which the minutes were confirmed