

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15 OCTOBER 2020

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a remote attendance meeting on Thursday, 15 October 2020

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

Councillors: Sean Bibby, Haydn Bateman, Geoff Collett, Andy Dunbobbin, Mared Eastwood, Patrick Heesom, Richard Jones, Kevin Rush, Andy Williams and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGY: Chief Executive

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor: Paul Johnson (for Paul Shotton)

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts (Leader and Cabinet Member for Education), Councillor Carolyn Thomas (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and Countryside), Councillor Billy Mullin (Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Assets), Councillor Glyn Banks (Cabinet Member for Finance), Chief Officer (Governance), Corporate Finance Manager, Senior Manager for Human Resources & Organisational Development and Finance Manager

IN ATTENDANCE: Head of Democratic Services, Democratic Services Team Leader and Democratic Services Officer

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

12. EMERGENCY SITUATION BRIEFING (VERBAL)

The Chief Officer (Governance) gave a brief update on the current situation and referred to the possible impact of Health Protection Zones on the number of cases and the importance of complying with the advice. Members would be kept informed of any changes and further announcements by Welsh Government were expected. The update also reflected on the Test, Trace & Protect service and work to refresh business continuity plans for the Winter period.

As Leader of the Council, Councillor Roberts thanked Members, officers and the people of Flintshire for the way in which they were dealing with the emergency situation. He gave a brief update on schools and assured Members that updates would be shared in a timely manner.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be received.

13. RECOVERY STRATEGY UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Governance) presented a report to update the Committee on the Corporate Portfolio Risk Register and mitigating actions as part of recovery planning, following the item at the previous meeting.

The Chief Officer, Corporate Finance Manager and Senior Manager for Human Resources & Organisational Development gave a joint presentation on the main changes and live issues on risk and recovery within their respective portfolios as follows:

- Open and closed risk trend
- Current risk status analysis
- Risk trend status analysis
- Finance
- Workforce
- Governance

Finance

Councillor Richard Jones said that to avoid any confusion, the data should differentiate between improving risk trends and static trends, therefore risk trends that were static should be annotated with the appropriate arrow but could remain red, amber or green in that static condition. The Chief Officer said that the data was presented to provide context on the current status alongside the trend, but could be reviewed if other Members shared the same concern. Councillor Jones proposed his suggestion as a recommendation and also questioned the title of the Recovery Strategy as he felt that this did not reflect the current phase of the pandemic. The Chief Officer said that the three phases followed national terminology and that the Recovery stage looked at forward planning. Inevitably each phase could be subject to change at any time.

Councillor Jones referred to the change in risk rating on national funding to replace lost income (CF01) which he said should be annotated to reflect the update in that month. In response to questions, the Chief Officer spoke about the proactive approach taken by the Revenues team to engage with private companies to access Welsh Government (WG) grant funding and to provide support through repayment agreements where possible. On the retention of Deeside Leisure Centre as an emergency hospital, the Corporate Finance Manager said that negotiations were ongoing on financial support for private companies operating within the building.

On financial risks, Councillor Johnson asked about the potential impact on Council Tax setting. The Corporate Finance Manager said that the budget report for the forthcoming Cabinet meeting detailed a range of known cost pressures and the limited solutions available to the Council to meet them. The start of the budget consultation process in November would provide an opportunity for Overview & Scrutiny committees to review and challenge those cost pressures alongside the broader approach to identify efficiencies. In addition, councils in Wales were currently working with the Welsh Local Government Association on the financial impact of the emergency situation.

In response to questions from Councillor Dunbobbin, the Corporate Finance Manager agreed to liaise with the Chief Officer (Housing & Assets) to provide more information on the value and reasons for the increase in rent arrears. A report on rent arrears would be considered by Overview & Scrutiny prior to Cabinet.

Following a question by Councillor Bateman, it was confirmed that although the loss of car parking income from quarter 2 did not meet the eligibility criteria for WG funding, officers were pursuing a possible claim for reduced footfall. Councillor Roberts explained that the Council's decision to withdraw charges during the period was regarded as a local decision by WG.

Councillor Banks reminded Members that the rationale behind the Council's decision was to support local town centres. Councillor Jones said that this case could be evidenced to WG. The Chief Officer assured Members that the Council was doing everything possible to maximise funding available from WG to support the recovery process.

Workforce

In response to a question from Councillor Jones on workforce availability as a result of caring responsibilities, the Senior Manager outlined the arrangements in place to support employees who were unable to work from home. She also referred to the impact on the workforce arising from the risk around the personal protective equipment (PPE) supply chain which was being monitored by Procurement. The Chief Officer advised that WG had agreed to procure the appropriate levels of PPE for social care and councils during the forthcoming winter.

When asked by Councillor Dunbobbin about the risk on employee availability in the education sector, the Senior Manager said that this was low and that pupils had been mainly affected, with schools adopting creative methods to deal with the situation. She also provided information on continuing positive engagement with Trade Union colleagues during the emergency period.

In response to a question from Councillor Johnson, the Senior Manager spoke about changes made to the recruitment process using digital means which were proving efficient. She also provided clarification on recruitment to critical roles including the approval process.

Governance

Councillor Dunbobbin thanked officers for the response to the recent data breach which he suggested could be used as a training opportunity for employees. The Chief Officer gave examples of actions put in place to safeguard against reoccurrence. In response to concerns about the rise in cyber-crime across the region, he gave an overview of the maintenance and renewal programme to update ICT hardware and software and would provide a separate response on the type of firewall software used by the Council.

In thanking officers for the report, Councillor Heesom took the opportunity to raise his concerns about aspects of the Planning function. As the matter was

outside the remit of this Committee, the Chief Officer would ask the Chief Officer (Planning, Environment & Economy) to liaise directly with Councillor Heesom.

Councillor Jones reiterated his earlier proposal which was seconded by Councillor Heesom.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee accepts the latest update risk register and risk mitigation within the corporate portfolios; and
- (b) That for future updates, the Committee requests that when a risk trend is static, it should be annotated with the appropriate arrow but can remain red, amber or green in that static condition.

14. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2020/21 (MONTH 5)

The Corporate Finance Manager presented a report on the revenue budget monitoring position for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as at Month 5 prior to consideration by Cabinet. This reflected the budget position at the close of the financial year if all things remained unchanged and took into account the latest position on Welsh Government (WG) Emergency Grant Funding announcements.

The operating deficit of £0.921m was a positive movement of £0.062m from the previous month. This projection did not include the impact of the two significant financial risks on Council Tax income and Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS), along with the pay award which would be met from reserves. The overall position had benefitted from £0.316m of temporary savings identified as part of the review of non-essential spend, however this was offset by a significant increase in Out of County spend which was £0.144m above the £0.300m contingency level that was set aside.

Officers were continuing to liaise with WG on future support for the CTRS and would update Members accordingly, along with progress on new risks on free school meals and transportation. To condense future reports, details of variances would only show those which had changed from the previous month.

On Reserves and Balances, the projected year-end balance on Contingency Reserves was £1.418m assuming that the projected overspend of £0.921m was met from the amount available in the £3m emergency ring-fenced fund, which would leave a remaining amount of £1.965m. The projected year-end balance on earmarked reserves at this stage was £11.4m.

On the HRA, a projected underspend of £0.364m would leave a closing un-earmarked balance of £2.373m, which was above the recommended guidelines on spend.

Councillor Dunbobbin referred to the potential impact of the Mockingbird project and proposed that the overspend on Out of County Placements be referred to the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The proposal was seconded by Councillor Richard Jones who also asked about the effect of Covid-19 on Out of County Placements. On the table showing the projected position by portfolio, he requested an extra column to identify income and costs and questioned the movement of funding within the 'approved budget' column for some portfolios (excluding Central and Corporate Finance) acknowledging that the total was reconciled at year-end. On the first point, the Corporate Finance Manager referred to the software used to generate the data and suggested that future reports could instead provide narrative for portfolios which may help to provide context. He also agreed look into the movement of funding in the approved budget of portfolios.

Councillor Banks spoke about the potential for long-term benefits of the Mockingbird project which was in the early stages of development and the first of its type in Wales.

The recommendations, which were amended to reflect the debate, were moved and seconded by Councillors Jones and Dunbobbin.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That having considered the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2020/21 Month 5 report, the Committee confirms that there are no issues to be raised with the Cabinet on this occasion;
- (b) That the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee be requested to consider an item on Out of County Placements and the Mockingbird initiative;
- (c) That Finance officers look into the possibility of including an additional column in Table 1 of future reports to separate income from costs, and provide a response on movement within approved budgets of portfolios; and
- (d) That information be provided on the impact of Covid-19 on Out of County Placements.

15. ACTION TRACKING

In presenting the report, the Head of Democratic Services advised that a Member workshop on Digital was being arranged, as requested at the workshop on the North Wales Economic Ambition Board. He also advised that discussions with the Welsh Local Government Association were currently on hold.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Dunbobbin and Heesom.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

16. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Democratic Services presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration.

In response to a question from Councillor Richard Jones, officers provided clarification on the timing of the budget consultation process starting with the Committee's meeting on 2 November.

The recommendations were moved and seconded by Councillors Dunbobbin and Bibby.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted; and
- (b) That the Head of Democratic Services, in consultation with the Committee Chair, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises.

17. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 12pm)

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Chairman