

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
10 DECEMBER 2020

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held as a remote attendance meeting on Thursday, 10 December 2020

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

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

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 Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Corporate Finance Manager, Senior Manager for Human Resources & Organisational Development, Strategic Finance Manager and Customer Contact Service Manager

For minute number 43

Head of Clwyd Pension Fund, Pensions Administration Manager and Pension Fund Accountant

IN ATTENDANCE: Head of Democratic Services, Civic & Member Services Officer and Democratic Services Officer

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

36. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2020 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Shotton and Dunbobbin. It was agreed that an update on business support grants would be circulated to the Committee.

The minutes of 12 November 2020 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Dunbobbin and Rush.

RESOLVED:

That both sets of minutes be approved as a correct record.

37. ACTION TRACKING

The Head of Democratic Services presented the report on progress with actions arising from previous meetings.

The recommendation was supported by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

38. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

In presenting the report, the Head of Democratic Services advised that the Community Safety Partnership Annual Report may need to be deferred to the February meeting and could be replaced by the Community Endowment Fund Annual Report. He clarified that the Revenue Budget Monitoring Month 8 position was scheduled for the next meeting and that the Emergency Situation Briefings would be replaced by weekly Member briefing emails from January.

Councillor Jones said that there should be more focus on the alignment of the Council Plan with portfolios. He was advised that consultation on the content and format of the Council Plan would begin early in the New Year.

In response to Councillor Jones' concerns about the need to consider financial strategies at an early stage and to focus on issues where the Council had some control, the Chief Executive said that the Cabinet report on the budget closing strategy had been shared and that the Member briefing on the Provisional Local Government Settlement on 23 December would provide an opportunity to review the position and future financial risk management.

On that basis, the recommendations were supported.

RESOLVED:

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

39. EMERGENCY SITUATION BRIEFING (VERBAL)

The Chief Executive gave a verbal update on the current situation including local and regional statistics and the responses to the emergency. He responded to questions on the vaccination programme and the status of emergency hospitals. Councillor Roberts provided an update on the position in schools. The Senior Manager for Human Resources & Organisational Development reported on the recruitment process to increase capacity in the Test, Trace & Protect service.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be received.

40. RECOVERY STRATEGY UPDATE

The Chief Executive presented a report to update the Committee on the Corporate portfolio risk register and mitigating actions as part of recovery planning. As many of the short-term risks had been closed, the focus was on those risks for the medium and longer term with a number of financial risks likely to remain open for some time.

The Chief Officer (Governance), Corporate Finance Manager and Senior Manager for Human Resources & Organisational Development each gave an overview of the main changes and live issues on risk and recovery within their respective portfolios.

Councillor Shotton paid tribute to the workforce for their work during the pandemic.

The Chief Executive said that the next update on the Recovery Strategy would be reported in February, and that any significant issues on Finance would form part of the Revenue Budget Monitoring report in January.

Councillor Jones suggested that the Committee should focus on live issues such as rent arrears, Council Tax collection levels and school transportation which would affect the budget. The Chief Executive said that in addition to the item on this agenda, the budget report in January would reflect any changes to projections prior to the County Council meeting in February.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee supports the latest updated risk register and risk mitigation actions within the corporate portfolios.

41. COUNCIL PLAN 2021/22 DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Chief Executive presented a report on the development of the proposed Council Plan for 2021/22 with focus on the Committee's respective portfolios.

As previously reported, the immediate strategic priorities for the recovery of portfolios had been extracted from the draft Council Plan 2020/21 and adopted for the second half of 2020/21. The Council Plan for 2021/22 would continue to take account of recovery and would be built around six themes suggested by Cabinet:

- Economy
- Education and Skills
- Environment
- Housing

- Personal and Community Well-being
- Poverty

The Medium Term Financial Strategy reflected key work on these areas. Consultation with Overview & Scrutiny Committees was scheduled for the New Year leading to adoption by Council in April/May 2021. In response to Councillor Jones' earlier point, whilst there was clear alignment with Overview & Scrutiny committees on the first five themes, areas under the Poverty theme were broader and spanned portfolios.

This point was acknowledged by Councillor Roberts who spoke about the need to retain cross-cutting themes such as Poverty and Well-being as well as in-year priorities such as Green Council which required a view across the Council.

Councillor Thomas agreed and gave examples of joint working across service areas. She also referred to the opportunity for Overview & Scrutiny committees to influence their forward work programmes.

In recognising the number of cross-cutting issues, Councillor Jones said that themes were easier to understand and follow when aligned to a specific lead officer and committee.

Councillor Shotton welcomed the priority areas to tackle poverty which spanned the remit of all committees.

Councillor Heesom spoke in support of Councillor Jones' comments and the importance of Overview & Scrutiny committees focussing on key issues.

Following the debate, the Committee supported the Chief Executive's suggestion that the Poverty theme remain open until the item was next considered so that Members could consider which Overview & Scrutiny committee was the best fit for this theme.

The recommendation in the report was moved and seconded by Councillors Jones and Heesom.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the process and timeline for the review of the Council Plan for re-adoption for 2021/22.

42. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2020/21 (MONTH 7)

The Corporate Finance Manager gave a presentation on the Council's success in making claims to Welsh Government (WG) for Emergency Grant funding and how these claims were reconciled against the £3m emergency reserve that was set aside at the start of the emergency situation. The presentation covered:

- National Funding Announcements
- Hardship Fund claims
- Income Loss claims
- Approved Contingency Reserve £3m

The presentation recognised the success of joint working between Local Government and WG from the start of the emergency situation. It was noted that the approved Contingency Reserve balance would be £2.616m if all holding claims were approved by WG in January. The lost income elements awaiting approval had been factored into budget monitoring projections and would result in a positive movement if approved by WG. The presentation slides would be circulated to the Committee following the meeting.

The Strategic Finance Manager presented the report on the revenue budget monitoring position for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as at Month 7 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 WG Emergency Grant Funding announcements.

The operating deficit of £0.196m was a positive movement of £0.373m from the previous month and would leave a projected Contingency Reserve balance of £1.415m. The review of non-essential spend had helped to reduce the overall position by £0.700m to date by delaying spend and holding vacancies.

Amongst the significant variances were £0.345m of additional costs for Out of County Placements, and an improved position of £0.148m for Streetscene & Transportation and £0.270m for Governance, as set out in the report. Emerging risks such as the increase in demand for free school meals were being closely monitored.

It was projected that 96% of efficiencies would be achieved by year-end.

The projected £1.415m year-end balance of Contingency Reserves assumed that the projected overspend of £0.196m was met from the amount available in the £3m emergency ring-fenced fund, which would leave a remaining amount of £2.446m.

On the HRA, a projected underspend of £0.460m would leave a closing un-earmarked balance of £2.469m, which was above the recommended guidelines on spend.

Councillor Banks thanked officers for the report and their successes in obtaining grant funding.

Councillor Heesom thanked officers for the improved presentation of variances. In response to questions, the Chief Executive reported a positive outcome on negotiations with WG on the reimbursement of car parking income losses during Quarter 2. He also spoke about the challenges in reinstating markets during the emergency situation due to safety concerns.

Councillor Jones asked for explanation on the reduction in the approved budget for Central & Corporate Finance to which officers would provide a separate response. He called for the continued suspension of car parking charges to assist town centres. In response to questions, the Corporate Finance Manager provided clarification on the impact of the teachers' pay award. On the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) it was hoped that WG would continue to provide financial support for the remaining two quarters.

Councillor Thomas spoke about her concerns about rising costs for transportation which would continue to be monitored.

Following a suggestion by the Chief Executive, it was agreed that the Committee would receive a report in January on the open risks from the emergency period and reconciliation of Emergency Grant funding, together with analysis of longer term risks in the risk register.

The recommendation was moved and seconded by Councillors Shotton and Jones.

RESOLVED:

That having considered the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2020/21 Month 7 report, the Committee confirms that there are no issues to be raised with the Cabinet on this occasion.

43. CLWYD PENSION FUND UPDATE

The Head of Clwyd Pension Fund presented a report on the Clwyd Pension Fund and Annual Report for 2019/20.

The Committee was introduced to the Pensions Administration Manager who gave an overview of the range of services provided by the teams.

The Pension Fund Accountant spoke about the statutory obligations in publishing the Annual Report and went on to highlight key areas such as the outcome of the triennial actuarial valuation and the impact of the emergency situation.

As a member of the Clwyd Pension Fund Committee, Councillor Mullin paid tribute to the work undertaken by the team.

A presentation was given on the local and national governance of the Fund covering:

- Clwyd Pension Fund Governance Structure
- Committee and Board changes
- The National Local Government Pension Scheme
- Policies and Strategies
- Objectives

- Summary of Independent Adviser's Sixth Annual Report
- Summary of Pension Board's Sixth Annual Report
- Looking forward

During the presentation, the Head of Clwyd Pension Fund explained the implications of Good Governance Recommendations to be introduced from next year.

The Chief Executive spoke about the complexity of the Fund and its robust governance arrangements. He thanked the officers, particularly the Pensions Administration Manager and her team for the improvements which had been made in that area.

Councillor Jones thanked the team for their presentation. He moved the recommendations which were supported by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That having considered the Clwyd Pension Fund Annual Report for 2019/20, the Committee has no specific comments to make; and
- (b) The Committee confirmed that there were no specific areas of concern to require further information on at the next update.

44. PUBLIC SERVICES OMBUDSMAN FOR WALES ANNUAL LETTER 2019-20 AND COMPLAINTS AGAINST FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL 2020-21

The Customer Contact Service Manager presented the report to share the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) Annual Letter for 2019-20. The report also included an overview of complaints against Council services between 1 April to 30 September 2020.

Although there had been an increase in the number of complaints made against the Council in 2019/20, a high percentage were premature (as the complaints procedure had not been fully exhausted), out of jurisdiction or closed after initial consideration by the PSOW. Good progress was reported on completing a range of actions to improve complaints handling.

For the period April to September 2020, Council services had performed well in closing a high percentage of complaints within timescale despite the national emergency, and the number of complaints had peaked in July as services were resumed. Members' attention was drawn to priority work underway on the workforce training programme and new Complaints Policy.

In response to comments from Councillor Jones, the Customer Contact Service Manager gave examples of complaints referred back from the PSOW which were requests for services. She explained that the recommendation on complaints handling applied to all councils and that workforce training was aimed at improving the quality of responses to reduce referrals to the PSOW. The high

number of complaints for waste and recycling services reflected the national position.

The Chief Executive spoke about work undertaken in Streetscene & Transportation and Planning to improve the quality of responses and timescales.

The Chairman referred to the inclusion of Rent Smart Wales complaints categorised under Cardiff Council, which prompted discussion on the disparity of figures due to outsourcing services. The Customer Contact Service Manager agreed to include the comments as part of feedback on the Annual Letter.

Councillor Mullin paid tribute to the Service Manager and her team for their work.

In response to comments from Councillor Heesom, the Chief Executive provided clarification on the services of the PSOW and said that the Complaints Policy would be shared with the Committee in the New Year. The Customer Contact Service Manager spoke about her involvement on a consultation group with the PSOW to discuss policy changes.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee:

- (a) Notes the annual performance of the Council in respect of complaints made to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (2019-20) and local complaints made against services in the first half of 2020-21;
- (b) Supports the actions in paragraph 1.08 to improve complaints handling across the Council; and
- (c) Supports the actions in paragraph 1.09 to review the Council's complaints policy by 31 March, 2021.

45. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 1pm)

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Chairman