

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16 JANUARY 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 16 January 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Tim Newhouse (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Marion Bateman, Clive Carver, Peter Curtis, Andy Dunbobbin, Ron Hampson, Richard Jones, Richard Lloyd, Mike Lowe, Ian Smith and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Ian Dunbar and Paul Shotton, Chief Executive and Head of Human Resources & Organisational Development

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Kevin Jones

CONTRIBUTORS: Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Head of ICT & Customer Services and Head of Finance

Corporate Finance Manager (for minute number 62)

Revenues & Benefits Manager (for minute number 63 & 64)

Revenues Manager (for minute number 64)

Benefits Manager (for minute numbers 63 & 64)

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

58. COUNCILLOR TED EVANS

Following a request by Councillor Clive Carver, the Chairman paid tribute to the late Councillor Ted Evans, which was echoed by the Committee.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Mike Lowe declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 6 'Council Tax Reduction Scheme' as he was in receipt of Council Tax reduction due to the disability of a family member.

Councillor Richard Jones declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 'Council Tax and Business Rate Policies 2014-15' as his partner was a business rate payer. He chose to leave the meeting during discussion on this item.

Councillor Clive Carver declared a personal and prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 7 'Council Tax and Business Rate Policies 2014-15' as he was a Director of a company located in his ward. He left the meeting during discussion on this item.

60. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 12 December 2013 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

61. IMPROVEMENT ASSESSMENT LETTER FROM THE AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES

The Head of ICT & Customer Services introduced the report on the Council's Improvement Assessment Letter from the Auditor General for Wales dated December 2013, together with the Council's response.

In line with requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, the Letter reported the view of the Auditor General for Wales that the Council had discharged its improvement reporting duties with no new statutory recommendations for improvement.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance said that the lack of new proposals for improvement gave assurance on the Council's position and that the helpful comments outlined in the Letter to strengthen current arrangements would be taken on board.

In response to a query from Councillor Haydn Bateman on two of the comments, the Head of ICT & Customer Services explained that these related to the level of detail and presentation of information to engage with residents and the suggestion to be proactive in inviting feedback from residents.

On the first comment, the Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance spoke of the need to ensure a balance between so that sufficient detail was given in a way that residents could easily engage with.

RESOLVED:

That the Council's Improvement Assessment Letter from the Auditor General for Wales, together with the Council's response, be noted.

62. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2013/14 (MONTH 7)

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced a report to provide Members with Revenue Budget Monitoring 2013/14 (Month 7) information for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report was due for submission to Cabinet on 21 January 2014 and would be on the same agenda as the initial budget proposals for 2014/15. Therefore it was important to reflect the most accurate position possible, due to the direct link with the level of contingency reserve available which would form a key part of the budget strategy for 2014/15. Due to this, it was reported that detailed work was being undertaken to confirm the timing and achievement of all efficiencies, particularly some of the large more complex areas such as the Customer workstream.

For the Council Fund, the projected net in-year expenditure was reported to be £944K less than the budget, which was a decrease of £68K from that

reported at Month 6. Explanation was given on the main reasons for variances from Month 6, together with actions, as outlined in the report.

On the Programme of Efficiencies, it was projected that £4.506m of the £5.331m included in the budget had either already been achieved or was expected to do so by the end of the financial year.

The position on pay inflation and non-standard price inflation remained unchanged from Month 6. An update on unearmarked reserves reported that an estimated £3.585m was likely to be available at the end of the financial year.

For the HRA, there was a projected underspend of £117K which would mean a closing balance of £1.551m, which at 5.4% of total expenditure was above the recommended level.

On the Council Fund, Councillor Haydn Bateman asked about the increased internal interest costs and reduction in debt management costs under the Central Loans and Investment Account. The Head of Finance explained that this section dealt with all debt and treasury management undertaken across the Council and that the position remained unchanged from that reported at Month 6. She said that further detail was available from the Finance Manager - Technical Accountancy and that the accounting part of treasury management activity (as considered by the Audit Committee, Cabinet and County Council) could be incorporated in the training session scheduled for 27 January 2014, to which all Members were invited. She would ask the Finance Manager - Technical Accountancy to refer to Councillor Bateman's question in a meeting which was being arranged to address previous questions raised.

Councillor Richard Lloyd referred to the potential costs relating to the former chemical plant in Sandycroft and asked for further clarification. The Corporate Finance Manager said that the update included in the report advised of projected costs of £400K for the current financial year. The Head of Finance was aware that the site had been made safe and that discussions were being finalised on its future. She agreed to seek an update from the Head of Legal & Democratic Services to share with Members.

In response to a query from Councillor Clive Carver, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that Denbighshire Council was now the lead Authority for the Coroners service and that the in-year costs were due to outstanding invoices which had been received late from Wrexham as the lead authority.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the reports be noted.

63. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

The Revenues & Benefits Manager introduced the report to seek views on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2014/15 and explained the requirement for the report to be approved by Cabinet prior to endorsement to adopt the

Scheme at County Council before the end of the month. Failure to do so would result in application of a default Scheme.

Following Welsh Government (WG) approval of the regulations, there was a need for the Council to re-adopt the Scheme for 2014/15 with consideration to three additional discretionary elements. The Revenues & Benefits Manager provided explanation on these areas for discretion, as outlined in the report, and advised that the outcome of consultation indicated that the majority of responses were in agreement with the recommendations of the report.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee noted the recommendations to Cabinet and Council;
- (b) That the making of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations ('the Prescribed Requirements Regulations') by Wales Government on 26 November 2013 be noted, as amended by the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Scheme) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2014; and
- (c) To recommend to Council to adopt the Council Tax Reduction Scheme discretionary elements as outlined in Appendix 1 to the report, subject to any input from Cabinet.

64. COUNCIL TAX AND BUSINESS RATE POLICIES 2014-15

Councillors Clive Carver and Richard Jones left the room prior to consideration of this item.

The Revenues & Benefits Manager introduced the report giving details of an annual report on Council Tax and Business Rate Policies proposed for the financial year 2014/15. He outlined the areas under Section 13A of the Council Tax regulations where discretionary relief could be applied by Councils, as indicated in the report, and advised that such amounts were funded by the Council and not Welsh Government. Views were sought from the Committee to be reported verbally to Cabinet.

Councillor Marion Bateman queried why discretionary discounts were not available to those who made payments by standing order/direct debit. The Revenues & Benefits Manager explained that a high proportion of residents currently used this preferred method and that a discount was not applied due to anti-poverty issues to residents and cost implications to the Council.

In response to a query from Councillor Richard Lloyd, the Revenues & Benefits Manager confirmed that the 25% discount on Council Tax for single person occupancy was part of primary legislation. A 50% National Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) reduction was applied to establishments which fulfilled the requirements for discretionary relief, such as golf clubs and golf driving ranges.

Following a query by Councillor Peter Curtis on the potential for some golf clubs to attract revenue from on-site functions, the Revenues Manager explained that only a small number qualified for the relief.

When asked by Councillor Haydn Bateman about traveller sites, the Revenues & Benefits Manager explained that Council Tax was payable on any domestic properties within the Council Tax Valuation List which were the main residence of the individual and that single person occupancy discount would apply within the legislation. Business rates would apply to caravans located on holiday parks payable through the site owner.

Councillor Arnold Woolley queried the rationale not to award discretionary 'top up' discounts to small businesses, in view of the current financial climate. The Revenues & Benefits Manager advised that hardship relief was available through the Business Rate regulations which would entitle 100% relief on those businesses which qualified.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance clarified that it was not the responsibility of the Council to set business rates and that the policy on discretionary elements had remained unchanged by the Council for some time.

Councillor Marion Bateman asked if Cabinet could give consideration to applying an incentive discount for payments by Direct Debit. The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance agreed that this was a valid point and would be referred to Cabinet. However, there was a need to understand the proportion of those already paying by this method and the potential significant cost implications to the Council.

RESOLVED:

That the current Council Tax and Business Rate Policies for 2014/15 be continued.

65. FEEDBACK FROM CONSIDERATION OF IMPROVEMENT AND PERFORMANCE PLANS

The Member Engagement Manager presented the report giving feedback from the functional Overview & Scrutiny committees on the new approach to Improvement and Performance Plans.

He reminded Members of the new reporting arrangements which had been received by the committees in November 2013. Whilst detailing the feedback, he advised that following a suggestion made by the Community Profile & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee, a workshop was to be arranged for the end of February 2014 to assist Members in their scrutiny of the new approach.

Councillor Peter Curtis, who was a member of the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee, stressed the need for Cabinet to take on board the concerns raised about joint working with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and the increased need for Dementia facilities in hospitals which had been

previously highlighted. Councillor Marion Bateman added that these concerns were also shared by some officers.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance gave assurance that this risk had already been identified within the Care & Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) report and that the Council would continue to work with the new Board to improve the situation.

RESOLVED:

That the observations of the Overview & Scrutiny committees on the Improvement and Performance Plans be forwarded to Cabinet.

66. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced a report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme. He drew attention to the workshop scheduled for 27 January 2014 which would give all Members an introduction to the Budget 2014/15.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be agreed.

67. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were two members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 10.55 am)

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Chairman