

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13 FEBRUARY 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 13 February 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Tim Newhouse (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Marion Bateman, Clive Carver, Andy Dunbobbin, Ron Hampson, Mike Lowe, Paul Shotton, Ian Smith and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Robin Guest (for Richard Jones) and Mike Reece (for Ian Dunbar)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Peter Curtis and Richard Lloyd

CONTRIBUTORS: Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management and Chief Executive

Head of Finance, Corporate Finance Manager and Head of Housing (for minute numbers 76 and 77)

Revenues & Benefits Manager (for minute number 77)

Head of Assets & Transportation (for minute number 78)

IN ATTENDANCE: Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

74. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

75. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 January 2014 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Accuracy

Minute 58: As a point of accuracy, Councillor Marion Bateman pointed out that it was Councillor Clive Carver who had asked that the Committee pay tribute to the late Councillor Ted Evans.

Minute 64: Councillor Marion Bateman clarified that her suggestion for consideration of incentive discounts was in relation to quarterly direct debit payments on bills. The Head of Finance confirmed that Cabinet had given consideration to offering discretionary discounts but had opted not to pursue this due to the implications involved, as referred to at the last meeting. This also applied to direct debits paid quarterly.

RESOLVED:

That subject to the above, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

76. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2013/14 (MONTH 8)

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced a report to provide Members with the latest Revenue Budget Monitoring information for 2013/14 (as at Month 8) for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The report was due to be considered by Cabinet on 18 February 2014 alongside the final budget proposals for 2014/15 which had been despatched to Members the previous day.

For the Council Fund, the projected net in-year expenditure was reported to be £1.068m less than the budget, which was an increase of £0.124m from that reported at Month 7. Explanation was provided on the main reasons for variances from Month 7, as outlined in paragraphs 3.04 to 3.06 of the report.

An update on the Programme of Efficiencies indicated that £4.146m of the £5.331m included in the budget had either been achieved or were expected to be achieved by the end of the financial year, which equated to 78%.

The position on pay inflation and non-standard price inflation remained unchanged from that reported at Month 7.

An update on unearmarked reserves reported a projected level of £3.709m of contingency reserves at the end of the financial year.

For the HRA, it was reported that an underspend of £0.212m was projected which would result in a closing balance of £1.646m, which at 5.76% of total expenditure was above the recommended level of 3%.

In response to a question from Councillor Robin Guest on the underachievement of some efficiencies in the programme of efficiencies, the Corporate Finance Manager confirmed that these figures were already assumed in the projected outturn figures. When asked about the £1.068m of variances from the budget, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that these were a mix of recurring and non-recurring items which had been considered as part of the finalisation of the 2014/15 budget proposals. Following a request, he agreed to carry out analysis of the detail which was appended to the report and provide a breakdown of recurring and one-off expenditure.

The Head of Finance said that the outturn figures included a mix of pressures and efficiencies such as the £0.381m in-year efficiencies on discretionary housing payments which represented an in-year saving and would continue. As a further example, an underspend on learning disability services in Community Services in 2012/13 had been recognised for the 2013/14 budget and would continue to be recognised for 2014/15.

Following a query from Councillor Clive Carver on the projected underachievement of £0.286m of efficiencies in the Flintshire Futures - Customer Programme, the Chief Executive explained that this was a deferred efficiency due

to timing implications from the Flintshire Connects programme. He reported on ongoing work to back-office systems and teams, resulting in reduced costs to the organisation and spoke of further work to be done on all Flintshire Connects centres.

Councillor Arnold Woolley commented on the reduction in the budget for Services for Adults and the increase for Central and Corporate Finance. The Corporate Finance Manager explained that around £1.2m of recurring efficiencies in Social Services for Adults had been identified at the start of the financial year during a review of the outturn for 2012/13. This amount had been transferred to be held centrally in the 2013/14 budget on a recurring basis and was made up of various service efficiencies. The Chief Executive added that these were savings from a broader transfer programme and were not a reflection on targets/needs within the service.

Councillor Paul Shotton praised the work carried out by the Welfare Response Team to help residents to manage financial change, resulting in a reduced level of need for discretionary housing payments to achieve an in-year efficiency. He welcomed the developments in the Flintshire Connects programme.

On the expected efficiencies in Streetscene, Councillor Haydn Bateman referred to the indication that the new income target was expected to be met on leachate processing. The Corporate Finance Manager advised that this efficiency was expected to be achieved in-year against the new target and agreed to provide details of the change from the original target.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the reports be noted.

77. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME CONSULTATION

The Revenues & Benefits Manager introduced the report on Welsh Government (WG) consultation to seek views on the review of options for the future of Council Tax support in Wales, with recommended responses to the consultation appended to the report for consideration.

Although funding had been made available from WG for the Council Tax support system, this would only provide a reduced level of support to those previously in receipt of Council Tax benefit and would not be sustainable to support future rises in Council Tax. It was noted that Flintshire currently paid £10.2m in Council Tax support to households. The Revenues & Benefits Manager explained the aim for one scheme across Wales and pointed out that in England, individual schemes developed by each Council had prompted legal issues. He gave an overview of the options put forward by WG for Councils in Wales to agree on a scheme for reduced entitlement that was sustainable and adaptable whilst providing a level of protection for vulnerable households.

Following comments from Councillor Paul Shotton on collaborative working, the Revenues & Benefits Manager explained that the consultation was based on the sustainability of the scheme currently in place which had been

developed by WG. The projected cost to the Council for supporting the scheme in 2014/15 was £633K.

Following concerns raised by Councillor Arnold Woolley about the Council's lack of control on a national scheme, the Revenues & Benefits Manager acknowledged that this was a challenging situation and that a 'postcode lottery' should be avoided. The Chief Executive said that although there may be agreement on the principles of the scheme, the issue was about funding responsibility.

The Chair proposed that the Committee accept the three recommendations of the report and on being put to the vote, this was carried.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the consultation be noted;
- (b) That the recommended responses, as detailed in Appendix 2 to the report, be endorsed; and
- (c) That the above endorsement be reported verbally to Cabinet on 18 February 2014.

78. ASSETS AS AN ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE STRATEGY WORKSTREAM

The Head of Assets & Transportation provided a verbal update on workstreams and explained the objective to review and consider the releasing of leases on third party owned buildings used by the Council, where a break in the lease was approaching. Although progress had been made, this was dependant on the timing of lease dates as penalties would be incurred if broken earlier.

The workstream on Flintshire Connects had helped to support agile and mobile working. Following the success of the Flintshire Connects centre in Holywell, the facility in Flint was expected to be operational within the next two months with the centre at Connah's Quay due for completion in May 2014 and design work taking place at the proposed facility in Buckley Town Hall. The Council had been successful in encouraging the presence of other public sector organisations at the centres to enable customers to access a number of localised services. Support was being put in place for managers to help with teams' transition to agile/mobile working and respond to lone working issues with appropriate technology in place. Information was available on the Council's Infonet on supporting the various elements of this transition.

On agile working, a review had indicated the need to maximise conference facilities through improved monitoring and management of the conference booking system. The Chief Executive spoke of the need to move away from the traditional meeting setup and encourage use of video conference facilities to minimise travel and time. Provision had been made within the budget to support this facility. He added that although progress had been made on ICT developments, further improvements would be needed.

On Electronic Document Management, the transition to shared access of centralised multi-functional devices had resulted in a reduction of over 50% of printers and more efficient use of paper supplies. Storage capacity had benefited from a move from traditional paper filing systems to electronic scanned documents. The Head of Assets & Transportation reported that work was ongoing to further reduce storage allocation at County Hall and that an increase in archiving and recycling was evidence of a different approach to working.

Councillor Clive Carver felt that more could be done in the approach to paperless systems such as the facility for Members to submit comments on planning applications without the need for a hard signature. This was queried by the Chairman who had been able to successfully submit comments online. Whilst the Chief Executive welcomed suggestions from Members, he pointed out that any changes would need agreement by all Members. The Head of Assets & Transportation agreed to clarify the position on the submission of Members' comments online and provide a response to the Committee.

In response to a query from Councillor Marion Bateman, the Head of Assets & Transportation agreed to provide the Committee with information on the number of third party buildings currently leased by the Council which could be released over the coming year and the potential savings from this. He went on to say that buildings were a key part of the workstream and linked to a number of service areas. The Chief Executive spoke of the benefits which had been made through good strategy and careful investment in remodelling work on the offices at Flint and Alltami.

Following comments from Councillor Robin Guest on releasing leases on third party owned buildings, the Head of Assets & Transportation explained that this was not a blanket approach and that user groups were challenged to establish whether accommodation in other Council buildings could be utilised. He referred to the geography of the county and said there was a need for a broader understanding on the use of assets.

The Head of Assets & Transportation agreed to speak separately with Councillor Mike Reece regarding a vacant Council owned building within his ward.

RESOLVED:

That the update be noted.

79. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the report to enable the Committee to consider the Forward Work Programme and urged Members to submit items for future consideration.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme be agreed.

80. **MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE**

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

(The meeting started at 10.00 am and ended at 11.02 am)

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Chairman