

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16 APRIL 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 16 April 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Tim Newhouse (Chairman)

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

APOLOGIES:

Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Councillors: Ian Dunbar, Ray Hughes and Mike Lowe
Chief Executive

CONTRIBUTORS:

Leader of the Council & Cabinet Member for Finance, Head of Finance, Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Head of ICT and Customer Services, Head of Assets and Transportation, Revenues & Benefits Manager and Finance Manager

IN ATTENDANCE:

Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

Prior to the start of the meeting, Councillor Peter Curtis indicated that two of the reports had been considered at the earlier Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee and queried why a joint meeting had not been held. The Member Engagement Manager responded that the reports referred to would have contained information relating particularly to Housing issues whereas the reports to this committee contained more corporate information. He added that only 15% of the agenda was duplicated and therefore a joint meeting with the two committees was not appropriate.

88. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Arnold Woolley declared a personal interest in agenda item 4 – Improvement Plan Monitoring Report, as he was Chair of the Flintshire Scouts Executive Committee.

89. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 13 March, 2014 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Matters Arising

Councillor Clive Carver referred to the penultimate paragraph on page 4 and indicated that he had not received the information on the number of vacancies that had been requested at the meeting. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development apologised for the delay in providing

the information but advised that she had sent it to the Member Engagement Manager just before the start of this meeting for circulation to Members. She asked Members to contact her if they had any further queries following receipt of the information.

RESOLVED:

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

90. IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Chairman introduced the report for Members to note and consider elements of the 2013/14 Mid Year Improvement Plan Monitoring report relevant to the Committee for the period October to December 2013. He introduced the officers in attendance for each section to the Committee.

Councillor Richard Jones felt that presentations by the officers should be provided as had been at the earlier meeting of Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Paul Shotton referred to appendix one on Welfare Reform and asked whether assistance had been put in place to help tenants who wanted to downsize and he welcomed that employees in the Flintshire Connects offices would be able to provide assistance to Universal Credit claimants. He also sought clarification on whether the Connah's Quay Flintshire Connects office would be opening in June 2014 as scheduled and whether it would enable a more agile working arrangement. In response, the Revenues and Benefits Manager said that the lack of smaller properties for tenants to move into was a problem and work was ongoing to try and identify an outcome. On the issue of Universal Credit, he commented on the partnership agreement that was in place to provide support for claimants, which was funded by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). He added that the first tranche in the pilot scheme were single people under the age of 25 so an increase in demand for assistance was not expected due to the small numbers eligible under the pilot scheme. The Head of ICT and Customer Services confirmed that the Connah's Quay Flintshire Connects office was expected to open on 9 June 2014 as scheduled. The majority of staff from the Connah's Quay Council Office were being relocated to the Flint office along with some employees from Phase 4 in County Hall. Due to the number of staff now based in the Flint office, agile working was being adopted and encouraged.

Councillor Arnold Woolley queried the date on appendix one and was assured by the Head of ICT and Customer Services that the data related to Quarter 3 – October to December 2013.

In referring to the issue of hotdesking and agile working, Councillor Marion Bateman asked whether it was possible for Members to have Flintshire County Council owned mobile phone numbers for officers working from home as they were not displayed on the infonet. The Head of ICT and Customer Services confirmed that officer's work extension numbers could be transferred to an alternative number such as their mobile or home number. However, this was not applied consistently in all areas of the Council and he agreed that Flintshire

County Council owned mobile numbers should be published on the infonet. Councillor Clive Carver also raised concern about not being able to contact those officers who were working from home. He referred to the Council's new website which he had experienced difficulty in navigating around as he felt that some of the information was not where he expected it to be. Councillor Richard Jones also commented on the difficulties of contacting officers on Council owned mobile numbers and that the issue was particularly a problem in Social Services.

Councillor Marion Bateman commented on electronic document management and stressed the importance of ensuring that documents were scanned in chronological order

In response to a question from Councillor Richard Lloyd about Community Asset Transfer and a suggestion that land that the Saltney Scout Group were based on had been offered to the District Scout Committee, the Head of Assets and Transportation said that he was not aware of such a suggestion but that he would check and would respond to Councillor Lloyd directly.

Councillor Haydn Bateman asked whether the establishment of the Welfare Rights Team was permanent and sought clarification on increases in Fees and Charges. The Revenues and Benefits Manager confirmed that the Welfare Rights Team was an established team but the Welfare Reform Response Team was a temporary team which had been set up specifically to assist residents to deal with the changes resulting from welfare reform. On the issue of Fees and Charges, the Head of Finance said that it had been an aspiration of Flintshire County Council's to have a corporate authority wide approach to fees and charges and the significant piece of work to enable consideration of this was now being undertaken. Discussions with Members on how to develop it as part of the overall financial strategy would be undertaken later in the year. She explained that the work would be challenging as it may result in increased charges or charges being introduced for services that were not currently charged for and could involve looking at more discretionary services.

The issue of personal development plans arising from appraisals highlighted on page 26 was referred to by Councillor Arnold Woolley who sought clarification as to whether this had been undertaken and he also commented on the future actions. In response, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development referred to the organisational change model and the new senior management structure and confirmed that performance appraisals were already in place. She said that in recognition of the changing size and shape of the organisation, the focus on performance and skills development through performance appraisals and development plans would become increasingly more critical. She commented that there would be renewed focus now around development plans which would be an important part of the transitional arrangements for the new operating model.

In referring to the issue of fees and charges, Councillor Peter Curtis commented on discussions at the recent meeting of the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee about charges for grass cutting. He asked that consideration be given to the impact of fees and charges on people when considering any future changes.

Councillor Richard Jones referred to appraisals and indicated that the problem of non-compliance could be resolved if it was included in all line manager's appraisals that all staff that they supervised had to have had an appraisal. On the issue of fees and charges, he had raised concern at budget time in February about a charge for financial management assistance for vulnerable people and reiterated the importance of being mindful of the impact of changing or implementing fees and charges. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development agreed with the comments on performance appraisals and advised that details of the numbers of completed appraisals were already included in the six monthly Heads of Service performance reports. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development added that it was essential for senior managers to be held directly responsible for ensuring that there were effective performance management arrangements in place for their teams and appraisals completed. Councillor Jones welcomed this which would allow monitoring of appraisals to be undertaken by the appropriate Overview & Scrutiny Committee and any resultant concerns to be reported to the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He also asked that his thanks be passed on to Mel Evans for the work he had undertaken on the Buckley Flintshire Connects Office. In response to a question from Councillor Jones on the asset transfer of Buckley Baths, the Head of Assets and Transportation advised that the transfer was currently in progress..

On the issue of fees and charges, the Head of Finance indicated that the issue would be a challenge but that any policy consideration would require an equalities impact assessment to assess the impact of implementation of, or changes to, fees and charges.

The Leader of the Council said that it was worth reiterating that not all fees and charges would automatically be increased as it had only been stated that a review would be undertaken. He explained that he had responded to the question raised by Councillor Jones at the Council's budget meeting but that he would ensure that the answer was circulated again. He felt that a review of fees and charges was an opportunity to look at the policy to ensure that a consistent approach was being undertaken which could result in additional income being generated if it was appropriate to do so. Councillor Marion Bateman suggested that Members should have sight of any future letters sent to Flintshire residents about changes to fees and charges as she felt that the letter about grass cutting had been misleading. The Leader of the Council said that it was important to separate the policy review from the implementation aspect of any changes.

Councillor Haydn Bateman asked about the North Wales Procurement Partnership (NWPP) referred to on page 48. In response the Head of ICT and Customer Services advised that the partnership ceased approximately 18 months ago. Subsequently a Welsh National Procurement Service covering the whole public sector had been launched in November 2013. The Council had also become a member of the Welsh Purchasing Consortium (WPC) which was made up of 19 local authorities instead of six which formed the NWPP. Councillor Richard Jones stressed the need to ensure that local companies were used for supplying local goods and queried whether this would be more difficult as the Consortium covered a larger area. The Head of ICT and Customer Services said that it was important to get the balance right and said that Flintshire County Council was a member on the WPC Board and that sourcing of goods or services

could also be regional or sub-regional. He explained that the WPC would set criteria for considering suppliers and it could not just be based on the fact that they were local; he also commented on lotting strategies. The Head of Assets and Transportation added that some contracts had community benefits clauses included in them, which he detailed, to ensure that some money was put back into the local economy.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the 2013/14 Mid Year Improvement Plan Monitoring Report and will continue to highlight and monitor poor performance and feedback details of any challenge to the Policy, Performance & Partnerships Team for reporting to Cabinet where appropriate.

91. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2013/14 (MONTH 10)

The Head of Finance introduced a report to provide Members with the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2013/14 (Month 10) information for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which had been submitted to Cabinet on 15 April 2014. She introduced the Finance Manager to the Committee. On this occasion, the information had gone to Cabinet prior to coming to Scrutiny simply as a result of the change made to the date of the April meeting.

For the Council Fund, the projected net in-year expenditure was reported to be £2.151m less than budget which was an increase of £0.170m on the £1.981m reported at Month 9. The main items contributing to the £0.170m variance included the identification of efficiencies under the Corporate Administration review and improved trading and reduced costs in Leisure which was offset by an overall increase in the cost of Out of County placements. This continued to be a significant pressure on the budget and there was a need to ensure the issue was monitored for the remainder of the 2013/14 financial year and into 2014/15 and onwards.

Carry forward requests were detailed in paragraphs 3.06 to 3.11 which were for works which had been planned for 2013/14 but had not been completed during this period. Section 5 detailed the budget assumptions and new risks and explained that the costs associated with the clean up of the former chemical plant in Sandycroft (Euticals Ltd) were being monitored monthly. The Head of Finance explained that it had previously been projected that the cost to the Council in 2013/14 would be £0.400m but it was now expected to be nearer to £0.300m, with further costs in 2014/15 which were being quantified; further details of the costs would be sent to Members when available. She added that the Council were now in ownership of the site and once the clean-up had been completed, it was planned that the site would be decommissioned and sold. Agreement of the clean up decommissioning plan would determine the cost in 2014/15.

The projected contingency reserve balance at 31 March 2014 was £4.792m. The overall projected underspend for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2013/14 was £0.089m and a projected closing balance at Month 10 of £1.522m, which at 5.33% of total expenditure satisfied the prudent approach of ensuring a minimum level of 3%.

In response to a query from Councillor Marion Bateman about whether the Council had incurred costs of £0.300m for the clear-up of the former Euticals site, the Head of Finance said that the Council and Natural Resources Wales had incurred costs and financial help had been sought from the Welsh Government but this had not been made available. Flintshire County Council had incurred costs due to its responsibilities for environmental protection to make the site safe and it was unlikely that all of the costs would be recovered.

Councillor Haydn Bateman asked about the winter maintenance reserve and whether it had been used. The Head of Finance explained that as part of the 2012/13 budget, it had been agreed that a reserve of £0.250m would be included for winter maintenance but due to the mild winter this had not been used so a top-up to the reserve would not be required as part of the closedown for the 2013/14 budget. There had been a requirement to purchase salt and replenish the stocks and details of the amounts spent would be available in the budget outturn report.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

92. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE

The Revenues and Benefits Manager introduced a report to update Members on the latest position regarding Welfare Reform.

He detailed the background to the report explaining that it had been agreed that arrangements were needed to report on the operational aspects of managing Welfare Reform. Members had received an update at a workshop in November 2013 and the report which was aligned to the Council's performance reporting cycle had been submitted to Cabinet in March 2014 and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee in April 2014. He provided details on the following key areas:-

- Benefit Cap
- Maximum Rent Social Sector (MRSS)
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme
- Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF)
- Personal Independence Payments
- Universal Credit (UC)
- Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)
- Welfare Reform Training and Development Programme
- Welfare Reform Response Team (WRRT)

The Leader of the Council thanked the Revenues and Benefits Manager for the detailed report. He detailed the reasons for its submission to other forums and said that the Council should be proud that it had gone above and beyond what other Councils had done in the United Kingdom and it meant that the Council was not fire-fighting. On the issue of Universal Credit, he said that the Council had not asked to be part of the pilot scheme and Shotton was the only area in Wales that had been selected. The point of the report was that once the Welfare Reform board had been dissolved and all was operational, there had

been a need to ensure that all involved received updates, which he hoped Members welcomed and would continue to receive them in the future.

Councillor Paul Shotton thanked officers for the report but stated that he found aspects of the information reported to members about the impacts of welfare reform concerning. He referred to the crisis loan scheme which had been replaced by the DAF which was a cash limited fund which would initially run until March 2015. He asked whether a scheme would be put in place to replace the DAF when it ceased. He commented on the loophole within the MRSS (commonly known as Bedroom Tax) which had since been closed and the undertaking by Councils in London to move benefit claimants out of London because of the Benefit Cap. Councillor Shotton raised concern about the distress caused due to the delay in processing Personal Independence Payments and asked whether any processes were in place to rectify the problems experienced. He spoke of the Universal Credit pilot scheme in Shotton which had resulted in three claims being received and welcomed the comment that support would be provided for those affected at the Connah's Quay Council and Citizen's Advice Bureau offices. In response, the Revenues and Benefits Manager advised that the DAF scheme in England would not be available from April 2015 but an announcement for Wales was still awaited.

Councillor Ian Smith queried whether any tenants had been made homeless and asked whether tenants were building up rent arrears because of the 'bedroom tax'. In response, the Revenues and Benefits Manager said that he was not aware of any tenant becoming homeless because of the changes in Welfare Reform. He added that he did not have the details with him but there had not been as many arrears as it had thought there might be. He commented on the direct payments of rents to tenants and said that this had seen a 50% to 60% increase in arrears but it was not a straightforward issue and it was difficult to assess.

Councillor Peter Curtis commented on the Personal Independence Payments for disabled persons who previously received Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and raised significant concern that the benefit claimants were being included in the category 'workers and shirkers'. He felt that the situation would get worse. He referred to the increase in rent arrears of £0.008k compared to the same period in 2012/13 and gave congratulations to the team involved for ensuring that claimants were given the best possible service. Councillor Curtis felt that there was a need to reconsider the housing allocation policy and raised concern at comments that claimants could take in lodgers so that they did not have to pay the 'bedroom tax'. He welcomed the proactive stance taken by the Council and the help and support that was being provided to claimants if they needed and wanted it.

Councillor Marion Bateman thanked the Revenues and Benefits Manager and his team for their hard work and asked what was in place to deal with the problems caused by direct payments to tenants. In response the Revenues and Benefits Manager commented on the safeguarding policy in place for those on Universal Credit which he detailed, which would protect landlords. He added that the idea of Universal Credit was that people took control of their own finances.

Councillor Arnold Woolley echoed the comments of congratulations to the Revenues and Benefits Manager and his team. He asked whether consideration had been given to sealing up bedrooms in oversized properties so that they could not be available to be used by the tenants and therefore would not incur the 'bedroom tax'. The Revenues and Benefits Manager responded that the property would still be classed as containing the same number of bedrooms no matter what was done with it. He added that tenants and/or landlords would still be receiving rent based on the number of bedrooms in the property, even if they were not all available for use.

Councillor Ron Hampson commented on the problems faced because of the 'bedroom tax' due to the lack of one and two bedroom properties. He felt that the amount of rent arrears would increase which he felt would be a tremendous strain on the Council.

Councillor Clive Carver referred to the earlier comment about safeguarding payments to the landlord but queried what happened to tenants when the landlord was not paid. The Revenues and Benefits Manager advised that if tenants were paid their housing benefit and this was not passed onto the landlord, then this was an issue for the landlord...

In response to a question from Councillor Richard Lloyd about whether landlords attended an accreditation scheme, the Revenues and Benefits Manager confirmed that no such scheme was in place. Councillor Lloyd also asked what happened if tenants withheld rent because of issues with the rented property such as damp. The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that if there was a dispute about the property and the landlord contacted the Council, contact would then be made with the tenant and the rent payment could be withheld until the dispute was resolved.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

93. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Member Engagement Manager introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

He detailed the items reported for consideration at the 8 May, 12 June and 10 July 2014 meetings but added that the Workforce Information report had been omitted from the Forward Work Programme. During earlier discussions, further information on appraisals had been requested, and the Member Engagement Manager suggested that this be incorporated into the Workforce Information report.

The Head of ICT and Customer Services advised that due to delays in the receipt of the Annual Improvement Report from Wales Audit Office, the report might not be available for consideration at the 8 May 2014 meeting.

In response to a query from Councillor Richard Lloyd about whether a monthly update on the former Euticals site at Sandycroft was to be provided, the

Member Engagement Manager advised that he would ask the Head of Finance to include the information in the monthly Revenue Budget Monitoring reports about the amounts spent on the site.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be approved subject to the Committee noting that the Annual Improvement Report from Wales Audit Office may not be available for May 2014;
- (b) That the Workforce Information Report including progress on appraisals be included in the Forward Work Programme; and
- (c) That updates on the Euticals issue be included within the Revenue Budget Monitoring reports.

94. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 3.52 pm)

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Chairman