

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13 JUNE 2019

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 June 2019

PRESENT: Councillor Clive Carver (Chairman)

Councillors: Geoff Collett, Bob Connah, Mared Eastwood, Patrick Heesom, Paul Johnson, Richard Jones, Michelle Perfect, Vicky Perfect, Aaron Shotton, Andy Williams and Arnold Woolley

SUBSTITUTE: Councillor: Helen Brown (for Bernie Attridge)

APOLOGIES: Councillors: Haydn Bateman and Paul Cunningham

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Dave Hughes attended as an observer

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader and Cabinet Member for Education; Councillor Billy Mullin, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management; Councillor Glyn Banks, Cabinet Member for Finance; Chief Executive; and Senior Manager, Human Resources and Organisational Development

Revenues Manager - for minute number 14

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer

10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

11. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 May 2019 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

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

12. ACTION TRACKING

The Democratic Services Manager presented the progress report on actions arising from previous meetings.

The Chief Executive reported that the breakdown of Central and Corporate Finance would form part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) update at the July meeting.

On the revenue budget monitoring reports, Councillor Heesom said that although monthly variances were shown, it was important that Members were

able to monitor actual expenditure levels in each Overview & Scrutiny portfolio area. In response, the Chief Executive said that the approved budget was published. As an interim report was scheduled for July, he agreed to review the report format for September.

Councillor Jones said that monitoring reports already provided this information and that more detail was needed on the causes for major variances. The Chief Executive agreed that the format would be reviewed.

The recommendations of the report were moved by Councillor Jones and seconded by Councillor Collett.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee notes the progress which has been made.

13. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager presented the current Forward Work Programme for consideration. Following the Committee's briefing on the Local Government Pension Scheme, an update on the Actuarial Review would be scheduled for July or September.

The recommendations in the report were proposed by Councillor Johnson and seconded by Councillor Woolley.

RESOLVED:

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

14. COUNCIL TAX COLLECTION RATES

The Revenues Manager presented an update on the latest year-end Council Tax collection rates, arrear levels and comparison with other Welsh councils. The report demonstrated the year on year improving position in Council Tax collection rates in Flintshire which compared favourably to average collection rates across Wales, England and Scotland.

The latest Welsh Government (WG) statistical release on collection rates across Wales for 2018/19 showed that Flintshire had recorded the highest in-year collection rate of 98.2%; this was above the Welsh average of 97.3% (an additional £700K in cashflow terms). Despite the 6.71% increase in Council Tax for 2018/19, Flintshire had maintained strong collection levels through its approach to engage with residents, signposting to discounts and targeting support to those experiencing payment difficulties. Since publishing the report, Council Tax arrears balances for 2018/19 had reduced further to £1.2m. A statistical note on 'All Wales Performance' showed comparison of collection rates on Council Tax and Business Rates.

In commending Flintshire's performance, Councillor Roberts paid tribute to the Revenues Manager and his team, and also to the residents of Flintshire for working with the Council to pay their Council Tax and contribute to local services. He also took the opportunity to thank all employees who were on duty during the recent period of bad weather.

During the item, Councillors Mullin and Banks expressed their gratitude to the Manager and his team for achieving the outcomes, as did a number of Members.

The Chairman referred to the WG decision to remove the use of 'committal' as a recovery tool for those unwilling to pay Council Tax. The Chief Executive said that the Council had made representations against this decision on the basis that it was an appropriate route to recover payment from a minority of people who purposely evaded payment of Council Tax and refused to co-operate. The impact of the WG decision on future collection rates was highlighted as a risk. The Revenues Manager explained that the committal hearing process provided for a fair hearing to consider a person's ability and affordability to pay.

Councillor Jones spoke about the positive impact on cashflow in achieving collection rates in-year and the need to make written representations to re-introduce the committal process. The Chief Executive suggested that this form part of wider discussion on Council Tax as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, taking into account the fairness and sustainability of Council Tax, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and impact on cashflow if collection rates fell. Analysis of written-off arrears across Wales was shown in the WG statistical release.

Councillor Brown asked about extending payment agreements for those experiencing difficulties. The Revenues Manager said that residents were encouraged to pay in-year and that recovery methods were adapted for those unable to do so.

In response to comments from Councillor Johnson, the Revenues Manager spoke about the sharing of good practice across Wales.

Councillor Shotton said that the Council's concerns about the removal of the committal process had been raised through the Welsh Local Government Association.

The recommendations, which were changed to reflect the debate, were moved by Councillor Heesom and seconded by Councillor Johnson.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee notes, with satisfaction, the latest Council Tax collection levels and the supporting information;
- (b) That the staff involved be congratulated for their performance;

- (c) That given the loss of the committal system, consideration of how this performance can be maintained be included within the MTFs; and
- (d) That the Committee's appreciation of the people of Flintshire for their forbearance with Council Tax increases be recorded.

15. WORKFORCE INFORMATION REPORT - QUARTER 4 2018/19

The Senior Manager, Human Resources and Organisational Development presented the workforce information report on Quarter 4 of 2018/19 which focussed on organisational performance and trends.

The increase in full time equivalent (FTE) figures in 2018/19 included a number of agency workers being appointed to permanent positions which had a positive impact on agency worker spend. The downturn in attendance figures was disappointing, however this reflected a similar position across many other councils in Wales. The main reason for sickness absence (Stress, Depression, Anxiety) also mirrored the national trend and in Flintshire, analysis by Occupational Health showed that the majority of those cases were triggered by personal issues which impacted on work. The Occupational Health team was continuing to work with services and had helped to reduce the number of work-related stress cases in Social Services. Detailed analysis on the team's findings would be reported to a future meeting.

On the completion of appraisals which was a priority area, the Chief Executive shared his disappointment in the outturn of 75% which was a downturn from the previous quarter (91%). This was not thought to be an accurate figure due to inadequacies in recording completed appraisals and failure to schedule repeat appraisals within the period. A detailed action plan included a review of the appraisal model which would help to achieve better outcomes. Quarter 2 progress would be reported to the Committee in September. In addition, there would be a special item on appraisals when relevant Chief Officers could be present to explain any areas of slippage.

Councillor Jones spoke about national suicide rates for the 25-45 age group, particularly for males who often found it difficult to speak about mental health issues. He asked if figures for the main category of absence (Stress, Depression, Anxiety) could be broken down to give an indication of the split between males and females. The Chief Executive agreed and said that age ranges could also be shown.

Whilst sharing officers' frustrations about the performance on appraisal completion, Councillor Jones said that this was a long-standing issue and called for Chief Officers to attend the Committee in advance of the quarter 2 data to give explanation on their service areas. He described the completion of appraisals as a key responsibility for Chief Officers which should be reflected as part of their own appraisals.

The Chief Executive said that an initial review had identified insufficient consistency on working within systems which would be pursued. Good progress had recently been made on appraisals which needed to be embedded into the process across the organisation to prevent further slippage. As the lead officer,

he would be seeking assurance of progress on the action plan and if he was not satisfied with the explanations given, the relevant Chief Officers would be required to attend before the Committee. Whilst Chief Officers were held accountable for their portfolios, there was wider responsibility amongst managers and supervisors in service areas.

The Senior Manager said that increased training for managers was having a positive effect in generating more consistent and quality appraisals. She agreed to speak with Councillor Woolley outside the meeting to clarify headcount and FTE figures in the report.

Councillor Collett questioned the rationale for including sections of the report such as sexual orientation and religious beliefs where many responses were inconclusive. Officers explained the need for the Council to collect as much information as possible, with the report containing areas of interest requested by the Committee. If Members wished, the quarterly report could focus on priorities such as attendance, appraisals and agency workers, with an annual report providing a breakdown of all other statistics.

Councillor Banks commended the Chief Executive's honesty in tackling the issue of appraisals. He said that the points raised by Councillor Jones about mental health in males should link with work in other service areas such as Housing.

The Senior Manager said that in addition to the range of support currently available to employees, the Health & Wellbeing Strategy would involve wider focus on physical, mental and financial aspects of individuals, all of which affected attendance. One of the objectives would be to provide a trained Mental Health Champion for each service.

Councillor Roberts praised the Chief Executive for being open in explaining the issues and the actions being taken.

Councillor Shotton welcomed the actions being taken to address the issues and identify a true figure for completing appraisals, asking if the Committee could be kept updated. The Chief Executive said that validation on the completion figure would form part of the update to be given to the Committee.

The recommendations, which were changed to reflect the debate, were moved by Councillor Johnson and seconded by Councillor Collett.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee notes the Workforce Information report for quarter four of 2018/19;
- (b) That disappointment is expressed at the reduction in Appraisals performance and an explanation for this sought;
- (c) That the offer by the Chief Executive to bring a report on Appraisals to the September meeting be accepted; and

- (d) That the Senior Manager speak to Councillor Woolley after the meeting to clarify the headcount and FTE figures provided.

16. COUNCIL PLAN 2019/20

The Chief Executive introduced a report to update the Committee on the annual process to complete the review of the Council Plan 2019/20. Part 1 of the Council Plan would be considered by Cabinet for recommendation to County Council for adoption on 18 June.

The report set out the main outcomes from the two Member workshops and the tracker of changes since the Council Plan 2018/19. A number of suggestions were also included to improve the process for future participation including better alignment between the Council Plan themes and Overview & Scrutiny forward work programmes. Part 2 of the Council Plan, including details of performance measures, would be shared with the Committee in July before consideration by Cabinet.

In speaking about process, Councillor Heesom said that the timing denied Members the opportunity to call-in the decision. He reiterated his concerns about the need to be able to prioritise certain areas of the Council Plan and said that the Integrated Transport Plan did not deal with the issue of the transport corridor strategy which was essential to the Ambitious Council theme. He said that there was too much focus on the Deeside Industrial Park with no sensible links to the wider area of the North Wales Growth Plan.

The Chief Executive said that the Council Plan was adopted each year and only contained actions on which the Council could deliver, ie Council functions. At County Council, Members would have an opportunity to propose changes which should be specific, practical and viable. All themes in the Council Plan had equal status and were built into the budget to deliver in-year. Where agreed at the Member workshops, feedback had been incorporated and the subsequent survey had generated responses from only 17 Members.

Councillor Roberts questioned Councillor Heesom's comments on Member involvement as the consultation process had been inclusive with further opportunity for debate at County Council. On transport, he said that clarification was required from Welsh Government on proposals for the North Wales Metro whereas the issue of roads was not part of the remit for this Committee.

Councillor Jones remarked that the Plan would have been better presented by service area. At the workshop, he had raised queries on the omission of 'maximising income and employability', along with specific mention of NEETS (not in education, employment and training) and Youth Justice.

The Chief Executive said that the workshops were intended to identify specific areas to be incorporated in the draft Plan. He agreed to look into the first point and advised that both NEETS and Youth Justice were included in Part 2 of the Council Plan.

Councillor Roberts said that the Council should be proud of its performance in maintaining low levels of NEETS.

Councillor Mullin thanked Members for their contributions including those who participated in the workshops.

The recommendation in the report was moved by Councillor Collett and seconded by Councillor Johnson. On being put to the vote, this was carried. Councillor Heesom asked that his abstention from the vote be recorded.

RESOLVED:

That the update on actions to complete the review of the Council plan for 2019/20 in readiness for the recommendation of the Plan to Council for adoption, be received.

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 11.55am)

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Chairman