

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 APRIL 2013

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Thursday, 18 April 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Richard Jones (Chairman)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Marion Bateman, Clive Carver, Peter Curtis, Ron Hampson, Patrick Heesom, Richard Lloyd, Mike Lowe, Paul Shotton, Ian Smith, Nigel Steele-Mortimer and Arnold Woolley

APOLOGIES:

Councillor: Ian Dunbar
Chief Executive and Head of Finance

CONTRIBUTORS:

Leader of the Council, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Head of ICT and Customer Services and Acting Overview & Scrutiny Manager
Revenues Manager for minute number 92
Corporate Finance Manager, Director of Lifelong Learning, Finance Manager and Head of Culture and Leisure for minute number 93
Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development for minute number 94

IN ATTENDANCE:

Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

89. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

90. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 14 March 2013 had been circulated to Members with the agenda.

Matters arising

Councillor M. Bateman explained that she had met with the Head of Finance about the overspend of £0.044m in relation to additional superannuation costs and that the issue was being considered.

Councillor C.S. Carver referred to the penultimate paragraph on Councillors travelling by taxi and provided an update for Members explaining that the costs had increased when the company had been asked to provide an invoice for the journeys made. The taxi company had since indicated that they were no longer able to provide transport for the Member. Councillor Carver raised concern about areas where the Council may be being overcharged for services but praised the work of the Committee to raise awareness of the issue.

Accuracy

Councillor P.G. Heesom referred to the last paragraph on page 3 and in explaining that he had said that the Medium Term Financial Plan was not an adequate strategy for dealing with the financial and economic planning for the future, he suggested that the words 'but he believed it was not an adequate tool kit to deal with the economic future and that a Base Budget Review was required' be added after the words 'essential part of the framework'.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the words 'but he believed it was not an adequate tool kit to deal with the economic future and that a Base Budget Review was required' be added after the words 'essential part of the framework' in the last paragraph on page 3; and
- (b) That subject to the suggested amendment, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

91. CUSTOMER SERVICES AS A FLINTSHIRE FUTURES WORKSTREAM

The Head of ICT and Customer Services introduced a report to provide an update on the Customer Services Workstream within the Flintshire Futures Programme.

He detailed the background to the report which provided information on the progress made on the various projects within the Customer Services Workstream. It was reported that although improving the customer experience was the primary goal, planning was also taking place to make efficiencies by encouraging use of self service digital access and challenging processes to ensure that the Council standardised, simplified and automated where possible. The Head of ICT and Customer Services explained that the focus of the work to date was about improving customer access to services and information which included providing choice in terms of how, when and where services were available and improving face to face and telephone access. The Flintshire Connects centre, which had been well received, opened in Holywell in November 2012 and facilities in Flint, Connah's Quay and Buckley were also planned. Invest to Save funding of £700,000 had been secured from Welsh Government and Job Centre Plus had confirmed that they would be operating permanently from the Flint Connects Centre with discussions on-going with other partners for all three facilities.

The Head of ICT and Customer Services provided details of the Contact Centre which was located at Alltami Depot and said that in addition to Streetscene, contact centre facilities had recently been implemented for Housing Repairs and Revenues & Benefits; consultation was ongoing for Leisure Services to be included in the future. Another project within the Customer Services Workstream was Channel Shift which the Head of ICT and Customer Services detailed and he advised that a new website was being developed and a new Flintshire "App" for mobile devices would be launched in July 2013. New standards and targets would be identified to incorporate the new access channels particularly digital self service which did not currently feature in customer care standards and the Customer Engagement Project Team had recently been

established and an exercise was underway to identify all consultation and engagement activities across the Council.

The Leader of the Council spoke of the Invest to Save funding which had been secured allowing the acceleration of the Buckley connects centre which was welcomed. He sought assurance that there was also a savings element to the benefits of Customer Engagement and that good practice of how to communicate effectively with community groups should be taken forward.

Councillor C.S. Carver praised the work of the staff at the contact centre but asked that the automated message be updated as it only related to queries about waste collections or snow. He also sought a fuller explanation of what Channel Shift meant.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Management thanked the Head of ICT and Customer Services for the report and gave thanks for the way the Council was keeping pace with technology. He said that there were indications that the connects centre was well used but queried whether it was promoted adequately.

Councillor P.G. Heesom commended the work of the staff at the Connects facility at Holywell and the support given to it by Members and Councillor P.J. Curtis in particular. Councillor P. Shotton asked whether customer services staff were able to undertake training and development opportunities and he welcomed the proposed new facilities at Connah's Quay, Flint and Buckley. Councillor R. Lloyd queried whether any progress had been made on the use of Saltney Library as an interim Connects facility. In response to the questions raised the Head of ICT and Customer Services advised that an internal customer service training programme was undertaken by all customer service staff and the opportunity to study a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) was undertaken with an external provider. Work was ongoing to identify other options for an interim contact centre in Saltney as it was not felt that the library was suitable in its current form. Councillor R.G. Hampson queried whether the amalgamation of the Housing Repairs service into the contact centre was a good idea and in response the Head of ICT and Customer Services said that it was important to have a common approach when delivering services which included the use of common training, technology and systems for all customer services contact centres; he added that its location was irrelevant.

Councillor Curtis welcomed the introduction of the Flintshire Connects facility in Holywell which he said had been an outstanding success. He spoke of the polite and helpful employees and said that he hoped the facility would continue to develop and that centres in other areas were provided at the earliest opportunity.

The Leader of the Council spoke of the increase in footfall in town centres due to the location of the Flintshire Connects facilities and spoke of the opportunity for community events to encourage residents to visit towns in Flintshire. On the issue of Channel Shift, he said that this was about additional choice for residents and encouraging them to use digital self service facilities alongside the current options in place.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

92. FAIR DEBT POLICY

The Revenues Manager introduced a report to seek input from the Committee on the draft Fair Debt Policy prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

He detailed the background to the report and explained that the development of a Corporate Debt Policy, which had been considered by the Committee in November 2012, established standard procedures for the collection of debt. The introduction of a Fair Debt Policy was separate to this and was a customer focused policy to assist those in financial difficulty owing single and multiple debts to the Council. He added that the development of the policy was a more streamlined approach and for customers it was a positive way forward.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Management thanked the officer for the report. He explained that it was still the responsibility of the individual to pay their debt but the introduction of the policy would ensure that the Council continued to fulfil its responsibility to maximise the collection of council tax, rents, corporate debt and housing benefit overpayments.

Councillor P. Shotton said that it was an important policy and Councillor P.J. Curtis spoke of the work of the Citizen's Advice Bureau and the assistance that this policy would provide for them. Councillor C.S. Carver asked whether there was a complaints procedure in place as this was not referenced in the report. The Revenues Manager said that he could include reference to a complaints procedure in the report and spoke of those customers who were struggling to pay compared to those who refused to pay.

The Leader of the Council spoke of credit unions and the Welfare Reform Bill and said that the policy was about ensuring that those in difficulty did not make things worse and included signposts of where they could go for assistance. He asked whether there would be a financial benefit to the Council if they did not have to engage multiple bailiffs to recover debts of customers. The Revenues Manager responded that there would not be a reduction in costs to the Council but it would ensure that the customer did not accumulate costs of multiple bailiff visits for each separate debt to the Council.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Management spoke of the work of the Revenues and Benefits section and the work that they had undertaken to identify those who were struggling with making payments to the Council and the increasing difficulty that they would face following the introduction of the Welfare Reform Bill. Councillor P.G. Heesom spoke of the need to act sensibly about debt and the need to monitor the situation going forward.

The Chairman felt that the Fair Debt Policy and the Corporate Debt Policy covered a number of similar issues and asked whether they could be collated into one document at a later date. The Revenues Manager responded that the policies were reviewed every twelve months and this was an issue which could be considered in the future.

RESOLVED:

That the report be received.

93. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2012/13 MONTH 10

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced a report to provide Members with the Revenue Budget Monitoring 2012/13 (Month 10) information for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which was being submitted to Cabinet on 23 April 2013.

For Council Fund there was a projected year end underspend of £1.305m, which was an increase of £0.449m on the position reported at Month 9. Appendix 1 showed a summary of the movements from Month 9 with the main change being in relation to Community Services (a positive movement of £0.431m).

The Corporate Finance Manager reminded Members that the projection did not take into account any additional costs associated with the extreme weather conditions at the end of March and that the impact of this would be reported in future monitoring reports.

The risks and assumptions associated with the projection were identified in paragraph 3.06 and an update on non standard inflation was shown in section 4. A request for carry forward for ICT & Customer Services was detailed in paragraph 3.07 and was being recommended to Cabinet.

Appendix 7 provided details on the movements on unearmarked reserves, which, after taking into account the current projection and previously committed amounts left a projected level of Contingency Reserves at 31 March 2013 of £0.894m.

The Corporate Finance Manager also advised of a projected underspend of £0.491m on the Housing Revenue Account which was an increase of £0.020m in the underspend reported at Month 9 and details of the variances were provided in appendix 8.

The Leader of the Council referred to the costs of the extreme weather conditions which were not reflected in this report but would impact on Month 11 Budget Monitoring and the Cabinet Member for Corporate Management spoke of the tremendous work undertaken by the employees from Streetscene during the bad weather.

The Head of Culture and Leisure commented on the overspend of £0.179m in Leisure Services which included increased employee costs, asset management/operating costs and reduction in income; details of how the overspend had occurred were provided in appendix 1. He explained that there was a need to stabilise employee costs and that a change in staff structure was being considered. On the issue of asset management he said that costs were being incurred to address the issues of keeping facilities open and 62% of the operating costs had to be met from income; this was a challenge as customers had less disposal income available to them to spend in the Leisure facilities.

Work was ongoing to overcome these challenges but a solution had not yet been identified.

In response to a question from Councillor G.H. Bateman, the Head of Culture and Leisure said that the Purchase to Pay (P2P) system had not been implemented in Leisure Services but that it was hoped it would be available in the next few months. Councillor Bateman also asked about the anticipated back pay for car park attendances and was advised that the question would be submitted to the Environment Directorate for a written response to be provided.

Councillor P.G. Heesom raised concern about the pressure of £0.383m for Facility Services (which included catering and cleaning services) and requested that a detailed report needed to be considered on the issue of catering in schools. He also queried the suspension of the Youth Service Review and raised concern, and requested an update report, about the shortfall of industrial unit rental income due to Gaz de France decommissioning the Shotton Power Station site. Councillor Heesom also asked for a breakdown of the amount of £1.500m approved in 2011/12 which was ringfenced for Investment in Change.

The Leader of the Council agreed that the issue of catering in schools needed addressing and assured Councillor Heesom that the Youth Service Review had not been suspended but that the report to Cabinet had been deferred. The Leisure budget was a concern and a risk and he queried whether the Alliance Business Plan had been challenged enough.

Councillor M. Bateman spoke of the all-weather pitch in Sychdyn and queried whether any funding was available to repair it. The Director of Lifelong Learning said that repair of the pitch was a pressure on the repairs and maintenance budget within Leisure and that external funding was being sought as Council funding was limited.

Councillor C.S. Carver requested a breakdown of the pressure of £0.383m in Facility Services. The Director of Lifelong Learning confirmed that this could be provided and explained that an allocation of £0.300m was included for 2013/14 to stabilise the position. The issue was also the focus of Lifelong Learning Overview & Scrutiny Committee and a meeting was to take place at one of the schools where some of the meals would be sampled. He confirmed that the Youth Service Review was ongoing. The Director also said that Flintshire had an exceptionally high level of sporting provision and the lowest level of funding in Wales; there was a high level of dependency on income and for many leisure was seen as a luxury. The Chairman said that increases in costs and reductions in income were not sustainable. The Leader of the Council spoke of the excellent work which was being undertaken to increase footfalls at Deeside Leisure Centre and the Jade Jones Pavilion at Flint. He queried what attempts had been made to market the facilities in a better way and asked whether a corporate approach was being taken about a call centre for Leisure Services. In response to a question from Councillor Carver about Leisure Centres being closed on bank holidays, the Leader of the Council spoke of ongoing Part 3 negotiations.

The Chairman suggested that a working group be established to consider the position of Leisure Services, in particular the income and costs element.

Councillor P.J. Curtis queried whether regular inspections were carried out at play areas as a slide had to be removed from a play area in Holywell as it was beyond repair. The Director of Lifelong Learning said that proactive inspections did take place but added that appropriate capital funding was needed to carry out any necessary repairs.

In response to earlier comments, the Head of Culture and Leisure said that it was envisaged that a customer contact centre would be introduced for Leisure Services. He added that marketing for leisure centres was undertaken by the Alliance Partnership and the Chairman indicated that a presentation from Alliance Leisure was to be made at the 11 July 2013 meeting of Lifelong Learning Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor R.G. Hampson raised concern at the lack of parking at Buckley Leisure Centre and said that the introduction of CCTV on the site would allow additional parking to be made available. The Head of Leisure and Culture explained that clarification was required on the School Modernisation Programme to ensure that any funding for CCTV at the Elfed High School was appropriate. The Director of Lifelong Learning confirmed that discussions on the issue of parking at the Leisure Centre were ongoing.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the establishment of a Task and Finish Group to consider Leisure Service Finances be considered during the item on the Forward Work Programme;
- (c) That an update report about the shortfall of industrial unit rental income due to Gaz de France decommissioning the Shotton Power Station site be provided;
- (d) That a breakdown of the amount of £1.500m approved in 2011/12 which was ringfenced for Investment in Change (as shown in appendix 7 on Unearmarked Reserves) be provided;
- (e) That a written response be provided by the Environment Directorate about the anticipated back pay for car park attendances; and
- (f) That a breakdown of the pressure of £0.383m in Facility Services be provided.

94. WORKFORCE INFORMATION QUARTER 3 - OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2012

Prior to the introduction of the report, Councillor P.G. Heesom requested that the consideration of the report be deferred. Councillor A. Woolley asked that it not be deferred as he had significant concerns about some of the information within the report. Deferment was not supported by the Committee.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development introduced a report to provide Members with an update for the third quarter 2012/13 on the following areas:-

- Establishment
- Headcount

- Agency
- Early Retirements (First and third quarter reports only)
- Turnover
- Diversity
- Absence

She confirmed that there had been an exchange of queries from Councillor Woolley and that discussions may need to take place with the Workforce Planning and Information Manager to address any ongoing concerns.

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development detailed the main changes to the report on establishment and explained that the actions taken would be monitored on a monthly basis. It was anticipated that the work undertaken would provide a more accurate position on vacancies despite ongoing organisational change. The number of agency placements were reported and there had been a decrease of 26% when compared to the same quarter in the previous financial year. Details of the early retirements for the period were reported and information on absence was also shown. The number of days lost through absence has increased slightly when comparing it to the same period in 2011/12 but the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that the submission of paperwork from the Directorates confirming that employees had returned to work usually led to this figure reducing in the forthcoming period. The figures were similar to those of the All Wales average (which compared local authorities) but the targets set by Flintshire County Council for 2012/13 were not being met and this had been reflected in the performance report submitted to Cabinet in March 2013 where a 'red' status was reported. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development explained that this was an area where improvement was required. For quarter four, the absence by service area would be reported and work was to commence to identify those absences recorded as 'other'.

The Chairman queried what had been the cause of the absence rate for quarter 3 which was the worst reported figure for two years. Councillor Woolley requested further information on the data behind the information reported as he was unable to calculate the number of employees who worked for the Council from the information provided in the Workforce Information appendices which had been made available for Councillors in Member Services. He also queried the figures reported in paragraph 3.01 and asked for an explanation of the calculations used. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development said that the information had been provided to Councillor Woolley but that she was happy to discuss the figures outside the meeting and that additional information could be provided for future reports.

The Cabinet Member felt that those with 100% attendance records should be recognised. Councillors Heesom and Hampson expressed concern about the absence figures, the lack of improvement and the importance of managing the issue. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development confirmed that work was ongoing with managers to ensure that they were aware of their responsibilities and added that policies were in place which could lead to dismissal if unacceptable levels of absence continued. Councillor Curtis queried whether consideration was given to how local businesses in the private sector dealt with sickness. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational

Development said that commitment would be given to looking at good practice within the private sector but that the important issue was to ensure that managers managed and followed the policy. In response to a query from the Chairman about seasonal variances for Agency workers, she said that she would provide detailed information in future reports for Overview and Scrutiny. She also responded to a question about the flexi system but reminded Members that not all staff were subject to it.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development provide further information on the data behind the information reported

95. INFORMATION COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE DATA PROTECTION AUDIT

The Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager introduced a report to inform the Committee of the audit being undertaken by the Information Commissioner's office (ICO).

She detailed the background to the report and explained that the report was for information. The Council had been approached and had agreed to a voluntary audit. It was reported that the ICO wanted to work within Community Services and to concentrate on one team within Children's Social Services and one team within Adult Social Services. The teams that the Council had chosen were the Family Placement Team and the North West Locality Team. Interviews with relevant staff were being conducted by the ICO.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

96. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Housing and Learning Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced a report to consider the Forward Work Programme of the Committee.

The Facilitator detailed the items for the next meeting scheduled for 16 May 2013 but explained that due to the large number of items listed, the Physiotherapy Pilot progress item would be included in the Quarter 4 performance report and the Workforce Information Quarter 4 report would be moved to the meeting on 13 June 2013. Following a request from the Head of ICT and Customer Services, the Chairman suggested that the report on Procurement as a Flintshire Futures Workstream scheduled for May 2013 be swapped with the Finance as a Flintshire Futures Workstream report scheduled for June 2013. The Facilitator detailed an amendment to the title of the Revenue Budget Monitoring report scheduled for June 2013 and said that an interim report for the Revenue Budget Monitoring for 2013/14 would be submitted to the meeting on 11 July 2013.

Councillor P.G. Heesom referred to his earlier request for a Base Budget Review to be undertaken and asked if a working group was to be established to consider its relationship to the Medium Term Financial Strategy. The Chairman said that he would take advice on the best way to pursue the issue.

The Acting Overview & Scrutiny Manager suggested that a report on a possible Task and Finish Group being established to consider Leisure Service Finances be submitted to the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted;
- (b) That the Forward Work Programme be amended to reflect the following:-
 - i. That the Physiotherapy Pilot progress item would be included in the Quarter 4 Performance report;
 - ii. That the Workforce Information Quarter 4 report be moved to the meeting on 13 June 2013;
 - iii. That the Procurement as a Flintshire Futures Workstream report scheduled for May 2013 be swapped with the Finance as a Flintshire Futures Workstream report scheduled for June 2013;
 - iv. an amendment to the title of the Revenue Budget Monitoring report scheduled for June 2013;
 - v. that an interim report for the Revenue Budget Monitoring for 2013/14 would be submitted to the meeting on 11 July 2013;
 - vi. that a report on a possible Task and Finish Group being established to consider Leisure Service Finances be submitted to the next meeting.
- (c) That the Chairman take advice on the best way to pursue the issue of a Base Budget Review and its relationship to the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

97. 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 1.00 pm)

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Chairman