

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11 SEPTEMBER 2014

Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 11 September 2014

PRESENT: Councillor Carolyn Thomas (Chair)

Councillors: Clive Carver, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Ian Dunbar, Andy Dunbobbin, Robin Guest, Joe Johnson, Richard Jones, Richard Lloyd, David Roney and Paul Shotton

SUBSTITUTIONS:

Councillors: Haydn Bateman for Marion Bateman and Mike Peers for Arnold Woolley

ALSO PRESENT:

Chief Officer (Organisational Change), Head of ICT and Customer Services, Finance Manager, Accountant,

CONTRIBUTORS:

Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Chief Executive, Chief Officer (Governance), Chief Officer (People and Resources), Chief Officer (Organisational Change), Corporate Finance Manager, Team Manager Advice & Homeless Services, Customer Services Team Leader,
For minute number 25 - Mr. Paul Goodlad from Wales Audit Office

IN ATTENDANCE:

Member Engagement Manager and Committee Officer

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

22. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 30th of July 2014 had been circulated with the agenda for the meeting.

Matters Arising

Minute 15

Councillor Paul Shotton thanked the Officers for the update on the Flintshire Connects footfall, and was pleased with the Connah's Quay figures. The Chief Executive indicated that this data would be included in future Access to Council Services reports.

Councillor Clive Carver reiterated concerns about Officers working from home not being readily contactable, citing specific examples. The Chief Executive stressed that his comments at the previous meeting had related to the incidence of systemic failures rather than a particular occasion. The Chair indicated that this should be an item for the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee to which she would refer it.

Councillor Mike Peers asked for information on the carrying out of appraisals, which the Chief Officer (People and Resources) undertook to provide.

Councillor Paul Shotton explained that he had asked a question on whether the move to Individual Elector Registration would increase public engagement; he was not saying that it would. It was agreed that the minute be amended accordingly. Councillor Carver raised an issue on the Individual Elector registration letter. The Chief Officer (Governance) explained that electors now needed to make an annual request for their details to be excised from the commercially available version of the register. The Chief Executive indicated that a full update on progress with the new form of canvass would be made on completion later in the autumn.

Councillor Peers asked whether the iPad training had been undertaken. The Chairman and some Members of the Committee confirmed that it had and the Chair undertook to send Councillor Peers the email which had been recently circulated listing progress.

Councillor Robin Guest commented that it seemed unusual that his wife had completed the individual registration form online, but had received confirmation by post. The Chief Officer (Governance) responded that this was a security provision.

Minute 17

The Chair commented that repairs and maintenance in schools would be the subject of a report to the Lifelong Learning Committee at the December meeting.

RESOLVED:

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

23. ADDITIONAL ITEM

The Chair indicated that under Section 100 (B4(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) she had requested that an urgent item be included at the meeting, to enable the Leader and Chief Executive to give a verbal update on the Budget Consultation Process.

24. BUDGET CONSULTATION PROCESS

The Chief Executive thanked the Chair for the opportunity to bring this issue to Members, and reported that the provisional local government settlement from the Wales Government was due to be published on the 8th October 2014. He explained the process which went from publication of provisional settlement through consultation to final settlement. This was normally in mid to late December.

He went on to explain that the Group Leaders had been briefed on the fundamental business planning review process which was being undertaken and commented on difficulties in planning longer term when the Welsh Government was only providing one year settlements. He went on to say that indicative reductions of between 1.5% and 4.5% in the Revenue Support Grant were being anticipated. Until the publication of the provisional settlement, the extent of the reduction would not be known. All services were currently approaching this on a 'worst case' scenario.

Initially discussions would take place with the Leadership and Cabinet before wider consultation was instituted.

The Leader and Chief Executive commented on the 'Big Budget Conversation' which had provided information to Flintshire residents on the scale of the project and the budget cuts required; 550 responses had been received to date. He commented on options for Town and Community Councils which could include the sharing of responsibilities.

The Leader of the Council said that discussions with Cabinet and Senior Officers on the budget were paramount. He expressed his pride at being able to support the budget for 2014/15 which had set out internal efficiencies before frontline services but said that this could not continue in the future. The funding proposals from Welsh Government were awaited with the worst expectation being 4.5% or £18m, meaning a total of £31m over two years.

Councillor Guest referred to the Big Budget Conversation and asked whether Members would receive a report on the outcome. The Chief Executive confirmed that the results of the survey would be shared with members and published.

In response to a question from Councillor Guest, the Leader of the Council said that it was hoped that the views expressed in the questionnaire would be shared as a background document during the consultation exercise. He added that there had been some suggestions had been made of where savings could be made.

The Chief Executive said that it had been important to inform residents of the challenges that the Council was facing and that it was also good practice to provide information on the outcome of the survey. He commented

on the challenging times ahead which could include consideration of alternative models such as increased charges.

Councillor Clive Carver asked how it could be ensured that the responses received on social media were valid and not from a small number of residents making repeated responses. The Chief Executive said that users had been encouraged to indicate whether they lived in Flintshire but reminded the Committee that the comments received as part of the research did not form a binding decision. The primary aim of the survey was to provide residents with information about the challenging times ahead and to seek their comments on how they felt the cuts should be achieved.

The Chair emphasised the need for the dates of Member consultation meetings to be published as soon as possible.

In referring to the significant budget cuts facing the authority, Councillor Mike Peers asked whether the future protection of front line services was in doubt. The Leader of the Council responded that it was important to continue to protect these services but reminded Members that the Council would have to deliver fewer services due to lower funding provision and he could therefore not confirm that frontline services would be protected in the future.

Councillor Richard Jones asked how the results from the survey/consultation exercise would create a criteria to assist the leadership in making the difficult decisions that the Council faced and how they would use the suggestions put forward. The Leader of the Council said that there would be a need to have these discussions at the second stage of consultation and added that Members, as part of the democratic debate, would need to decide how to use the consultation responses. He welcomed the option to discuss Councillor Jones' views on the criteria and referred to the unprecedented financial challenge. He added that Members would need to make difficult choices based on priorities and that a suite of options in excess of £18m was required to present to Members to allow those choices to be made.

The Chief Executive said that significant cuts internally could not continue and that the consultation exercise was a way of providing residents with the information on the challenges ahead and seeking their opinions. He reminded Members of the difficult decisions that they would have to make and added that all service areas would need to consider how to make savings. In response to a query from the Chair, he confirmed that workshops would be held for Members prior to the formal Overview & Scrutiny budget meetings but that dates for these had not yet been set.

Councillor Paul Shotton said that it was important to raise public awareness of the seriousness of the situation. Councillor Peter Curtis welcomed the opportunity for the public to be able to put forward their views and said that due to the potential budget cuts, it was impossible to confirm that front line services would not be affected. The Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Councillor Mullin, agreed that the views of residents through public engagement were important.

RESOLVED:

That the update be received and that Members be informed of the budget consultation workshop dates as soon as possible.

25. IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2014-15 AUDIT – CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

The Chief Executive introduced the report to advise Members of the positive Certificate of Compliance from the Auditor General for Wales in respect of the audit of the 2014-15 Improvement Plan. An Executive response was also included.

Mr. Paul Goodlad from Wales Audit Officer (WAO) provided a detailed presentation to the Committee, with the main features being as follows:-

- Context and Background
- Summary
- The Council has addressed the key areas of concern highlighted in the September 2013 Improvement Assessment Letter from WAO
- Improvement Objectives and sub-priorities within the Plan are (with a few exceptions) generally clear and robust
- Achievement measures do not always clearly reflect planning achievements/outcomes
- A few inconsistencies between aspirations to improve and the targets set for 2014-15
- In the few cases, the 'bigger impact' expected from the Plan is not apparent
- A minority of targets set for 2014-15 do not appear to be challenging
- In the significant majority of cases, the Council should be able to clearly demonstrate achievement of each improvement objective and sub-priority
- Gaining access to, and awareness of, the Improvement Plan and its key messages may be challenging for some stakeholders
- Proposals for Improvement

The Chair requested that the presentation be sent electronically to Members.

The Chief Executive felt that some of the comments were valid such as clearer explanation in some sections of the Plan. However, he also disagreed with some of the comments such as on the opportunities to raise awareness of the plan being reduced because of the decision to stop the door-step delivery of the *Your Community, Your Council* newsletter. He explained other ways that residents could access the document either on the website, by email or in libraries.

Councillor Richard Jones welcomed the points raised but felt that the feedback should be considered by a Task and Finish Group made up of Members from the Committee. He felt that it was important to understand

what was being undertaken by neighbouring authorities on their plans and to replicate any good practices.

Councillor Mike Peers referred to the issue of street-lighting highlighted in the presentation and agreed that the target should be three days if the fault was the responsibility of the Council and that this should be clearly identified in the achievement measure. Councillor Richard Lloyd felt that street-lights should be inspected more regularly to allow faults to be identified and that the three day target should only apply once the problem had been discovered.

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Management, Councillor Billy Mullin, thanked Mr. Goodlad for the presentation. He also referred to the issue of the Council's newsletter and reminded the Committee that residents could also access the Council's website at the new Connect Centres.

Councillor Clive Carver suggested that the plan should be called a "Challenge Plan" rather than an Improvement Plan. Councillor Andy Dunbobbin suggested that a text only file, rather than a PDF, could be made available to those wanting to access the document to reduce the download time.

Councillor Robin Guest felt that this Committee should look at all aspects of the Improvement Plan not just those relevant to this Committee. Each Committee currently considered the document for the service areas in the remit of that Committee and put their comments forward for Council determination. This meant that this Committee did not have the opportunity to consider the comments made before the Council decision was taken.

Following the earlier comments on street-lighting, Mr. Goodlad explained that the information had been included to identify the flat target rather than to undertake a debate on the particular target. He added that improvement could be measured in two ways which were to provide more services for the same money or the same services for less money.

The Chief Executive agreed that the term 'Improvement Plan' was dated which he felt was a national issue. He said that it was important to keep the rigour of target setting in proportion and not allow it to distract from ongoing work. Public interest was high in individual services but generally for corporate issues such as the Improvement Plan, it was low.

The Chair sought nominations for the Task and Finish Group and the Chair, Councillors Richard Jones and Robin Guest put their names forward. The Chief Executive supported the proposal and offered to draft a suggested Terms of Reference for the Group with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Management.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the presentation be received;

- (b) That the report and the Council's Executive response be noted; and
- (c) That Councillors Carolyn Thomas, Richard Jones and Robin Guest form a Task and Finish Group to consider the feedback from the Wales Audit Office on the Improvement Plan.

26. **IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT**

The Chief Executive introduced a report for the Committee to consider elements of the 2014/15 Improvement Plan Monitoring report relevant to the Committee for the period April to July 2014.

Representatives from each of the service areas gave a short presentation on the Improvement Plan progress, outlining the progress status, how the achievements would be measured and the actions/arrangements in place to control the risk. They also answered questions, as shown below, on each of the service areas which were:-

- Welfare Reform
- Organisational Change
- Financial Strategy
- Procurement Strategy
- Asset Strategy
- Access to Council Services
- People Change & Development

Welfare Reform

Councillor Ian Dunbar welcomed the work of the Welfare Reform Team and, in referring to householders with disabilities, commented on there not being any smaller adapted properties available for them to move into. He queried whether it would be more cost effective to allow them to stay in their current property rather than them having to move. The Team Manager Advice & Homeless Service spoke of a common sense approach but referred to the spare room subsidy which would result in tenants losing benefits if they had too many bedrooms in their property. The Welfare Team would ensure that the tenants were receiving all the benefits they were entitled to including access to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), which could be paid for as long as it was deemed necessary. He also referred to a recent Private Members Bill that the spare room subsidy should only apply if alternative properties were available, which had been discussed in Parliament.

In praising the work of the Welfare Reform Team, Councillor Paul Shotton asked whether Flintshire County Council had received any of the funding from the extra DHP monies made available specifically for Wales. The Team Manager advised that Flintshire had not received any of the funding specifically for rural locations but had been successful in its application for £50,000 from the Welsh Government's 'Additional DHP Fund' which would contribute to the Welfare Reform Team and the development of Advice Gateway Service.

Organisational Change

Councillor Robin Guest queried the quarter 1 outturn which was reported as being 'under review'. The Chief Executive responded that as there were many ongoing service reviews, it was impossible to set a meaningful target at this point.

Financial Strategy

Councillor Mike Peers queried whether it would be possible to produce a four year sustainable plan, as reported, due the current financial climate. The Chief Executive responded that in the absence of indicative figures it was difficult to plan with any certainty. He added that requests had been put forward for three to four year budget proposals from Welsh Government (WG) rather than the current annualised information.

Councillor Richard Jones sought clarification on the entry for the 2014/15 target on page 40 and in response, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that it had been confirmed for 2014/15 that 100% of resources were in place. Following a further query from Councillor Jones, the Chief Officer (People and Resources) explained that the 'Red/Amber/Green' (RAG) status for this year was green but that the Outcome Performance Predictive RAG should not be reported as such. Councillor Jones felt that the risks to be managed were not well written in the document and that they should be reviewed.

Procurement Strategy

In providing an overview, the Chief Officer (Governance) paid tribute to the work carried out by the Head of ICT and Customer Services and his procurement team.

Councillor Richard Jones referred to the Welsh Procurement Consortium and raised concern for local businesses which he felt would be overlooked when choosing suppliers for goods or services. He felt that Flintshire County Council should be mindful of the weighting that local companies had to make them more competitive against other larger companies. The Chief Executive explained that this was a concern on the issue of scale across procuring councils and offered to follow up with more information on how contracts were being segmented to allow smaller contractors to benefit.

Councillor Mike Peers referred to the merger of Flintshire and Denbighshire Council's procurement teams and queried whether this would have to be disbanded if a voluntary reorganisation between Flintshire and Wrexham Councils took place. The Chief Executive responded that there was no intention to change existing service mergers, and the Leader of the Council said that there was no need or requirement to disband pre-existing mergers if reorganisation occurred.

Asset Strategy

Councillor Ian Dunbar asked whether phases three and four of County Hall would be sold if the programme to close them was completed. The Chief Officer (Organisational Change) that it was intended that the phases would be 'mothballed' but that selling of the building could be challenging due to the high running costs. He added that there currently no plans to vacate phases one and two.

In referring to Connah's Quay offices and the opening of the Connects Centre, Councillor Paul Shotton asked whether the old offices would be demolished. The Chief Officer (Organisational Change) said that the quality of the asset was poor which could result in the building being demolished but the wider regeneration approach would be considered.

Access to Council Services

Councillor Paul Cunningham queried whether the staff in the Connects Office in Flint were trained to deal with police issues and asked for details of the number of customers who had attended the office. The Customer Services Team Leader responded that the staff received basic training on police issues but also advised the customers that police surgeries were held on a Friday at the offices. Councillor Mike Peers queried whether Flintshire County Council were reimbursed for police queries dealt with by staff when the police were not in attendance. The Customer Services Team Leader did not have details of the customer numbers for individual offices or on possible reimbursements but would be able to provide the information following the meeting.

Councillor Robin Guest raised concern at the target of 84% which had been reported for complaints responded to within 10 working days as the current outturn was 75.31%. He felt that it implied that officers were sure that there would be an increase in performance for the remainder of the year and that if this was not the case, then the predictive outturn should be reported as amber not green. The Customer Services Team Leader referred to a number of initiatives which were in place and the mandatory training undertaken by employees and she added that officers were hopeful that the target could be achieved. Councillor Guest felt that the target was speculative and that the outcome should be reconsidered.

In response to a query from Councillor Richard Jones about computer training for vulnerable adults, the Customer Services Team Leader spoke of an initiative called 'Get Online' which could be accessed through the Flintshire County Council website. The training which was carried out in conjunction with Flintshire Local Voluntary Council was being rolled out and promoted across the county. She indicated that she could provide information on the initiative to Members.

In welcoming the opening of the Flintshire Connects Offices, Councillor Paul Shotton asked whether customers completed a satisfaction form based

on their experience of the service. The Customer Services Team Leader said that there were plans to put a form in place.

Councillor Clive Carver said that it was pleasing to see that the current outturn exceeded the target for the take up of the Flintshire app but queried why figures relating to the Council's website were not available. The Customer Services Team Leader explained that this was as a result of the forthcoming move to a new website.

People Change & Development

In response to a request from the Chair on Single Status appeals, the Chief Officer (People and Resources) said that appeals and maintenance claims had been reviewed and letters would be sent out to the employees from the following Monday, 15th September 2014. Further work was still required on some of the appeals.

Councillor Mike Peers asked about the drop in sessions and queried whether they had proved to be cost effective against potential equal pay claims. The Chief Officer (People and Resources) explained that the process was continuing and to date, 3,800 employees had signed the form. This figure would include a number who had potential equal pay claims and a clearer view of the figures would be known within the next few weeks.

On the issue of appraisals, Councillor Richard Jones felt that the Committee should consider the issue at a future meeting, particularly on core or transferable competencies. He suggested that there was a need to concentrate on measure REM3 and that the completion of employees appraisals should be included in the appraisal for all managers to ensure 100% completion. The Chief Officer (People and Resources) commented on the use of leadership competencies and explained that the new Chief Officer team would undertake their appraisals first followed by a programme of appraisals for employees across the Council.

Councillor Paul Shotton welcomed the introduction of the physiotherapy scheme to all employees. He queried the current outturn of 22 for employees undertaking supervisory and management training programmes developed with Coleg Cambria compared to the 2014/15 target of 115 to 120 employees. The Chief Officer (People and Resources) said that there were a number of programmes across the academic year and the target was expected to be met.

The Chair raised concern about areas within the Council which were not appropriately covered particularly between 12 and 2pm or on Friday afternoons and asked the Chief Officer (People and Resources) to raise the issue.

RESOLVED:

That the reports be received.

27. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2014/15 (MONTH 3)

The Corporate Finance Manager introduced a report to provide Members with the latest Revenue Budget Monitoring 2014/15 (Month 3) for the Council Fund and Housing Revenue Account which was to be submitted to Cabinet on 16 September 2014.

The report reflected the work undertaken to rebase all staffing budgets to reflect the actual new costs arising from the new pay and grading structure following the implementation of the Single Status agreement. No pay variations were included within this report although this was deemed reasonable due to the fact that the relevant budgetary provision would be allocated to the actual costs being incurred in line with the affordability model used to estimate costs.

For the Council Fund, the projected net in year non pay expenditure was forecast to be £0.603m higher than budget and full details of the projected variances were summarised in appendix 1. The biggest variance was £0.514m which related to Domiciliary Care provision within the Localities Teams but had been slightly offset by the impact of the increase by Welsh Government in the level of the maximum charge cap from £50 per week to £55 per week. Section 3.05 detailed the efficiencies and it was currently projected that £8.444m of the £8.840m (96%) would be achieved.

An initial phase of Voluntary Redundancy Programme had identified a number of efficiencies and a second programme commenced on 1 September 2014 to run alongside the next phase of the Management Review.

Section 5 detailed the budget assumptions and risks and the projected balance on the contingency reserve was £2.338m and was summarised at appendix 3.

The HRA was projected to have an overall overspend of £0.038m and a projected closing balance at Month 3 of £1.127m which at 3.75% of total expenditure satisfied the prudent approach of ensuring a minimum level of 3%. Appendix 4 detailed the reasons for significant variances.

Councillor Robin Guest sought clarification on the significant variance for Social Services of £0.514 and suggested that the issue be referred to the Social and Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.

Councillor Mike Peers referred to the Section on Streetscene on page 91 and sought assurance that the posts which had been vacant for some time would be carefully considered.

In response to a question from Councillor Richard Jones, the Corporate Finance Manager said that any significant variances over £0.025m would be reported separately.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Social and Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee be asked to consider the significant variances within Adult Social Care, particularly to £0.514m relating to Domiciliary Care provision.

28. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

Details were provided of the four items scheduled for the meeting on 9 October 2014. Councillor Clive Carver commented on recent problems he had experienced on not receiving responses to communications sent to officers. Councillor Robin Guest felt that the issue would be more appropriately considered by the Democratic Services Committee and Councillor Carver agreed to write to him with the details. It was also agreed, following an earlier suggestion by Councillor Richard Jones, that a report on appraisals be submitted to a future meeting of this Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Member Engagement Manager liaise with the Chair to include a report on appraisals on the Forward Work Programme for consideration at a future meeting of the Committee.

29. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

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

(The meeting started at 10.00am and ended at 12.50 pm)

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Chair