

Mid-Year Chief Officer Report

Report Author: Chief Officer – Community and Enterprise
Report Date: November 2014
Report Period: April to September 2014

Introduction

The Chief Officer report is produced on a half yearly basis and provided to Cabinet Members for review and assurance focusing on the 'business as usual'. The reports are provided for Overview and Scrutiny Committees as part of their Forward Work Programmes. Chief Officer reports compliment the Improvement Plan monitoring reports.

Chief Officer reports are exception reports which summarise the key information Members should be aware of, including both good and poor performance. Emerging issues / operational risks are also detailed. The reports are split into three distinct sections: -

1. Performance Overview - this section is used to give an overview of the progress being made towards delivery of key plans for the services which include those Improvement Priorities which do not have an in year focus i.e. these are not reported within the quarterly Improvement Plan monitoring. It is also used to highlight good news and key issues (including operational risks) arising. In addition, summary progress is given for key projects and collaborative areas of work.

2. Internal and External Regulatory Reports - this section summarises regulatory work reported in the half year and its outcomes and intended actions arising from recommendations.

3. Corporate Reporting - this section summarises the performance in relation to corporate issues i.e. Sickness absence, Complaints

Plus supporting appendices: -

Appendix 1- Performance Indicators - summary table of the key performance indicators used to manage the services. In addition, any NSI and PAM (statutory PIs) reported by the services are included.

Appendix 2 - High level (red) operational risk detail - completed full risk templates for those risks currently assessed as high (red).

Section 1 - Performance Overview

This report covers the following business plan areas:

- Housing Revenue Account
- Regeneration
- Customer Services
- Economic Development

Areas of Positive Performance

Positive performance is being made across the portfolio, much of which is covered in the improvement plan reports and in internal performance reporting. Of noteworthy mention are:

Housing Revenue Account:

Plans are progressing well to introduce self financing for the Housing Revenue Account from April 2015. Procurement has commenced for a council house building programme. Efficiency and income maximisation options are being developed for the 15/16 budget process.

Housing Asset Management have progressed a number of key projects. The PDA project is gaining momentum with the software and infrastructure now in place. Consultation is now to take place on the selection of handheld devices with staff, members, unions and other stakeholders. Detailed project planning is progressing with a target go live early in 2015.

The “van stocks” project is also underway to deliver an improved service to tenants as once implemented more jobs will be able to be completed on first visit.

The new Rents policy/Service Charge Project continues to be a key project for Housing. New tenants will be subject to services charges from April 2015, charges for existing tenants will be phased in over a three year period from April 2016.

Work is being undertaken to work to the Crime & Policing Act 2014 with Community Safety, Youth Justice and North Wales Police. The act will impact ASB cases linked to the environment which will give the partners the powers to issue enforceable notices.

Areas of Concern

The level of no access visits for gas servicing and the lengthy legal process to gain entry is still a high priority for the Housing Management Team. The team are exploring alternative ways of gaining access.

Rent arrears continue to be a concern in light of the Welfare Reforms. Although the impact has not been as severe as originally forecast the effects have not been nor can be fully mitigated. Good work between the income team, neighbourhood teams and welfare rights continues to assist those households affected.

Regeneration:

The Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme (SHARP) is progressing. The programme has identified an initial nine sites across the county for development. The initial focus of the programme is the Flint Town Centre Master Plan including the development of 100 housing units on the site of the maisonettes.

The council was awarded £6.042M through the Vibrant & Viable Places Regeneration Framework for schemes across Deeside over the next 3 years. The aim of the funding is to support high street regeneration, through the improvement of commercial premises and streetscape works, alongside support for housing creation and improvement.

To date the council is progressing a number of energy efficiency retrofit projects, is in the process of tendering for a streetscape contractor and is creating new residential accommodation above commercial town centre premises. A successful Green Team programme is underway, supporting economically inactive people to access training and employment opportunities in horticulture and construction based sectors.

The council is on track to meet the objectives it set out in its year 1 bid and will meet Welsh Government targets as set out in the community benefits toolkit around job creation, training and skills.

The Housing Strategy & Regeneration team has maintained the Customer Service Excellence award during Q2 following an audit from the awarding body and has identified areas of further improvement to be delivered over the remainder of the year.

Town centre programmes are scheduled to deliver all European funding expenditure by the end of the financial year.

Phase 2 of the Deeside Renewal Area Group Repair programme has seen considerable improvements in the processes and approach from Phase 1 leading to a more efficient service and the achievement of 100% customer satisfaction during the last two quarters.

There are a number of contributory factors to achieving these results to date which include survey and contract documentation being more precise and user friendly, pre-start meetings being held with each property owner and all parties involved being present.

Areas of Concern:

The "Home Loans" initiative between Housing Strategy and Regeneration and Street is taking too long to turnaround property improvements and is now undergoing a mini lean review. We hope to see considerable improvements in this area in the remaining two quarters of the year through process improvement.

V and V programmes are making good progress but started late making spend projections and outputs challenging in Year 1.

Customer Services

The third Connects Centre is open and operational in Connah's Quay. Transfer of services to Connects has enabled efficiencies within back office services areas and improved access to these services for customers. Examples include the processing and issuing of blue badges and homelessness matters which are now available at all centres. Responsibility for the Street Scene contact Centre has reverted to the service. A new web site has been launched now enabling roll out of self serve.

The service is working to ensure the smooth implementation of the SARTH project. The triage service has been launched and customers are being contacted and where necessary visited to ensure the information the council holds is accurate and up to date ahead of the transition to a Single Access Route to Housing.

A significant development for the service has been the Homeless Prevention Pilot. This has been sponsored by WG and delivered in partnership with Shelter, and has seen the team piloting the new homeless legislation which will commence in April 2015. The Housing Options Service has been providing a full prevention service for all those that approach in need of assistance irrespective of their priority need status or local connection. The prevention levels for the first six months of the year have been high at 88% cases. An early findings report has been completed and will be reported to scrutiny committee in November and shared with wider partners and stakeholders.

The Welfare Rights Team has been reduced by 1.5 posts this year and has worked with Connects Staff to manage this reduction in capacity. To date the team has managed to meet targets for maximising income.

Council tax and business rate collections are holding up well despite the economic climate and realistic payment plans are in place for arrears cases. The service is confident of achieving their target for the year.

At the end of Q2:

- 58.3% of all council tax due in the year has been collected
- 61.9% of all commercial rates due in the year has been collected

The single person discount review is well underway with completion forecast for November 2014. The project should deliver significant savings for the council.

The channel shift project to migrate face to face payment services into Flintshire Connects has been completed, reducing staff overheads. Since March 2014, over 6500 transactions have been conducted via the payment kiosks.

The Supporting People Programme is facing year on year significant reductions and the team is working on an analysis of demand and assessing strategic priority of services. Work is also ongoing with providers to identify options for savings through remodelling or collaboration.

Senior Housing Representatives attend the Children's Services Forum to maintain communication around any issues arising for care leavers seeking suitable accommodation options. The Housing Options and Children's Services Integrated Team are now involved in Pathway Plans for each individual at an early stage to identify their housing aspirations and explore suitable and affordable options.

Areas of Concern

The number of families and single households needing to be accommodated in B&B has increased from 72 households to 87 households when compared with the same period in the previous year. This is reported to Scrutiny Committee in the Improvement plan monitoring report. However, despite the increase in numbers, the team has reduced the average length of stay to less than last year. This is the result of some improved joint working between Housing Options, Accommodation Support and Estate Management.

Complaint handling performance has dipped and measures put in place to improve. The Customer Services team will take control of complaints handling and deal directly with service managers.

Economic development

Flintshire Business week was a significant success with many businesses engaging positively and networking to improve business growth and success.

Assisted Areas are those areas where regional aid can be offered to undertakings, within Commission state aid rules to provide financial support to eligible businesses in key business sectors and certain strategically important projects outside these. It helps fund capital investment, job creation, research, development and innovation and certain eligible revenue projects throughout Wales. The Flintshire bid has been accepted and retained without amendment and consultation has closed. Retention of Assisted Areas status ensures the continued offer of Enhanced Capital Allowances of £70m permitted at Deeside Enterprise Zone.

Partnership working has taken place around the introduction of Superfast Broadband to the county. This enables businesses to work more efficiently with faster upload and download speeds and reducing travel, helping to create jobs and expand businesses.

Flintshire County Council recognises the importance of successful exploitation of superfast broadband infrastructure for its businesses and has signed the Superfast Exploitation Charter to partner with Welsh Government and collaborate with other Welsh Councils in the delivery of Superfast Exploitation support. It aims to:-

- help raise awareness to businesses about Superfast Broadband exploitation across Wales.
- explain how to make the most of Superfast Broadband and technologies for businesses
- offer free online guides informing of the benefits and technologies associated with Superfast Broadband.
- signpost to further advice relating to Superfast Broadband

To date, Flintshire has raised awareness with businesses both at Deeside Industrial Park Forum and the Mersey Dee Alliance Innovation Network and delivered a dedicated seminar during Flintshire Business Week 2014 in addition to publicising Superfast Broadband via social media.

Areas of Concern:

Collaboration options need to be developed further to protect service delivery:

NEW Homes

Work to deliver the first year business plan targets is progressing. The work of the council in establishing the company has been shortlisted for the Chartered Institute of Housing “Best New Idea award”. A specific report on the company and its progress is being reported to the November Housing Scrutiny Committee.

Areas of Concern:

Although social media and other avenues for marketing have been used, a marketing/brand development strategy is needed.

Summary of Operational Risks (from the above sections)

Risk Type	Risk Ref. and Description	Net Risk Score	Risk Trend	Target Risk Score & Date
Operational / Project	The current budget challenges places risks to ongoing service delivery especially for non-statutory services. Options are being developed to maximise income, research alternative delivery models, make cost efficiencies, reduce demand etc. These will be shared during the budget process.	A	↑	A
Operational	The level of rent arrears in the HRA arising from Welfare Reform requires close monitoring and may need policy change to protect income going forward.	A	↔	G 2015/16
Project	The SARTH project faces a possible financial risk as a key regional partner outside of Flintshire has recently decided to delay the implementation of the common register.	A	↑	A

Section 2 - Internal and External Regulatory Reports

Report: Housing Rent Arrears, Internal Audit report

Date Finalised: October 2014

Conclusion: Reasonable assurance

Recommendations: 2 x medium, 1 x low

Summary

Areas of good practice:

- The work carried out by the Housing staff does contribute towards the achievement of the objectives expressed in the Council Improvement Plan 2014/15
- Housing staff have achieved their KPI's; in some cases exceeded them in the face of a difficult economic climate and a major change in Welfare Provision.
- Housing Staff deal with a high number of difficult clients who can present challenging problems. Throughout the audit it was found that staff strive to find solutions which are both achievable for the tenant and beneficial to the Council.

Key areas for improvement:

- The stability of the Capita Housing system is poor, maintenance needs to be improved as a matter of urgency.
- Whilst there has been an improvement in the diary notes kept by Income Officers, not all Housing staff are updating the system. Diary notes on the Capita system should be comprehensive and up to date.

Report: Corporate Compliments, Concerns and Complaints, Internal Audit

Date Finalised: July 2014

Conclusion: Reasonable Assurance

Recommendations: 3 x medium, 2 x low

Summary

An audit of Compliments, Concerns and Complaints (CCC) was undertaken as part of the approved internal audit periodic plan for 2013/14.

Compliments, Concerns and Complaints can be received by the Council in a number of ways: telephone, letter, fax, email, website and via the contact centre. In accordance with the CCC policy complainants are asked to contact the service that they have been dealing with or the Customer Services Team in the first instance. Flintshire County Council (FCC), aim to deal with the complaint within 10 working days from receipt of the complaint. All complaints must be recorded on the Council's CCC database.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the response they are given, they are advised to contact the Customer Services Team who ensure that the complaint is considered by a senior officer and responded to within 20 working days. In the financial year 2013/14 Flintshire County Council received 863 complaints, 86.72% were responded to within 10 working days with 3 being referred to the Public Services Wales Ombudsman (PSWO). FCC exceeded its target of 80% (figures provided by the Corporate Complaints Officer).

Report: Registration Service Annual Performance Report 13/14

Date Finalised: 30th April 2014

Conclusion:

We note your excellent attainment against the key performance target in respect of birth and death appointments. In relation to customer satisfaction, whilst we acknowledge that there have been no customer complaints and indeed, several compliments received, it is usual to have periodic customer surveys to establish prevailing levels. This can also assist in service planning and delivery.

Additionally, I am pleased to note the assurance you have provided that GRO requirements in respect of the reporting of Suspicious Certificate Applications and Suspected Sham Marriage/CP; and those in respect of Data Protection and the Registration Online (RON) System have been adhered to. The comments included in this section show good management oversight and staff awareness in this important area.

Report: Council Tax and NNDR Finance, Internal Audit

Date Finalised: May 2014

Conclusion: Substantial Assurance

Recommendations: 2 Low

Summary

Areas of Good Practice:

- Procedures in the Council Tax/NDR Department ensure that each property is allocated a unique reference number on the valuation list and Civica system.
- Regular reports are produced of outstanding notifications for both Council Tax and NDR.
- Weekly reconciliations are prepared of property details from the Civica system to those held by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA).
- Valuation Office amendments are actioned promptly.
- Properties on the Council Tax and NDR list are regularly reconciled to the VOA and billing run.
- Liability amendment notifications are dealt with promptly.
- Discounts and exemptions are appropriately verified and recorded.
- Regular quality checks are performed by the Team Leaders on completed work items.
- Daily reconciliations are performed on the totals on the BACs processing reports to the totals on the direct debit extract reports.
- Credits, transfers and refunds are appropriately verified and recorded.
- The suspense account is cleared daily.
- Notifications of deceased tax players are processed promptly.

Areas for improvement:

- Our opinion of the design of the aforementioned framework has confirmed that there is no requirement for new controls to be introduced. Application of and compliance with control framework. Testing highlighted the following weaknesses in the application of the control framework.
- Differences on the NDR reconciliations to the VOA property listings need to be resolved and cleared.

Section 3 - Corporate Reporting

Equality and Welsh Language

List the Equalities and Welsh Language Impact Assessments: -

(1) Started/Work in Progress

(2) Completed

during the period (April – September 2014)

None during the period.

List the work areas / functions where diversity of customers are monitored

None during the period.

Appendix 1 - Performance Indicators

Key

R	Target significantly missed or likely to be missed by a significant margin
A	Target missed or likely to be missed but within an acceptable level
G	Target achieved / exceeded or on track to be achieved / exceeded

The RAG status of the indicators for the half year position are summarised as follows: -

R	A	1	G
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Note 1 – NSI = National Statutory Indicator PAM = Public Accountability Measure

Note 2 – Change (Improved / Downturned) is based on comparison with the previous reporting period. Where it is more appropriate to compare performance with the same period in the previous year this should be stated in the commentary.

Indicator	NSI / PAM (Note 1)	Annual Outturn 2013/14	Annual Target 2014/15	Mid-Year Outturn 2014/15	RAG	Change e.g. Improved / Downturned (Note 2)	Commentary
HHA/013: The percentage of all potentially homeless households for whom homelessness was prevented for at least 6 months	NSI / PAM	84.89%	90%	N/A	N/A	N/A	This indicator is only reported at year end.
PSR/004: The percentage of private sector dwellings that had been vacant for more than 6 months at 1st April that were returned to occupation during the year through direct action by the local authority	NSI	6.73%	8.71%	4	A	↔	The interim target for properties brought back into use in Q1 & Q2 is 11. The number of empty properties whose owners are engaged with the service in bringing them back to use, suggests we are still on track for achieving our end of year target. Delays with the legal team processing

Indicator	NSI / PAM (Note 1)	Annual Outturn 2013/14	Annual Target 2014/15	Mid-Year Outturn 2014/15	RAG	Change e.g. Improved / Downturned (Note 2)	Commentary
							Houses Into Homes applications has reduced the figure by 8 units this quarter, these properties will be brought forward into the next quarters figures

Appendix 2 – High Level (Red) Net Risks

No high level risks identified for this report.