

COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 4 July 2012

Present: Councillor J Hale (Chair)

Councillors A Cox C Muspratt
S Williams S Whittingham
P Doughty J Williamson
S Hodrien P Gilchrist
C Jones

1 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Members of the Committee were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary and non pecuniary interests, in connection with any item(s) on the agenda and state the nature of the interest.

Members were also reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they are subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

2 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meetings held on 26 March 2012, be approved.

3 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

The Committee was asked to consider if it wanted to appoint a Vice-Chair.

On a motion by Councillor Hale, seconded by Councillor Cox it was –

Resolved - That Councillor S.Williams be appointed Vice-Chair of this Committee.

4 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the first meeting of Council Excellent Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the municipal year.

He indicated that he would be bringing Item 14 – Masters in Business Administration (MBA) Qualification first to the agenda to enable the presenting officer, Head of HR and Organisational Development to leave to attend a further meeting (Minute No. 5 refers)

5 **MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA) QUALIFICATION**

Further to Minute 93 (26 March 2012), The Committee considered a report by the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management, giving a detailed response following a request from the Committee for further information on the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programme and training budgets.

Details of the current leadership development activity across Merseyside were outlined in appendix 1 to the report, which showed a range of activity with specific accredited activity targeted at first line and middle managers. The programme was funded by the Merseyside Improvement & Efficiency Programme and represented excellent value for money at £1500 per delegate for a six month programme. For all authorities the programme had been a supplement to their own leadership development programmes.

The report indicated that Local authorities across Merseyside had worked together to develop a “Merseyside Platinum Leaders Programme” which had been attended by 30 managers across the region, four of which were managers from Wirral Council.

Concerns expressed by managers who attended the MBA programme, echoed by this Committee indicated that the participants were not able to access additional learning and development opportunities. In drawing up the improvement plan, the Executive Team would be drawing upon the skills and enthusiasm of the MBA participants, amongst other groups to deliver key projects.

Appendix two of the report detailed the Council’s training expenditure for 2011 -12 (excluding Schools), the table showed the training expenditure divided into the following areas, Leadership Development; Management Development and Employee Skills and Professional Development. In summary, in 2011 – 12, 9.8% of the Council’s training expenditure was used on the MBA programme, this equated to £52,000.

In response to Members, the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development indicated that there had been members of staff who after completing the MBA had left the Council, however the Council and present employees had benefited from the qualification. In relation to career progression for MBA students, this would be looked at as part of the Improvement Plan, which had been submitted to the Improvement Board for comment. The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development agreed to forward information to Members as to how many staff had left the Council upon completion of the MBA.

Resolved – That

- (1) the report in relation to the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) Programme be noted; and**
- (2) the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development be requested to provide information to Members regarding the number of staff that had left the Council upon completion of the MBA.**

6 **FINANCIAL MONITORING STATEMENT**

Prior to the discussion on this item, Councillor S. Whittingham declared a personal interest by virtue of him being a volunteer at the British Transport Museum.

The Acting Chief Finance Officer provided a summary of the position of the revenue accounts and General Fund balances as at 31 May 2012. The Statement included the composition of the original 2012/2013 budget by Department including agreed savings and the 'one year' policy options; monitoring against the 2012/2013 budget including the financial implications of any changes agreed through Cabinet decisions; anticipated variances, changes not agreed by Cabinet, against the original budget and; comments that provided an explanation of variances and areas identified as requiring further attention.

The report highlighted changes agreed by the Cabinet which affected the 2011/2012 financial position and indicated that the impact of those decisions was an overall decrease in balances of £0.7m. The Statement presented an update of the revenue budget and General Fund balances as at 31 May 2012 and he indicated pressures and potential over/underspends that had been identified by Chief Officers. As at 31 May, the latest projections were for £8.1m in balances as at 31 March 2013 and this had been taken into consideration when setting the 2012/2013 budget.

In response to Members, the Acting Chief Finance Officer indicated that the slippage reported against the employee savings target within the Adult Social Services department occurred due staff not leaving the Department at the time expected.

In relation to targets for the Technical Services Department, the income from car parking and cultural services remained challenging targets which the Department would keep under review. Members indicated that in relation to this issue, Cabinet needed to be made aware of the challenging target set which was in need of review.

Resolved – That the Financial Monitoring Statement be noted.

7 **REVENUES, INCOME AND BENEFITS**

The Acting Chief Finance Officer provided information on the position regarding Council Tax, National Non Domestic Rate, general debt and cash income collection and the payment of benefits.

In response to Members in relation to the debt recovery process, the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services indicated that the department took all reasonable recovery action and worked alongside Enforcement and Recovery Teams to recover payment which in some cases proved very difficult; these difficulties were reported to Cabinet on a regular basis.

In relation to golf course fees, the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services agreed to forward information to Members on the proportion of fees uncollected.

In response to concern raised by Members regarding car parks increasing their fees. The Head of Financial Services indicated that he would ask the Building Control Department to respond to Member in writing regarding this issue.

Resolved – That

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services be requested to forward information to Members on the proportion of fees uncollected in relation to golf course fees; and
- (3) the Deputy Director of Technical Services be requested to investigate the points raised by Members in relation car park fees and report back to them in writing.

8 BUDGET PROJECTIONS 2013/15

The Director of Finance presented the projected budget for 2012-2015, which had been considered by the Cabinet on 2 June 2011 (minute 7 refers). He set out the assumptions which underpinned the projections and reported upon the outcome of grant negotiations and other legislative issues. Balances were projected to be £6.3m at 31 March 2012 and with savings having been taken into account, he reported that there would be a projected shortfall of £20.8m in 2012/2013, £27.6m in 2013/2014 and £30.3m in 2014/2015. (See also minute 8 ante).

Resolved –

That the budget projections be reviewed on a regular basis.

9 WELFARE & DEBT ADVICE SERVICES

Prior to consideration of the item Councillor Hodrien declared a Personal Interest in the item by virtue of her being a volunteer at an Advocacy and Advice Centre.

Councillor S.Williams also declared a Personal Interest in the item by virtue of him being a Bankruptcy Examiner

The Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services presented a report setting out the work undertaken at the One Stop Shops (OSS) and Libraries in relation to financial advice to residents. It also provided details on the provision of information and advice on fuel tariffs and the opening of bank accounts to further improve financial inclusion. The report had been requested and noted by Cabinet on 12 April 2012 (Minute. 403 refers)

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the progress on the delivery of welfare and debt advice services be noted; and**
- (2) the Welfare Rights Unit currently managed by the Department of Adult Social Services be transferred to the Finance Department.**

10 BENEFITS ANNUAL REPORT

The Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services presented a report updating Members on the work and developments within the Benefits Service 20/11/12. The report detailed the programme of current changes to Local Housing Allowance / Housing Benefit and the Welfare Reform programme which would have a significant impact and introduce widespread change for the Council, its staff, the service users and stakeholders.

The report also detailed the expanded breadth of the service during 2011/12 as it took over responsibility for the assessment and collection of Personal Domiciliary and Residential Care Charges from the Director of Adult Social Services as well as the direct responsibility for the administration of Education Welfare Benefits.

A Member commented upon the need to monitor the impact the introduction of universal credit may have on claimants.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

11 CUSTOMER SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT

The Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services presented the Customer Services Annual Report for 2011/2012. The report detailed the current and future work programme.

In response to Members concerns in relation to waiting times at one stop shops, especially for those people with young children in attendance, the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services indicated that there were play facilities provided within the one stop shops and waiting times were monitored regularly. This was a balancing issue in relation to staffing but it was hoped that the merger of one stop shops and libraries would alleviate this.

Members raised concern regarding the impact the Welfare Reform would have on those advisors working in the One Stop Shops. In response, The Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services indicated that all staff would receive the appropriate training and IT tool kit to give them the knowledge to offer advice and guidance; discussions were also taking place regarding the Local Welfare Assist Scheme.

Resolved – That the report be noted and the officers be thanked for the services offered to the public during the year.

12 **TREASURY MANAGEMENT ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12**

A report by the Acting Chief Finance Officer included a review of Treasury Management activities during 2011/12 and confirmed compliance with treasury limits and prudential indicators. The Annual Report had been prepared in accordance with the revised CIPFA Treasury Management Code and the revised Prudential Code.

The report indicated that the year saw these activities realise a net underspend of £3.7 million. Of this sum £2.5 million was anticipated and included in the Estimates 2012/13 as agreed by Cabinet on 21 February 2012 (Minute No. 322 refers). The report also confirmed compliance with treasury limits and prudential indicators.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Treasury Management Annual Report for 2011/12 be agreed;**
- (2) the transfer of the net underspend of £3.7 million to General Fund balances in 2011/12 be agreed; and**
- (3) the Treasury Management Team, responsible for achieving this level of income for the Council, be congratulated.**

13 **REVIEW OF USE OF CONSULTANTS**

Further to Minute No. 106 of 26 March, the Committee considered a report by the Acting Chief Finance Officer giving a detailed response following a request from the Committee for further information on the use of Consultants by the Council during 2011/12.

The report provided details of the budget and use of consultants analysed by department for the 2011/12 financial year and the budget for the 2012/13 financial year also by department, based on extracts from the authority's financial ledger.

The Acting Chief Finance Officer responded to Members questions in relation to office accommodation and consultants within the Children and Young People's Department.

Resolved – That the report in relation to the use of consultants be noted.

14 **CORPORATE FIREWALL**

The Committee considered a report by the Acting Chief Finance Officer informing Members of the award of contract, under delegated authority, for the provision of a pair of firewalls to protect the Council's corporate connection to the Internet.

The Contract was awarded to Sapphire, who had submitted the lowest priced bid at £64,934, which included the first twelve months support and maintenance; ongoing provision of support and maintenance would be assessed on an annual basis.

Resolved - That the award of contract under delegated authority to Sapphire for the provision of two firewalls, including twelve months support and maintenance at a total cost of £64,934.

15 2011/12 YEAR END PERFORMANCE & FINANCIAL REVIEW

A report by the Acting Chief Finance Officer set out performance of the Council's Corporate Plan 2011-14 for the end of year 2011/12, and provided an overview of performance, resource and risk monitoring.

Appended to the report was an appendix that provided a full year outturn of performance against all Corporate Plan and Strategic Change Programme projects and Corporate Plan indicators.

Members raised concern regarding the volume of information contained within the report, which made it very difficult to assimilate and identify the key issues, not only for them but also for members of the public. It was agreed that a more effective way to present performance information would need to be identified and ideas from Political Groups on this would be welcome. A refreshed Corporate Plan would be discussed at the Special meeting of the Cabinet on 9 July 2012.

In relation to Members queries in relation to the Printing Review, the Acting Chief Finance Officer indicated that a project manager would be looking at this, encouraging departments to use multifunctional instead of stand alone machines, which would reduce spending.

Members raised concern and asked for an update on office rationalisation which had consistently been reported to the Committee with delays. In response, the Acting Chief Executive agreed to refer the points raised by Members to the Head of Asset Management for a response and update report

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the report detailing the performance of the Council's Corporate Plan 2011-14 for the end of year 2011/12, giving an overview of performance, resource and risk monitoring be noted;**
- (2) the Head of Asset Management be requested to provide an update to Members in relation to Office Rationalisation.**

16 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS - REFERRAL FROM SCRUTINY PROGRAMME BOARD

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Law, HR and Asset Management on Equality and Impact Assessments, which had been referred by the Scrutiny Programme Board at its meeting on 28 February, 2012 (minute 33 refers) to all five themed Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

The Acting Director informed the Committee that all reports from his department for either Cabinet or this Committee were compliant with the EIA requirements.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

17 **REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair referred to the Committee's Work Programme and sought the views of Members as to whether any matters should be recommended for inclusion in the Work Programme of the Committee for the 2012/2013 municipal year.

In relation to the work programme, the Chair suggested that a meeting be held to discuss the work programme and outstanding items.

Resolved – That

- (1) the Work Programme be noted;**
- (2) the following topics be included in the Work Programme for the 2012/2013 municipal year –**
 - Corporate Governance**
 - ICT Projects;**
- (3) a meeting to discuss the work programme be held on Thursday 19 July 2012 at 4:00pm to be attended by the Chair and Spokespersons.**

18 **FORWARD PLAN**

The Director of Law, HR and Asset Management reported that the Forward Plan for the period March to June 2012 had been published on the Council's intranet/website. Members had been invited to review the Plan prior to the meeting in order for the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider, having regard to the work programme, whether scrutiny should take place of any items contained within the Plan and, if so, how it could be done within relevant timescales and resources.

Resolved – That the Forward Plan be noted.

19 **EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC**

Resolved – That in accordance with section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business, on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by the relevant paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The public interest test has been applied and favours exclusion.

20 **EXEMPT APPENDIX - CORPORATE FIREWALL**

The Cabinet noted the detail of the exempt appendices to Item No. 12 on the agenda – Corporate Firewall (Minute No. 14 refers).