

WIRRAL COUNCIL

COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

PUBLICATION OF PAYMENTS TO SUPPLIERS - WORKLOAD IMPACT

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. As requested by the Committee this report informs Committee of the increase in workload as a consequence of implementing the proposal to publish monthly, all Council third party expenditure over £500, from the 1 April 2010, to demonstrate the Council commitment to be open and transparent with residents.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Council on 2 November 2009 approved Notice to Motion item 62:
- This Council notes the recent campaign by the Taxpayers Alliance and George Osborne MP to provide greater disclosure to the public of what their money is being spent on.
 - Council also notes the recent move by the London Mayor to publish online details of all Greater London Authority (GLA) expenditure over £1000, detailing all payments for goods and services.
 - Council believes that the publication of all Council items of revenue expenditure of £1,000 and above; and capital expenditure of £10,000 and above will increase transparency and therefore accountability.
 - Therefore, Council resolves to instruct the Director of Finance to bring forward proposals to publish online from the start of the 2010 financial year, details on all such items of Council expenditure on a monthly basis within three months of the transaction.
- 2.2 In response to the Notice of Motion it was agreed, following a report to Cabinet on 14 January 2010, that the Director of Finance would publish monthly, from April 2010, payment details of all third party expenditure, excluding grants and personal payments, over £1000. Cabinet acknowledged that there would be a possible increased demand on staffing resources as a result of queries arising from the publication of this information.
- 2.3 The Council therefore published, on its website, expenditure over £1000 for both April and May 2010.

- 2.4 In June 2010 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government wrote to the Leader of the Council recommending that all expenditure over £500 be published from January 2011 in the interests of local transparency. As a consequence, with effect from June 2010, all data published, including a description of the reason for the expenditure, is for expenditure over £500.
- 2.5 At the meeting of the Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 8 July 2010, in response to a question from a Member with regard to the impact on workload of the requirement to publish information in relation to items of expenditure over £500, the Director of Finance commented that it had not, as yet, been quantified. Monitoring would be undertaken and I agreed to present a further report to a future meeting of the Committee.

3. REPORT PRODUCTION AND ENQUIRY WORKLOAD

- 3.1 A monthly report is published on the Council website which lists the total payments to suppliers, with a value over £500. The report is produced from the corporate financial information system and is reviewed to establish the reason for the expenditure and to ensure that there is no grant or personal data showing. A contact point is provided, on line, so that residents can access further information if, for example, they would like to know more about the type of business conducted with these suppliers. The Council aims to provide a response within five working days.
- 3.2 Since the data has been published from April queries have emanated from a number of sources: the public, the press and media and Councillors. This has resulted in over "190 line" enquiries i.e. individual transactions that have had to be explained. In order to respond to the complexity of enquiries it is necessary to contact individual officers within different departments. This has proved to be time consuming.
- 3.3 The aim is to be as open and transparent as possible but in some cases there will be a need to respect information that could be seen as commercially sensitive.
- 3.4 As no additional resource has been identified to cover this work, at present the duties have been split between the Procurement Manager and an Administrative Officer. They have taken on this role in addition to their existing duties. The consequences of this are that other elements of work, such as consolidating and letting contracts, are being delayed.

4. IMPROVEMENTS IN DATA QUALITY

- 4.1. I am planning to develop this initiative further by making improvements to the information that is made available on the Council web-site. This will include reviewing the descriptions provided when detailing the types of goods and services obtained from the expenditure and build upon the comments and responses received to date. The intention is to provide more relevant information through the web-site and therefore reduce the need for individuals/organisations to contact the Council.
- 4.2. I am also looking at improvements to the usability of this information by others. Further recommendations from the Government ensure that any published information is made available in a format that can be re-used by third parties. At present Wirral publishes this information in a Portable Document Format (PDF) i.e. the data cannot be easily downloaded for analysis. It is anticipated that, with further work, this published information will include the underlying data in an open standardised format called Comma Separated Values. This is simple text file format used for moving data between programmes that cannot read each other's native format.

5. FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Although the current operation of the procedure is occupying the equivalent of one officer it is hoped that the improvements in data quality will reduce the additional workload.

6. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

7. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

9. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

10. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

11. MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS

11.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None

13. RECOMMENDATION

13.1. That Members note the report.

IAN COLEMAN
DIRECTOR OF FINANCE.

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