

TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 29 January 2014

Present: Councillor S Whittingham (Chair)

Councillors RL Abbey M Johnston
A Hodson C Muspratt
P Gilchrist M Patrick
P Glasman J Salter
R Gregson A Sykes
J Hale J Williamson

Deputies: Councillors C Povall (In place of L Rowlands)
P Hayes (In place of C Blakeley)

In attendance: Councillor A Jones

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

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare whether they were 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.

25 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee of 9 December, 2013 be approved.

26 SCRUTINY REVIEW GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE

The Head of Policy and Performance presented a report which set out draft guidance for the setting up and operation of Scrutiny Review Panels to ensure there was a consistency of approach to task and finish work across the four Policy and Performance Committees. The draft guidance, appended to the report, had been presented to the Policy and Performance Coordinating

Committee on 15 January 2014 and they had welcomed the fact that there were significantly more scrutiny reviews being undertaken

A Member suggested that at the end of a scrutiny review, and after recommendations had been referred to Cabinet, there needed to be some form of tracking to ensure recommendations agreed by Cabinet were carried through to completion.

Responding to comments from a Member, the Head of Legal and Member Services suggested that a scrutiny review could include a particular caveat to capture any concerns of a Member regarding any particular recommendation(s). With regard to action tracking, actions were generated on the modern.gov system and officers did receive action notifications but there was a need to ensure these were followed through.

Resolved – That, subject to the addition of tracking agreed recommendations being referred to within the Scrutiny Review Guidance, the report be noted.

27 **DIRECTORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT**

The Strategic Director of Transformation and Resources and Head of Policy and Resources presented a report which outlined the current performance of the Department (as at 30 November 2013) against its Directorate Plan for 2013/14 in a Performance Dashboard. It translated the priorities set out in the Plan into a coherent set of performance outcome measures and targets.

The report also included appendices with exception reports on those three items which had been 'red' rated for non-compliance against the specified target. The 3 measures rated red were:

- Percentage of Adult Care Packages supported by Direct Debit
- Percentage recovery of Personal Finance Unit Charges
- Percentage of Personal Finance Unit Assessments completed within timescale

Responding to comments from Members, the Strategic Director stated that the report concentrated on those 19 high level indicators which were critical to the management of the service. In respect of P29 and the roll out of self serve to schools, which was rated red, the Head of HR and Organisational Development would provide a written response in respect of this indicator.

In respect of the 10 day payment policy to small and medium enterprises (P3) he reported that progress was continuing, performance was at 32 per cent in November, 2013 and he would hope that a significant improvement would be seen within this year, the ambition being to hit performance of 80/90 per cent.

The Head of Legal and Member Services stated that in respect of indicator DP16 and response rates for complaints, there had been lower performance in November when the response rate had risen to 15 days, but he would anticipate the overall rate being on target. He would have to establish with the relevant departments as to why some were taking nearly a month to respond.

In respect of indicator DP11a, the Head of Business Processes outlined the work being undertaken with the Department of Adult Social Services to address outstanding issues and improve performance. The new staff within the Personal Finance Unit were under the Transformation and Resources Directorate and were still undergoing training. The next quarter's indicator would also show separately the historic debt.

With regard to indicator CP2 and the adult care packages to be supported by direct debit, the system was now 'live' and letters would be sent out in the following week inviting people to use it.

The Chair stated that he was pleased to see the improvement in the level of performance of indicator DP12, the response times to Freedom of Information requests.

Resolved - That the Performance Dashboard be noted and the information contained within it be used to inform the Committee's future work programme.

28 **SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT**

The Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development submitted a report which set out the current position in relation to sickness absence across the Council.

The report had been requested to identify sickness absence performance across the new directorates following the restructure of the Council, the process for dealing with sickness absence and the impact it had had on capacity within the HR division and the wider organisation in the light of the transformation process and significant organisational change.

Following the Senior Management restructure undertaken in December 2012 the Council was re-organised into three Strategic Directorates; Families and Wellbeing, Regeneration and Environment, and Transformation and Resources. An appendix to the report showed current levels of absence across the Council and Schools up to 30 November 2013. The projected days lost per employee were currently 9.17 compared to 10.23 in 2013/14. This was based on the national Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI). Excluding schools, the current projected performance was 12.13 days which showed a marginal improvement compared to 12.88 days in 2012/13.

Comparisons against other Local Authorities in the region for 2012/13 inclusive and exclusive of schools were attached as appendices to the report.

The report also gave details of strategies to manage absence, including the Employee Assistance Programme, Occupational Health Support and Fit for Wirral.

Responding to comments from Members, the Head of HR and Organisational Development informed the Committee that the Employee Assistance Programme was provided by an external provider and the Council was not provided with any details about individuals contact or interaction. She outlined the work of the dedicated casework team (five staff and one manager) who had been brought together from across the organisation in 2013 to provide support on all individual employee relations cases including absence management cases.

Appendix six to the report provided a snapshot of sickness trends, reasons for sickness, and comparisons of short and long term sickness on a particular day. To look at actual trends one would look at the monthly figures previous to the month on which the snapshot was taken as it could have been taken in the middle of the month. The data provided an illustration of the format and type of data available to managers on a daily basis which would help in improving the management of absence. Long term sickness was defined as sickness lasting more than four weeks.

The number of staff, 854, completing the e-learning course in attendance management was approximately consistent with the total number of managers, which included team leaders across the Council, although this was over a certain time period and was not the latest figure the Council had. The results of the annual staff survey would be shared with Members once they were available.

She also described how the Council engaged with union representatives over both the implementation of the attendance management policy and occupational health matters in relation to specific employees. The policy was designed not to be punitive but to ensure managing attendance was robust and supportive. The breakdown of absence reasons meant that the Council was able to target support more effectively.

The Strategic Director welcomed the use of the 'insight' system which allowed manager's immediate access to live absence data for their teams. The data could be interrogated as to whether absences were a one off or a growing trend.

In respect of further comments, the Head of HR and Organisational Development stated that she would be happy to provide written responses on the following questions and comments:

- Of the 144 Sickness absence cases closed, what were the reasons?
- The proportion of long term and short term absence. At Wirral Council 64% of absence was long term. Is there any benchmarking data to compare this with other organisations?
- Employee Assistance Programme. What feedback does the Council have from staff, what performance measures are in place and is there a breakdown by department of contacts made?
- What is the cost of the flu vaccination?
- In appendices 3 and 4 can the names of the comparator North West authorities be given?
- In appendix 7, is the absence of males aged 20–25 years, a snapshot position or part of a trend?

A Member suggested that the Committee could establish a Task and Finish Group to look at workplace stress and absences.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Williamson, it was –

Resolved –

(1) That the contents of the report and the Council’s current approach to management of absence, be noted.

(2) That the Committee establish a Task and Finish Group, in the new municipal year, to look at workplace stress and absences.

29 ICT DISRUPTION

The Interim Head of ICT submitted a report which provided an update on the causes of the ICT disruption of 4th and 5th September 2013. The report also covered the actions taken to prevent a similar recurrence and particularly what had been done to increase resilience of the Members’ ICT service.

Although there were many other areas of ICT which the Committee was interested in discussing, the current capacity in ICT had been severely affected by significant staffing reductions and the sickness absence of the most senior manager. The service was, quite understandably having to prioritise very carefully and ensure systems that had most effect on the well being of the public were being maintained and managed. On-going prioritisation of work was in place and an interim advisor had been appointed to assist with the improvement activity required and to manage day to day operations. Further updates could be provided to the Committee as necessary and in a paced and sensible way. There was a balance required between the resource constraints and the high level of demand for ICT services and this was common in all public sector organisations.

Responding to comments from Members, the former Interim Head of ICT elaborated on the risks if the Council did not have a backup generator. With 4,000 users there was a need to invest to minimise risks. He also gave details of the facilities at Cheshire West and Chester Council in the context of a possible future shared service. He acknowledged the need for the ICT Disaster Recovery Plan to be re-written and stated that his successor was now working on this.

The Strategic Director assured the Committee that the ICT Disaster Recovery Plan would be brought to this Committee in due course.

With regard to the recent IT issues the previous week, the Strategic Advisor on ICT gave an update to the Committee on how these issues had been addressed and the timeline in invoking the business continuity process.

The Strategic Director commented that this IT issue was unrelated to the previous ICT disruption in September, 2013. He thanked all the staff involved for all their work in resolving this issue and the effectiveness of the Council's business resilience processes in dealing with the matter.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Abbey, it was -

Resolved -

(1) That this Committee, in recognising the high risks from possible future ICT disruptions, supports the establishment of an appropriate officers group to consider the business case for installing a standby generator and to identify the Council's critical services, which will be served from the more robustly "protected" server room.

(2) That the thanks of this Committee be conveyed to all the staff involved for all their efforts in resolving the recent ICT issues.

30 **TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES FINANCIAL MONITORING
2013/14 (MONTH 8)**

The Director of Resources presented the financial monitoring report for Month 8 (November 2013) in respect of the budget performance for the Transformation and Resources Directorate.

The report gave details of performance against revenue and capital budgets and in year efficiency savings for 2013/14. The Strategic Director drew the Committee's attention to the currently forecast underspend of £249,000 in respect of the revenue budget.

In response to comments from Members the Head of Business Processes stated that collection of Council Tax, with the introduction of the Council Tax

Support Scheme and, the billing of people who had previously received benefit at 100 per cent; his expectation was that the Council would do well to stay on target.

He also explained the figures for housing benefit fraud referrals between 1 April and 30 November, 2013, not all of which would have been investigated. Figures were also given for cases which had been investigated and cases under investigation; there were 40 cases where some form of court action had been taken.

With regard to Discretionary Housing Payments, he stated that the Council was on course to spend all the Government grant. A bid for additional funding would be submitted in early February, although there was no guarantee that anymore grants would be given. There had not been any noticeable shift between the social and private rented sector but this was subject to ongoing monitoring.

In respect of the Council Tax Discretionary Relief policy, no awards had as at the end of December, 2013 been made from this £50,000 fund. There were currently just under 100 applications for funding, though grants were only made for exceptional reasons. It was feasible that not all of this money would be used, and then it would be for the Council to decide how it was used.

There was currently a significant underspend in the Local Welfare Assistance support scheme which was supported by a Government grant of £1,345,925. Total awards as at 30 November, 2013 were £292,434 to be used for the provision of pre-payment cards for food and fuel and direct provision of white goods. The scheme was being reviewed and a report would be going to Cabinet which would examine possible alternative options for the use of these discretionary awards. In relation to this scheme a Member suggested that some form of consortium of voluntary sector organisations might be better placed to spend this money being more aware of those vulnerable people in need of help. The Member raised concerns that the grant could remain unspent despite vulnerable Wirral residents requiring support.

The Chair concurred that the idea of a voluntary sector consortium should be investigated with regard to the Local Welfare Assistance support scheme and that there might be a more creative way of allocating these funds.

Resolved – That this Committee notes the report and that a Task and Finish group be established to consider the possibility of a more creative way of allocating funds from the Local Welfare Assistance support scheme, including the idea of some form of voluntary sector consortium.

This resolution was subsequently amended by the Committee on 14 April (minute 34 refers) to read:

Resolved - That this Committee notes the report and asks that a report to consider the possibility of a more creative way of allocating funds from the Local Welfare Assistance support scheme, including the idea of some form of voluntary sector consortium, be brought to a meeting of this Committee.

31 **POLICY UPDATE**

The Head of Policy and Performance submitted a Policy Briefing report which provided the Committee with the opportunity to review new areas of policy and government initiatives that would impact on local government in the short to medium term.

The Chair suggested that a report could be brought to the next meeting on the Local Audit and Accountability Bill.

Resolved – That the report be noted and a report be brought to the next meeting on the Local Audit and Accountability Bill.

32 **WORK PROGRAMME**

Further to minute 17 (23 September 2013), the Head of Policy and Performance presented an update upon the progress made in delivering those items included in the work programme. The four pieces of work were:

- ICT Strategy
- Review of Shared Services
- Review of process for handling Freedom of Information requests
- Review of sickness absence process

A Member suggested that the thanks of the committee should be accorded to the department for the significant improvement in the response rate for dealing with Freedom of Information requests.

Resolved –

(1) That the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee work programme, set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be approved, subject to the addition of:

- a Task and Finish Group being established in the new municipal year, to look at workplace stress and absences;
- a Task and Finish Group being established before the year end on the allocation of funds from the Local Welfare Assistance support scheme.

(2) That the thanks of the Committee be accorded to the department for the significant improvement in the response rate for dealing with Freedom of Information requests.