

# TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 5 November 2014

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	J Williamson (Chair)	
	Councillors	P Doughty M Daniel R Gregson M Patrick J Walsh	I Williams T Anderson B Berry K Hodson P Gilchrist
<u>Deputies:</u>	Councillors	M Sullivan (In place of C Muspratt) W Clements (In place of Tracey Pilgrim) S Williams (In place of A Sykes)	
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	A Jones	C Meaden
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillor	L Reecejones	

## 13 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.

Councillors Wendy Clements and Tom Anderson declared their personal interests in agenda items 3 and 4, 'Future Council Consultation Findings' and 'Future Council Budget Options Scrutiny Review', by virtue of their being friends of Greasby and Irby Libraries.

Councillor Mike Sullivan declared a personal interest in agenda items 3 and 4, 'Future Council Consultation Findings' and 'Future Council Budget Options Scrutiny Review', by virtue of him being a friend of Pensby Library.

Councillor Matthew Patrick declared a personal interest in agenda items 3 and 4, 'Future Council Consultation Findings' and 'Future Council Budget Options Scrutiny Review' by virtue of him being a member of Upton Library.

## 14 MINUTES

Members were requested to receive the minutes of the meeting of the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee meeting held on 16 September, 2014.

**Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of 16 September, 2014 be approved.**

## 15 FUTURE COUNCIL CONSULTATION FINDINGS

The Committee received a presentation from Kevin MacCallum, Marketing and Communications Manager, Neighbourhoods and Engagement, on the process of the Budget Options consultation. The consultation was launched on 8 September with an extensive on and offline promotion and finished on 31 October, 2014. A total of 7,874 responses had been received with a breakdown as follows:

- Residents 6,872
- Members of Staff 1,079
- Voluntary, Community, Faith sector 260
- Partner Organisations 62
- Local Businesses 176

He also provided details of the demographic and geographic breakdown of the responses and of a number of petitions which had been received in respect of the Budget Options and particularly with regard to Pensby, Irby, Greasby and Upton Libraries.

For 2015/16 £18 million savings were required, the Future Council project had been able to identify potential savings and efficiencies of £15.5 million. If implemented, these savings would potentially reduce the budget gap to £2.5 million in 2015/2016. Options had been proposed by the Chief Executive which would achieve a combined saving of just under £4million for 2015/2016.

Kevin MacCallum then provided a breakdown of the responses in respect of the two budget option proposals relevant to this Committee:

- Council Tax Over 70s Discount
- Community Libraries

With the Council Tax Over 70s Discount option he also provided a breakdown of the responses by age.

In response to comments from Members, Kevin MacCallum agreed to provide a breakdown of the geographical analysis provided based on wards rather

than constituencies. Kevin MacCallum further directed Members to a report to Cabinet which provided Committee with a dashboard of all options and the feedback provided through the consultation questionnaire. The petitions which had been submitted would be referred to in the report to Cabinet, but they did stand independent of the questionnaires.

**Resolved – That the report be noted.**

## 16 **FUTURE COUNCIL BUDGET OPTIONS SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Committee received the findings of the Scrutiny Review into the two budget options which fell under its remit.

### **Community Libraries**

The Head of Business Processes introduced this review to the Committee.

The Chair thanked all those Members who had sat on the Scrutiny Reviews, the officers for all their time and work on the review and Professor Lee, Chair of the Wirral Libraries Forum.

Members commented upon the review and the positive way in which the review was conducted with a great level of detail provided by officers. The conclusions were a fair representation of what the Panel had decided.

The Head of Business Processes clarified for Members the way in which opening hours of 24 hours could be split across libraries. If a constituency had four community libraries then the 96 hours total could be spread out across the four libraries to best meet the needs of each particular area. He also confirmed that the majority of libraries did have a user group, though not everyone and those that didn't tended to be in those areas with most need.

A Member queried whether the Council could be in breach of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 if it were to reduce opening hours of libraries if local user groups were not consulted.

The Head of Legal and Member Services responded that he was not aware of any such challenges to this option and that the consultation arrangements were compliant with requirements under the legislation. There would be a need to consult with all relevant stakeholders to ensure the Council met their identified needs. User groups would be consulted as to how hours were allocated across each library within a constituency.

A Member suggested that if Cabinet were to approve this budget option then another Task and Finish Group could be established to examine the best way forward.

A Member commented that the Council was trying its utmost to maintain all 24 libraries within the Borough and that each library was unique with its own specific requirements.

Councillor Gilchrist moved, and it was seconded by Councillor Steve Williams, an addition to the conclusions of the scrutiny review, that –

“Cabinet be reminded of the findings of the Sue Charteris review with regard to the need for an assessment of local needs, the requirements of children, the need for a Strategic Plan and the requirement to address the needs of deprived communities and be asked to develop a process to ensure that this is taken into account.”

The motion was agreed unanimously and it was then –

**Resolved – That the Scrutiny Review be referred to Cabinet and that this Committee endorses the conclusion of the Panel as follows:**

- (1) Whilst the majority of members accepted a need for reduced levels of provision to meet the need for savings, the whole Panel felt the current proposals in respect of opening hours were not ideal. Specifically, a one size fits all approach in allocating the number of hours should not apply across all community libraries as operational needs may differ. The majority of the Panel recommended local consultation is carried out on Community Libraries to determine preferred opening arrangements on the basis of an allocation of 24 hours of operation per week. The Panel also agreed the Constituency Committees should play a role in deciding on the future of libraries in their area.**
- (2) Cabinet be reminded of the findings of the Sue Charteris review with regard to the need for an assessment of local needs, the requirements of children, the need for a Strategic Plan and the requirement to address the needs of deprived communities and be asked to develop a process to ensure that this is taken into account.**

### **Council Tax Over 70s discount**

The Committee then considered this second budget option, which the Head of Business Processes introduced.

The Chair thanked all the officers who were involved in this scrutiny review.

A Member commented upon the position some people could be in who were just above the level for support and the need to mitigate the impact of any loss of discount for those on a low income.

The Head of Business Processes responded that this was referred to in the fifth observation on the review and the need to look at the best ways to alert people to the assistance they could seek out. He would expect the Council to be alerting people within the billing regime.

On a motion by the Chair, duly seconded, it was –

**Resolved - That the Scrutiny Review be referred to Cabinet and that this Committee endorses the observations from individual Panel members as follows:**

- **The proposal brings Wirral in line with other authorities which do not provide a pensioner discount.**
- **Council Tax Support was reduced for working age residents with the introduction of 22% contributions immediately when it was introduced in April 2013. In this context, the removal of the 5% discount in terms of impact is more marginal and is considered less likely to put people into real hardship.**
- **Pensioners are seen as being on a fixed income. The government's threshold for a referendum on increased Council Tax is 2%, therefore a 5% increase albeit for a proportion of the population could be considered significant.**
- **A key opportunity for mitigating the impact would be to phase out the discount gradually in a similar way to Barnsley Council. However, it was acknowledged that this becomes a more complex change to communicate.**
- **Another way to mitigate this proposed budget option would be to communicate the change clearly in order that households can undertake mitigating activity themselves. This could be through communication via the annual Council Tax statement, through a dedicated communication to all those affected and/or via communications through all other communication channels.**
- **There is an opportunity to use this change as a mechanism to promote and widen the take up of other benefits for eligible pensioners.**