

COUNCIL EXCELLENCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 27 November 2012

Present: Councillor J Hale (Chair)

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

Deputies: Councillors C Povall

35 ADJOURNMENT

The Chair indicated that due to an administrative error, Members had not received hard copies of the supplementary agenda containing Item 3 – Improvement Plan Update and Item 8 – Social Welfare Reform - Local Council Tax Support Scheme, which had been published previously. The Committee adjourned for a period of 30 minutes to consider the supplementary agenda items.

36 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.

37 MINUTES

Members indicated that at the meeting held on 7 November 2012 The Head of HR was not present, therefore, it was agreed that a report regarding gifts and hospitality be added to the work programme for discussion at a future meeting.

Resolved –

That subject to the addition of the gifts and hospitality report being added to the work programme to be discussed at a future meeting, the minutes of the meetings held on 1 October 2012 and 7 November 2012, be approved as a correct record.

38 IMPROVEMENT PLAN - PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided an update on progress delivering the Council's Improvement Plan. There was a summary of the key achievements to date as well as the activities scheduled in the next period. These were set out against the five priority themes around which the plan had been developed.

The report also provided a more general narrative which reflected the observations of the Improvement Board and the feedback from the recent Peer Challenge as well as highlighting some of the issues and challenges in relation to the next stage of delivery.

Fiona Johnstone, Director of Policy, Performance and Public Health responded to Members and indicated that in relation to the recruitment of the Strategic Director Transformation and Resources, applications had been received and interviews would be taking place mid January 2013.

In relation to the Local Public Service Board, a meeting had been held with representatives from the public services and Wirral Partnership Homes to discuss the terms of reference for the group and agree a way forward. Progress on this would be reported to the Committee in due course.

Members asked about the leadership programme detailed within Priority 1, and asked who the targeted audience was and what the criteria would be. In response Ms Michele Duerden, Policy, Performance & Public Health Improvement Team indicated that the programme had not taken place yet and information regarding future planning of the programme would be shared with the Committee.

In relation to questions raised by Members regarding training on procurement and tender preparation for management, Ms Johnstone indicated that the HESPE report requested training for managers be undertaken to ensure that alongside the procurement team, all appropriate officers were trained to ensure that the same tender and procurement processes were consistent throughout the Council.

Members welcomed the introduction of the Members enquiry system and indicated that a suitable, relevant system was essential in meeting the Priority 2 target. In response, Surjit Tour, Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management indicated that the system would allow Members to post enquiries to relevant departments for responses; delays in providing information would be reported to Members. Mr Tour further indicated that a case management system was also to be developed for Members to assist with Councillor case work. These two systems would allow Members be to better supported by way of a simpler process and giving improved access to key contacts.

On a motion proposed by Councillor Whittingham and seconded by Councillor Williams.

Resolved – That

- (1) the progress against the Improvement Plan; and**
- (2) the endorsement of the Peer Challenge Review be noted.**

39 OFFICE RATIONALISATION

Further to Minute No. 29 of 1 October 2012, the Committee considered the report of the Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management updating on the recent activity in respect of in respect of the office rationalisation programme.

In response to Members, Mr Ian Brand, Head of Asset Management agreed to submit the survey regarding a review of occupation of the core administrative accommodation to a future meeting. Mr Brand indicated that the survey would give an excellent opportunity to look at the geography of staff in relation to the buildings.

In relation to the North and South Annexe buildings, Mr Brand indicated that Cabinet had agreed in February to close one of the buildings; however, a decision as to which building would close had yet to be taken, this would be decided once staffing structures were agreed. Both buildings would need upgrading works, i.e. heating upgrade, asbestos clearing, building and cabling repairs, the buildings were fit for purpose at present but investment was need for future use.

In response to comments by Members in relation to parking and transport, Mr Brand indicated that the Council did have a travel plan, which looked at encouraging staff not to use their cars but alternative transport, a corporate approach was needed throughout the Council.

Resolved – That

- (1) the report updating on the recent activity in relation to the Office Rationalisation programme be noted; and**
- (2) the Head of Asset Management be requested to submit the survey regarding a review of occupation of the core administrative accommodation to a future meeting**

40 REVENUE MONITORING 2012/13 MONTH 6 (SEPTEMBER 2012)

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Director of Finance setting out the revenue position for 2012/13 as at Month 6 (August 2012). It identified the latest financial projections and prioritised the risks for ongoing management actions, to ensure the year-end position would result in spend remaining within the budget allocated.

The report indicated that Cabinet on 6 September 2012, when considering the Month 3 monitor, instituted a spending freeze in the light of the projected overspend. Items included in the first two weeks of the freeze were agreed by Cabinet on 18 October 2012 (Minute. Refers) further items from weeks three to six were recommended for inclusion as detailed in Appendix 7 to the report.

Mr Peter Timmins, Interim Director of Finance answered questions and gave an explanation to Members in relation to the 'Blue Book', projected General Fund budget, Departmental Spends, projected Departmental Variations by Spend and Income, risk band classification and progress on agreed savings.

Members asked about the 'Blue Book' and asked if a budget book could be produced with an indication of the actual budget that was being spent. Mr Tom Sault, Head of Financial Services indicated that the Finance Department were currently working on the outturn report which would be provided at the end of the year, which would enable a clearer budget overview to be provided at the start of the new financial year.

On a motion proposed by Councillor Whittingham and seconded by Councillor Williams.

Resolved- That

- (1) the report on the revenue monitoring 2012/13 for month 6 (September) 2012 be noted; and**
- (2) the Interim Director of Finance and his officers be thanked for all their hard work.**

41 TREASURY MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Director of Finance, which presented a review of Treasury Management policies, practices and activities during the first quarter of 2012-13 and confirmed compliance with treasury limits and prudential indicators. The report had been prepared in accordance with the revised CIPFA Treasury Management Code and the revised Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities.

Mr Tom Sault, Head of Financial Services responded to Members questions in relation the Council held investments.

Resolved –

That the Treasury Management Performance Monitoring Report be noted.

42 SOCIAL FUND REFORM - WIRRAL LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE SCHEME

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Director of Finance detailing the proposed year one policy for a new local discretionary support scheme administered by the local authority from April 2013 to replace the crisis loans and community care grants currently administered by the Department for Work and Pensions. Members views were sought for referral to Cabinet and consequential approval by Council.

In response to Members, Mr Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services indicated that there would be plain English information provided to members of the public making applications and staff would be given appropriate

training and guides to help them assist the public and ensure health and safety for citizens and staff.

In relation to the evaluation of the scheme, Officers would be doing this on a monthly basis and reports would be submitted to Members on a monthly basis, the evaluation would assist with the planning for year two.

Members raised concerns regarding the environment of the one stop shop/libraries and security at each site, in response, Mr Flanagan indicated that this was an issue that needed addressing carefully to address the balance of setting the right environment in the one stop shop against the security of staff and the public. Mr Flanagan explained that those customer making applications would not be dealt with at the reception counters but in a separate interview room by trained staff, rooms would be fitted with CCTV to meet health and safety requirements and safeguarding procedures.

Members raised concern regarding the plans to provide two centres; which may prove costly for those transporting from Eastham and New Brighton to attend centres at Birkenhead.

In relation to working with voluntary sector, Mr Flanagan indicated that the Council has 90 days before the scheme was to go live, Officers were trying to make contact with voluntary sector prior to this deadline of March 2013 which may prove difficult. It was suggested that this could be looked at as part of Year 2 planning.

On motions proposed by Councillor Doughty and Councillor Williams

Resolved – That

- (1) subject to the acknowledgment of Members concerns and comments raised, the report detailing the proposed year one policy for a new local discretionary support scheme administered by the local authority from April 2013 to replace the crisis loans and community care grants currently administered by the Department for Work and Pensions be noted; and**
- (2) the Interim Director of Finance and his officers be congratulated on all their hard work.**

43 SOCIAL WELFARE REFORM - LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Director of Finance informing of the Authority requirement to establish a Local Council Tax Support Scheme, known as Council Tax Support (CTS) to replace Council Tax Benefit (CTB) from April 2013. This was a key strand of the Government's wider Welfare Reform review. The scheme also brought with it reduced funding from Central Government.

The report proposed a Local Council Tax Support Scheme to replace CTB for 2013/14 that managed the £3.2 million shortfall in Government funding which was

based upon current, and increasing, levels of CTB. There were associated costs that increase the shortfall to a maximum of £3.635 million. In addition, the change also increased the likely level of non-collection of Council Tax by up to £1 million gross / £0.85 million net, and this needed to be included within the Budget Projections for 2013 / 14.

The Council must approve a scheme no later than 31st January 2013 or the Government default scheme, requiring the shortfall to be fully funded by the Council, will be imposed. Members were asked to approve a scheme to Council.

In response to Members, Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services indicated that services would be provided from existing staff who would receive the appropriate training to deal in any matter arising. Welfare and Debt agencies would also be available to offer support and guidance.

In response to Members concerns regarding waiting times to those dialling into call centres, Mr Flanagan indicated that this was issue that the Department would be looking into, but there would be cost implications.

On a motion proposed by Councillor Doughty, seconded by Councillor Hodrien and Councillor Muspratt, Members thanked the Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services and his Department for their excellent report and work undertaken.

In response to Members, Mr Flanagan indicated that the suggestion of the introduction of a means test would make the process more difficult to manage. Mr Flanagan indicated that in relation to the definition of vulnerable groups, this could be looked at in Year 2.

Mr Flanagan responded to Members questions in relation to income regarding empty properties, in particular schemes used within other Authorities.

RESOLVED (8:1 Councillor Gilchrist voted against the Motion)

That it is recommended to Council that:

- (1) Eligible Pensioners and Vulnerable Groups (disabled, disabled child and war pensioners) be protected under the Local Council Tax Support Scheme;**
- (2) The Local Council Tax Support Scheme proposed for 2013/14 be Scheme 1 with the associated proposals that will see Working Age Claimants meet 22% of the Council Tax payable in order to meet the £3.2 million reduction in Government Grant;**
- (3) The annual increase in caseload, estimated at 1% (£300,000) per year be included with the Budget Growth Projections for 2014/15 onwards;**
- (4) The potential losses on collection of £1 million gross / £0.85 million net be incorporated within the Council Tax Base calculation and that this reduction in Council Tax Income be reflected in the Budget Projections for 2013/14, funded from the change in the Council Tax discounts; and**

- (5) Thanks are extended to those residents who participated in the Council Tax Benefit consultation, ensuring the consultation was meaningful.**

44 QUARTERLY ANALYSIS OF FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN CONTACTS

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Director of Finance providing quarterly analysis of requests received under the Freedom of Information Act and contacts made by the Local Government Ombudsman, as recommended by Cabinet at its meeting on 12 April 2012 (Minute 404 refers). Additional qualitative information was offered on service performance in responding to contacts, highlighting any exceptions.

This report was considered by Cabinet on 8 November 2012 (Minute refers) and was presented to this Committee primarily for information.

Resolved –

That the report providing quarterly analysis of requests received under the Freedom of Information Act and contacts made by the Local Government Ombudsman be noted.

45 AWARD OF TENDER FOR THE PROVISION OF MICROSOFT SOFTWARE

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Finance Director informing of the award of a contract for the provision of Microsoft software for the three years to October 2015. The contract was awarded under delegated authority to Trustmarque Ltd., who submitted the lowest priced tender. Tenders for the continued provision of the service will be invited towards the end of the contract term.

Resolved –

That the award of contract under delegated authority to Trustmarque for the provision of Microsoft software for a period of three years to October 2015 be noted

46 FORWARD PLAN

The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period November to February 2013 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.

47 **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.

Resolved –

That the Work Programme be noted.

48 **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.

49 **EXEMPT APPENDIX - AWARD OF TENDER FOR THE PROVISION OF MICROSOFT SOFTWARE**

The Committee noted the detail of the exempt appendices to Item No. 15 on the agenda – Award of Tender for the Provision of Microsoft Software (Minute No. 45 refers).
