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TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 6 November 2013

Present: Councillor S Whittingham (Chair)

Councillors RL Abbey M Johnston
P Gilchrist M Patrick
C Blakeley L Rowlands
P Glasman J Salter
R Gregson A Sykes
J Hale J Williamson

Deputies: Councillor P Brightmore (In place of C Muspratt)

In attendance Councillors A Jones A McLachlan

Apologies Councillor A Hodson

18 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.

19 MINUTES

A Member, referring to minute 13, 'ICT Strategy' commented that she had not received anything in writing from the Interim Head of ICT as yet on the security of the Wrap2 system, the Strategic Director of Transformation and Resources, assured the Committee that he would follow this up.

Resolved – That the minutes of the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee of 23 September, 2013 be approved.

BUDGET OPTIONS

The Committee received a presentation from Kevin MacCallum, Marketing and Engagement Manager, Neighbourhoods and Engagement, on the process of the Budget Options consultation. The consultation was launched on 16 September with extensive online promotion. There had been around 200 events to date with direct engagement with 20,000 Residents. To date, a total of 5,000 responses had been received, 4,000 from residents and 1,000 from members of staff.

Budget options had been developed with the focus on four principles:

- Being More Efficient
- Working Together
- Promoting Independence
- Targeting Resources

The consultation would close on 6 December, with the results being considered by Cabinet on 10 December and recommendations from the Cabinet being considered by Council on 16 December, 2013.

In response to questions from Members on the consultation process, Kevin MacCallum made the following comments:

- A fifth of the responses so far were from staff and these could be disaggregated from total responses if there was a different view between staff and residents when the results were published.
- Responses from community organisations would count as one response although they would be highlighted in the results and shown as community responses.
- Although direct engagement had taken place with 20,000 people so far only 4,000 questionnaires had been returned from the public, though this engagement was comfortably the highest level of engagement of any similar consultations in the country.
- He would be able to supply a breakdown of responses by ward to all the Committee.
- More time was spent going to particular established groups, with over 200 so far having been consulted.
- The staff working on the consultation were neighbourhood engagement staff whose role it was to spend 52 weeks of the year doing this type of work.
- This was now the third or fourth time such a consultation exercise had been undertaken and the response rate was continually improving.
- The neighbourhood engagement staff were continually being made aware and finding out of new community groups being established and these were then involved and added to the consultees.

- Staff would knock on doors and try and talk to as many people as possible particularly in hard to reach groups of residents.

Councillor Blakeley commented that the Committee had no idea of what the people of Wirral's responses were to the consultation until it had concluded and what really mattered was what the people of Wirral wanted.

Councillor Hale commented that there was no reference to consulting with Councillors in the Chief Executive's message in the consultation paper foreword. Whilst fully supporting the consultation process he expressed concern about the interpretation of responses and that many of the questions were very general.

Councillor Johnston commented that political criticism of the process undermined the consultation process which was previously started under a Conservative / Liberal Democrat administration.

Councillor Brightmore commented that the Committee was meeting to scrutinise the budget options and not to make any decisions.

The Strategic Director commented that the published officer proposals to meet budget savings were an opportunity to pre-scrutinise and discuss the options in advance of consideration by the Cabinet on 10 December with proposals to be decided by Council on 16 December.

It was moved by Councillor Blakeley and seconded by Councillor Hale that –

'The meeting stand adjourned to be reconvened on a date when the budget consultation results are known and can be considered by the Committee.'

The motion was put and lost (4:10).
(Councillors Blakeley, Hale, Rowlands and Sykes voting for the motion).

The Chair then invited the Committee to consider each of the budget options in turn and comments, questions and responses were made as follows:

1. Transforming Wirral Council

- A request was made for a table to be supplied to all the Committee Members giving details of the current number of funded trade union representatives and listing where they were seconded from (Councillor Gilchrist)
- There was a need for more details around where the 500 staff losses occur and what would this mean in terms of service delivery (Councillor Johnston)
- With regard to severance, now it was no longer in the remit of the Employment and Appointments Committee, where would the decisions

be made and what were the views of the Trades Unions on this?
(Councillor Johnston)

The Strategic Director and Head of HR and OD in response stated that they would be able to provide details of the numbers of full time TU officials. There were significant areas within the Council where there were higher costs when benchmarked against similar sized authorities and Ernst and Young, appointed as consultants to deliver details of the remodelling option. An initial report on the proposals would be available within the next two weeks which could then be discussed with Members and the TUs. A detailed structure change proposal would be available by the end of January. The views of the TUs through consultation on the severance and funding for TU representatives option would be fed back in due course.

The decisions on any proposed changes to severance packages would be recommended by the Cabinet budget meeting for a decision by Council in December.

Further comments and questions included:

- The proposed savings are over two years, how much would relate to the principle 'promoting independence'?. (Councillor Glasman)
- The Conservative Group take these options very seriously but there was a need to listen to what the public think as what really matters was what matters to the people of Wirral. He would be happy to question officers on these proposals when the people of Wirral had spoken. (Councillor Blakeley)
- A request was made for a breakdown of when the savings would take effect. (Councillor Patrick)
- The savings were quite frontloaded, how confident was the Strategic Director of achieving these and mitigating any impact on service delivery? (Councillor Brightmore)

The Strategic Director, in response, stated that this option was not about reducing service delivery to customers but rather about achieving a smoother, more efficient running of the Council with reduced resources. The impact on direct service delivery he hoped would be kept to an absolute minimum. This option would be spread over two years with discussion beginning early in the New Year with savings being realised from October 2014. As soon as any decisions were made then a full risk assessment would be taken.

The Head of HR and OD stated that there were 8,658 full time employees (non-teaching), of these 4,570 were Trades Unions members (53 %). There were currently 8 full time seconded TU representatives a ratio of 1 to 571 staff. A proposed reduction to 4 full time seconded TU representatives would give a ratio of 1 to 1,143 staff.

2. Information Technology and Telecommunications

- There had recently been some discussion on the numbers of mobile telephones issued to staff. (Councillor Gilchrist)
- Are there any estimates for these renegotiated merged contracts and was the option in respect of CCTV the same as that reported under the Regeneration and Environment directorate. (Councillor Johnston)
- Why was this even an option when renegotiation for telecommunications contracts should be taking place each year to achieve value for money. (Councillor Sykes)
- How much would the Council be saving taking broadband away from Members and asking them to pay for it themselves. (Councillor Salter)
- How was the figure for a saving of £270,000 arrived at? (Councillor Patrick)

The Strategic Director and IT Services Manager stated that a report would be taken to the Audit and Risk Management Committee on 25 November on the mobile telephones issues. There had certainly been no double counting in respect of the CCTV saving. It was not part of the budget option to reduce any IT access for Members. Tenders were sought each year for these services although the benefit of a single contract for these services was now thought appropriate to enter into at this time. Conversations were held with suppliers to gain a certain level of intelligence as to what savings could be achieved and information on those companies contacted could be shared with Members.

3. Managing the Money

- What impact would this have on the customer? (Councillor Gilchrist)
- Could the introduction of a charge for credit charge payment increase levels of debt in those least well off? (Councillor Whittingham)
- This could be a disincentive to people paying. (Councillor Brightmore)

The Head of Business Processes, in response, gave details of the current fee charges in respect of processing payment methods. Assessments were not made as to people's ability to pay by credit card, although if people were to use debit card payments the charges for an overdraft would be a lot less than the interest charges on credit cards. The introduction of a charge would hopefully move more customers into paying by direct debit which was the least costly collection method for the Council.

4. Improving Access to the Council

- 'This option will see the Council make savings through the Call Centre more efficient in the first instance', how in the first instance? (Councillor Glasman)

- Would there be a full Equality Impact Assessment undertaken to assess the impact on the vulnerable? (Councillor Brightmore)
- The option was to be welcomed as it would improve services to customers. (Councillor Johnston)
- Did it include the Floral Pavilion? (Councillor Gregson)
- Would there be direct job losses? (Councillor Patrick)
- Were the Council introducing self-assessment kiosks? (Councillor Gilchrist)

The Head of Business Processes responded that this was part of the wider transformation project improving customer access. Moving people away from access where there was a need to talk face to face or on the telephone to complete the process to where there was no need. This would initially apply to the call centre but then other customer access points would also be looked into, such as one stop shops. EIAs would be carried out on all these changes. The changes would not include the Floral Pavilion as this was a more commercially orientated operation. There would be no direct job losses although currently vacant posts within the call centre would be removed. Self-assessment branded Wirral kiosks were already in operation at certain locations.

5. Council Tax Collection

- Was the Council legally obliged to recover all non-payments, however small, when that figure could be in pence and cost more to recover? (Councillor Williamson)
- What were the court fees and had the authority benchmarked against other authorities as to their recovery fees? (Councillor Johnston)

The Head of Business Processes responded that there was no lower amount limit at which the Council did not recover non paid council tax or business rates. Internally, decisions were made as to at what point summons' for non payment were issued. Every local authority paid £3 to the court and the remaining £82 was to cover the Council's costs, the Council was not allowed to profit on these charges. Wirral's charges were believed to be in line with other Merseyside and neighbouring Cheshire authorities.

6. Council Tax Over 70s Discount

- Wirral was one of only a few Councils to provide this discount. (Councillor Gilchrist)
- Would it be possible to operate a tapered discount? (Councillor Whittingham)
- Could the responses to the consultation on this option be broken down by age? (Councillor Glasman)

The Head of Business Processes stated he was aware of only two other authorities in the country who operated an age based discount, with neither discounting as much as Wirral's current discount. A tapered discount might be possible but would clearly affect the level of savings and analysis would have to be undertaken as to whether this was possible within the computer system which currently calculated the blanket discount for 13,000 residents.

Kevin MacCallum assured the Committee that the responses to this option would be broken down by age range.

The Chair then moved, and it was seconded by Councillor Patrick, that –

'The comments and questions from Members be noted.'

It was moved as an amendment by Councillor Blakeley and seconded by Councillor Hale, that the following be added to the recommendation –

'The Committee meets again in December to discuss fully the results of the budget consultation prior to the Cabinet and Council meetings'

The amendment was put and carried (11:3)

Resolved (11:3) –

(1) That the comments and questions from Members be noted.

(2) That the Committee meets again in December to discuss fully the results of the budget consultation prior to the Cabinet and Council meetings.

The Head of Legal and Member Services then advised the Committee that this special meeting would have to be held on Monday 9 December, at a time to be agreed, as the consultation process finished on Friday 6 December, and the Cabinet would be meeting on 10 December.

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