

# TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES POLICY AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Monday, 14 April 2014

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	S Whittingham (Chair)	
	Councillors	A Hodson	C Muspratt
		P Gilchrist	M Patrick
		P Glasman	L Rowlands
		R Gregson	A Sykes
		J Hale	J Williamson
		M Johnston	
<u>Deputies:</u>	Councillors	M Sullivan (In place of RL Abbey) S Mountney (In place of C Blakeley)	
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillor	A Jones	

## 33 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.

Councillor Williamson declared a personal interest in item 4 – Local Welfare Assistance Scheme 2014/15 and Future Support Options (see minute 36 post) by virtue of her employment.

## 34 MINUTES

Members were requested to receive the minutes of the meeting of the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee meeting held on 29 January, 2014.

The Chair referred to minute 30, 'Transformation and Resources Financial Monitoring 2013/14 (Month 8)' and requested that the minute resolution be amended so as to read,

'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.'

**Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of 29 January, 2014 be approved subject to the amendment referred to above.**

## 35 **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION SCRUTINY REVIEW**

Councillor Sykes introduced a report on the findings and recommendations of the Freedom of Information Scrutiny Review which had been undertaken by three members of the Committee, Councillors Christina Muspratt, Adam Sykes and Stuart Whittingham.

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 provided public access to information held by public authorities. Public authorities were obliged to publish certain information about their activities and members of the public were entitled to request information from them.

In January 2013, Wirral Council was subject to a three month period of monitoring action by the Information Commissioner's Office due to the timeliness of responding to Freedom of Information (Fol) requests. On 14 November 2013, the Information Commissioner's Office notified the Council that it was satisfied performance had improved, resulting in no further monitoring action being taken. The Review Panel acknowledged and commended the Council in ensuring that response times for Fol requests were now over the 85% threshold required by the Information Commissioner.

The Review Panel's report provided a number of recommendations which they believed should assist the Council in managing its requirements to meet the Freedom of Information Act and also to become a more open and transparent Council.

The report contained 8 recommendations which the Committee were requested to consider.

Councillor Sykes thanked the officers involved in producing the report, Jane Corrin, Surjit Tour and Mike Lester.

The Chair echoed the thanks to officers and also thanked the other two Members involved in the Scrutiny Review.

A Member queried what could be done with the search facility on the internet which could help to reduce the number of Fol requests if information was more easily accessed on the internet.

The Strategic Director responded that anything to improve the 'search' facility across the internet would be looked at and the Council was shortly to embark on changes to internet accessibility. This could be picked up by the Committee in the new municipal year.

He also welcomed the positive approach taken by the scrutiny review. It was important to note the number of requests received was around the average for comparable local authorities and that response times had improved significantly. The aim would be to provide consistency in terms of response times. The more information that the Council could provide upfront then the hope would be to reduce the number of FoI requests. He welcomed the report and was happy to accept all the recommendations.

**Resolved –**

**(1) That the contents of the report be noted and the eight recommendations contained therein, be endorsed.**

**(2) That the Freedom of Information Scrutiny Review be referred to Cabinet.**

36 **LOCAL WELFARE ASSISTANCE SCHEME 2014/15 AND FUTURE SUPPORT OPTIONS**

The Head of Business Processes presented a report on the Local Welfare Assistance (LWA) Scheme for 2014/15 and future support options. Cabinet had approved the updating of Wirral's local discretionary support scheme "Local Welfare Assistance" introduced in April 2013 on 13 March 2014 (minute 164 refers). Wirral's scheme was approved by Cabinet on 24 January 2013 and a small number of specific scheme amendments for 2014/15 were made.

This specific grant funding was only available for 2014/15 and would not be available thereafter. An authority had no statutory requirement to have a scheme and could locally specify its own scheme. The Committee were asked to consider if they wished to propose options for the future given the short term period now available with this grant.

In response to questions from Members the Head of Business Processes made the following comments:

- It would be a matter for Members what assistance could be offered to try and mitigate for the fact that the scheme would not be available from 2015/16 onwards.
- Any future scheme would have to be funded directly by the authority, other systems of support could be made such as working with foodbanks and local credit unions.

- More staff had been taken on to help with the administering of the scheme, with an administrative grant of £230,000 but this would disappear from 2015/16.
- The authority would have to decide in the 2015/16 year how much, if any they should set aside out of the general grant settlement to continue funding the scheme. The Local Government Association had been pressing the DWP to maintain in some form this extra resource for authorities.
- It was possible to apply for more than one award, such as furniture and white goods, the majority of applications were for food and utilities, but claimants were only allowed one from each element within a two year period.
- With regard to loan sharks, this was more of a long term issue, whereas LWA was only a one off payment. Applications could be made online but applicants did have to appear in person to receive a payment. Immediate advice could be given in respect of loan sharks and more detailed advice was available from other agencies, such as the CAB.
- With the grant funding of £1,345,925 per annum for the years 2013/14 and 2014/15 there would be a probable spend of approximately £800,000 in 2014/15. The surplus balance could be put in for future years, if the authority decided to do so.
- Family composition was taken into account when deciding upon whether awards were made or not.
- Weekly payments were currently averaging £24,000 a week as at February, 2014 having risen from £4,500 in April, 2013 when the scheme was introduced.
- He gave details of the support available for one stop shop staff who were dealing face to face with customers experiencing financial hardship or who had been refused an LWA award.
- The average payment made was approximately £60 excluding payments for 'white goods' but he would circulate these figures, payments made for 'white goods' and the average payment.
- He would also supply the figure for appeals and those which had been successful.
- The card system which was used for payments was explained and those which had been used incorrectly could be blocked.
- The DWP hardship payments scheme was also explained to applicants for LWA but it was up to the individuals whether they applied or not.

The Head of Business Processes further stated that he would be happy to respond to any specific questions from Members, whether immediately after the meeting or by email.

A Member suggested that with £561,913 having been spent by the end of February, 2014 there would be £2.1m left which should be enough to have a scheme in place beyond 2014/15 for the 2015/16 year.

On a motion by the Chair, seconded by Councillor Williamson, with two additional recommendations by Councillor Johnston, seconded by Councillors Mountney and Gilchrist, it was –

**Resolved –**

- (1) That this Committee sets up a Task and Finish Group to examine future options for the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme as a potential piece of work in the new municipal year recognising that the timing of this is critical.**
- (2) That this Committee recommends to Cabinet the establishment of a reserve to include the unspent grant funding so the Authority could review spending on welfare assistance and that it would be disheartened to see this unspent funding subsumed into general reserves rather than go towards extending the lifetime of the LWA scheme.**
- (3) That the Chief Executive be asked to write to the appropriate Government Minister and request that the Government rethink its position on this grant funding for 2015/16 and beyond.**

**37 LOCAL AUDIT AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT 2014**

The Head of Legal and Member Services presented a report which provided a summary of the key provisions of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (“the Act”) and explained the impact on Wirral Council, specifically in relation to the appointment of a local auditor (external auditor) and the establishment of an independent audit panel to advise the Council on the appointment of a local auditor.

The report had been considered by the Audit and Risk Management Committee on 18 March 2014 (minute 60 refers).

The Act had abolished the Audit Commission and established new arrangements for the audit and accountability of local public bodies in England. It amended the legislative framework for council tax referendums and provided measures to ensure local authority compliance with the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity. Section 39 of the Act gave the Secretary of State power to direct a local authority to comply with the Code of Practice and had come into force on 30 March 2014.

The Act also introduced greater transparency and openness to meetings of local government bodies by allowing local residents to film, blog, tweet and access information related to the decisions made in those meetings. Section 40 of the Act gave the power to the Secretary of State to make Regulations allowing persons to film, photograph or make sound recordings of

proceedings. The power to make Regulations had also come into force on 30 March 2014.

He confirmed that this did not affect those reports restricted under the exempt information rules.

**Resolved – That the report and appendix 1 concerning the changes being introduced by the Audit and Accountability Act 2014 and its implications, be noted.**

## 38 DIRECTORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Strategic Director of Transformation and Resources presented a report which outlined the current performance of the Department (as at 31 January 2014) 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 five items which had been 'red' rated for non-compliance against the specified target. The five measures rated red were:

- Percentage of adult care packages supported by Direct Debit
- Percentage recovery of personal finance unit charges
- Percentage recovery of personal finance unit charges (historic charges)
- Percentage of personal finance unit assessments completed within timescale
- Replacement of Windows XP and Windows 7

Responding to comments from Members the Head of Business Processes explained the use of direct debit, which, if it were to offer a discount would disadvantage those who were unable to pay by direct debit for care packages. He acknowledged that the percentage return on the collection of current debts would always be higher with historic debts being much harder to collect and some targets were therefore overly optimistic.

He went on to outline the work of the Council's bailiffs, who were based on Wirral and that they had to abide by a policy and guidelines set locally and nationally. Complaints were closely monitored and it was intended to bring the policy back for revision if necessary during the next municipal year when the current bailiff's contract was due to end.

The Strategic Director also responded to comments regarding the Future Council work and stated that indicators rolling into the Future Council programme would not be pushed into the background.

The Strategic IT Advisor gave an update on indicator DP 13 and the replacement of Windows XP with Windows 7. Although Microsoft had ceased supporting XP on 8 April, 2014 a further year's support was now in place following a Government intervention to provide this for organisations. Plans were now well developed with 450 computers arriving this week. An external company would be engaged to roll out the new equipment.

Responding to questions from Members the Strategic IT Advisor made a number of comments which included:

- The exact number of PCs to be rolled out had not yet been determined as one part of the Future Council agenda was to determine the shape and size of the Council.
- The budget which had previously been set aside for the IT upgrade was £2.5m with approximately 90 per cent of PCs to be replaced.
- A pilot replacement would be undertaken across five different Council areas at the end of June and following an assessment of this it was intended to roll out approximately up to 400 a week.
- It had been decided to replace with Windows 7 rather than Windows 8 as a lot of the Council's mainstream systems were not compatible with Windows 8.
- An indication of the numbers of PCs required had been given to the supplier although they would be bought in phases through a framework agreement.

The Strategic Director also elaborated on some of the responses and stated that Policy and Performance Committees would start considering the Future Council programme in July at which point the Head of ICT would have more answers on the IT upgrade. Existing revenue resources and also a capital budget had previously been set aside. The investment in IT would take cognisance of all the work on shared services and the authority was still readily engaged with Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East Councils.

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

## 39 **FINANCIAL MONITORING 2013/14 MONTH 10 (JANUARY 2014)**

The Director of Resources presented the financial monitoring report for Month 10 (January 2014) 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 £420,000 in respect of the revenue budget.

In response to comments from Members the Head of Business Processes reported upon the issuing of summons for non payment of Council Tax, the Council now imposed a charge for court costs at £95. He agreed to provide a breakdown in writing of figures for collection of Council Tax outstanding from 5, 4 and 3 years ago and of what had been spent on collection of debts.

In respect of the Council Tax Discretionary Relief Policy with a budget of £50,000 no awards had been made to date, the policy was for grants to be made in exceptional circumstances. He also outlined how the Council Tax Support worked for those now having to pay a minimum of 22 per cent of the annual charge. Staff resources had been extended with temporary staff in revenues and benefits and he would expect an improvement in the time taken to process benefits.

**Resolved – That this Committee notes the report.**

40 **POLICY UPDATE**

The Chair informed the Committee that a policy update had not been provided at this meeting because of staffing resources.

41 **WORK PROGRAMME**

Further to minute 32 (29 January 2014), 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

**Resolved – That the Transformation and Resources Policy and Performance Committee work programme, set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.**

42 **VOTE OF THANKS**

Members thanked the Chair for his work in chairing the Committee over the past municipal year. The Chair thanked all the officers who had supported the Committee in its work.