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## COMMUNITY AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 8 April 2009

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	C Meaden (Chair)	
	Councillors	A Pritchard S Quinn W Smith	P Gilchrist P Hayes
<u>Deputies</u>	Councillor	I Lewis (in place of C Povall)	
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillor	S Kelly	

### 33 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

The members of the Committee were asked to consider whether they had a personal or prejudicial interest in connection with any item on the agenda and, if so, to declare it and to state the nature of such interest. They were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

Councillor A Pritchard declared a prejudicial interest in respect of minute 39 (Local Housing Allowance) by virtue of him being a private landlord.

Councillors Hayes and Lewis declared personal interests in respect of minute 39 (Local Housing Allowance) by virtue of their membership of the local Conservative Party organisation which was in receipt of monies as a landlord.

### 34 MINUTES

In respect of minute 29, Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Services, informed the meeting that he would be happy to report to a future Overview and Scrutiny Committee on developments in all One-Stop Shops.

In respect of minute 30, Tracey Smith, Senior Community Engagement Officer, apologised to the Committee that with the departure of the Head of Policy, two departmental equality groups had not been invited to the meeting as originally intended.

**Resolved - The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 4 February, 2009, be received as a correct record.**

## 35 **YOU DECIDE - EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Services presented a report which had been considered by Cabinet on 19 March, 2009, reviewing the pilot of the 'You Decide' scheme.

The 'You Decide' process involved the allocation of funds via a form of participatory budgeting. The pilots had taken place across all the area forums. Findings indicated that this process benefited the community by enabling additional services to be delivered in local communities, by involving residents in decision making and by enabling residents to have a greater understanding of the costs of services and associated choices. It had also provided departments with an additional intelligence source to help understand local needs and deliver services accordingly.

Council on 2 March, 2009 had agreed for the funding to be maintained at £260,000 which was £20,000 per Area Forum with the continuation of an additional £20,000 each for the Youth Parliament and the Older People's Parliament.

Responding to Members' comments Tracey Smith informed the meeting that the Area Forum Chairs' Group would be involved in discussions on the services for sale on the new questionnaire for 2009/10 allocation of 'You Decide'. Consultation would take place from May to August, 2009 with a report going to Cabinet in September. There would be feedback to the community to ensure residents were aware of the additional services provided as a result of 'You Decide'.

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

## 36 **COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT 2008 - BENEFITS SERVICE**

The Director of Finance presented a report which outlined the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) review process for the Benefits Service for 2008. The Benefits Service had been assessed as 'Excellent' with a score of 4. This was the final CPA report as significant changes were made to the inspection process from April 2008 transferring responsibility from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate to the Audit Commission including the introduction of Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE). This was reputed to be a much 'harder test' and distinctly different in terms of inspection focus, the Audit Commission had already highlighted the degree of change and likely impact this change was likely to have on inspection outcomes.

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

## 37 **FINANCE DEPARTMENT PLAN 2009/10**

The Director of Finance submitted the Finance Department Plan for 2009/10 which set out how the Finance Department would contribute to the overall delivery of Council aims and priorities in the context of the Corporate Plan.

The report set out the strategic direction of the Finance Department and provided the links to the Corporate Plan and other critical plans, identifying the targets, indicators and significant projects which would determine the demands upon resources.

Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Services, responded to comments from Members on a variety of issues in the plan, including performance indicators, savings targets and risk management.

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

### 38 **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (FOI) REQUESTS**

The Director of Finance presented a report which detailed the processing and the nature of Freedom of Information requests received by the Council.

The number of requests had increased over the last 4 years from 135 in 2005 to 538 in 2008 and as at 7 April, 2009 there had been 373. Requests reflected both topical and specific issues for the Borough in which local people were interested such as the Strategic Asset Review, salaries of senior staff, Councillors' expenses and Tranmere Rovers Football Club Sponsorship; and more global issues such as safeguarding children, assaults in schools and lists of empty properties.

There was scope within the legislation to refuse information to requestors as long as there was a legal exemption to do so. There was additional scope within the legislation to refuse requestors who became repeated or vexatious; Wirral had issued a refusal notice to two requestors since the legislation came into force.

Responding to Members' comments, Jane Corrin, Information Manager, explained what vexatious requests there had been and the circumstances in which the Corporate Marketing Team were given advance notice of FOI requests.

Members suggested that it would be useful to have a breakdown of requests and this could be monitored by the appropriate future overview and scrutiny committee.

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

### 39 **LOCAL HOUSING ALLOWANCE**

(Councillor Pritchard, having previously declared a prejudicial interest, left the meeting and took no part in the discussion regarding this matter.)

The Director of Finance presented a report updating the Committee on the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) which had commenced nationally on 1 April 2008. The scheme was being successfully administered at Wirral and had confirmed the view of practitioners nationally that, contrary to the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) initial view, the scheme was more complex to administer than originally anticipated.

Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Services, responded to comments from Members on the operation of LHA on Wirral.

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

**ANY OTHER URGENT BUSINESS APPROVED BY THE CHAIR**

Responding to a comment from Councillor Pritchard, Malcolm Flanagan, Head of Benefits, Revenues and Customer Services, said that he would take up the issue of answer phones for Councillors with IT services.

As it was the last meeting of the municipal year the Chair thanked all the Members and officers for their contributions and work over the past year.