

Support Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Monday 1 October 2012

PRESENT:

Councillor Murphy, in the Chair.

Councillor Bowyer, Vice Chair.

Councillors Aspinall (substitute for Councillor Casey), Churchill, Fox (substitute for Councillor Parker), Gordon, James, Michael Leaves (substitute for Councillor Martin Leaves), Rennie, Stark and Stevens.

Apologies for absence: Councillors Casey, Martin Leaves and Parker.

Also in attendance: Councillor Lowry, Cabinet Member for Finance, Malcolm Coe, Assistant Director for Finance, Efficiencies, Technology and Assets, Ann Thorp, Service Manager, Alex Hurth, Carbon Manager, Karen Brindley, Head of Human Resources (Corporate and Community), Simon Arthurs, Lead Officer and Ross Johnston, Democratic Support Officer.

The meeting started at 3.30 pm and finished at 5.35 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the committee will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

25. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest in accordance with the code of conduct.

26. **MINUTES**

Members were informed that the reporting mechanism for Finance and Performance information was being reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board at its next meeting.

Agreed the minutes of the meeting held on the 6 August 2012.

27. **CHAIR'S URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no items of Chair's urgent business.

28. **TRACKING RESOLUTIONS AND FEEDBACK FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The panel received the tracking resolution document and members commented that they were disappointed and concerned that the information requested on temporary staff employee sickness figures and the make-up of the Capital Programme Board had not been provided and that officers from these departments should be in attendance to explain why this information had not been provided.

The panel was informed that –

- (a) the temporary staff employee sickness figures would be provided by email the following day;
- (b) the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board would raise the issue of panels not receiving information requested from officers at its next meeting.

Agreed that the Assistant Director for Human Resources and Organisational Development be requested to attend the panel meeting to provide an explanation as to why the information on temporary staff employee sickness was not provided.

29. **UPDATE ON GOVERNMENT POLICY CHANGES**

There were no government policy updates provided but it was commented by members that –

- (a) there had recently been a number of changes in legislation which would have an impact on the Democracy and Governance section of the Corporate Services Directorate, a department the Support Services Overview and Scrutiny panel was responsible for;
- (b) the Localism Act had been implemented some time ago and an update on this should have been provided.

Agreed that -

- (1) an update would be provided to the panel at the next meeting on the impact of the Localism Act and how this has affected the provision of services across the council;
- (2) an update would be provided to the panel at the next meeting on the impact of The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

30. **REVENUES AND BENEFITS, CUSTOMER SERVICES AND TRANSACTION CENTRE REVIEW**

Councillor Lowry, Cabinet Member for Finance, Malcolm Coe, Assistant Director for Finance, Efficiencies, Technology and Assets, and Ann Thorp, Service Manager provided the panel with an update reviewing the Revenues and Benefits, Customer Services and Transaction Centre.

The panel was informed that –

- (a) this report was in response to the recommendations agreed at the

Support Services Task and Finish Group in February 2012 which reviewed the impact of the restructure in Revenues and Benefits, Customer Services and the Transaction Centre (previously incomes and creditors);

- (b) the Revenues and Benefits service over the past 12 months had been through huge change including a restructure, with the aim of saving £1m, and a major increase in service demands;
- (c) recent CIPFA 2012 benchmarking information showed that the service was now one of the most cost efficient authorities. Performance had also improved with the time taken to process new claims reduced from 30 to 23 days (which is now on a par with council average);
- (d) the service acknowledged that there was still work to do in further reducing processing times, although it was strongly felt that the service was heading in the right direction;
- (e) the restructure, since its implementation in November 2011, had been successful, although there were still many changes still to be implemented, many of which were suggested improvements from staff.

In response to members questions it was reported that –

- (f) the interim staff survey had not been completed, however, the management were heavily engaged in staff relations throughout the service by way of measures including hot-desking and formal staff consultations;
- (g) in attempting to enable a single and central customer service location the service had been engaged with libraries and were exploring many customer access points;
- (h) the Strategic Manager role, identified in recommendation 10, was due to be re-evaluated along with all other manager posts within the FETA departments and it was hoped that if this post was demonstrated to have been under-valued then the pay scale would be backdated;
- (i) in order to deal with the impending changes to Welfare Reform the department were currently consulting the public on Council Tax Support and working with voluntary organisations to raise awareness of this issue. Internally, the department had been improving staff training, providing updates and guidance on welfare reform, communicating with staff on and investing in new technologies;
- (j) online transactions were an important tool for the department, however, it was acknowledged that there needed to be viable

alternatives for transactions to assist those customers who were not IT literate;

- (k) the impact on the service during school holidays had been reduced by spreading term-time workers across many different teams;
- (l) Cabinet were going to receive a monthly update on the Revenues and Benefits Service and if the panel felt that it would assist this information could be shared;
- (m) the service had to deal with a significant increase in benefit applications but now operated with a nil backlog system on new applications, compared to the 2600 backlog cases when the restructure was implemented;
- (n) processing times for changes in circumstances have been affected by an issue with downloading ATLAS files from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), this was currently operating as a backlog but was being cleared as a priority;
- (o) there was now a clear distinction between Grade D and Grade E posts;
- (p) the service was confident about recovering overpayments and now worked out of hours to assist customers in making payments and offering advice;
- (q) uncollected debt was sometimes written off but the service had clear policies and procedures for dealing with this issue. In recent years the Council had been very successful in recovering Council Tax and NNDR debts.

Members commented that it was concerning that recommendations from a scrutiny panel or task and finish group were not being actioned as necessary, and that officers, if they could not action recommendations, should inform the panel or the Chair of the panel as to the reasons why.

Agreed that –

- (1) the results of the interim staff survey will be submitted to the panel at its next meeting on 19 November 2012;
- (2) Dave Saunders would email all panel members an update of work undertaken on enabling a single and central customer services location;
- (3) Malcolm Coe, would email all panel members an analysis on the make-up of the service structure including numbers of term-time workers, with percentages against the full-time employed service;

- (4) the monthly Revenues and Benefits update report, submitted to Cabinet, would be included on the agenda for all Support Services Overview and Scrutiny panel meetings;
- (5) Malcolm Coe, would email all panel members a full analysis on overpayments made by the council, including figures on how much is written off. In addition the figure of 98 per cent collection of Council Tax is to be provided as a monetary figure.

31. **CARBON MANAGEMENT UPDATE**

Councillor Lowry, Cabinet Member for Finance, and Alex Hurth, Carbon Manager, provided the panel with an update on Carbon Management.

The panel was informed that –

- (a) the Council had produced a Carbon Management Plan, annexed to the Asset Management Plan, which aimed to increase the use of renewable technologies and reduce the impact on increasing energy costs; the Council had a 20 per cent increase on its energy costs over the past 18 months;
- (b) the Council and schools were charged approximately 12 pounds per tonne of CO₂ it produced which was estimated to cost £250k for 2011 – 2012;
- (c) Plymouth had been successful in reducing carbon emissions and compared favourably in a published CRC Performance League Table, which showed which organisations were effectively reducing carbon emissions;
- (d) there was still a lot of work for the Council to do to further reduce carbon emissions and it was focussing on achieving these reductions through –
 - invest to save projects, such as improving school boilers, reducing council properties and reducing energy consumption as part of the Accommodation Strategy;
 - improved energy management by using electronic invoicing which was paperless and more efficient and installing smart meters which accurately report on the energy consumed in council properties;
 - improved awareness, educating school children and staff to reduce carbon footprints and ensuring council department's business plans commit to sustainability;
- (e) the Council had reduced CO₂ by 9.1 per cent since 2010, which was

currently 1.1 per cent up on its projection of 4 per cent per year;

- (f) at present a programme of plans and projects on carbon management and green energy was being worked on; this would be submitted to Cabinet in the near future.

In response to members questions it was reported that –

- (g) the Council aimed to take advantage of currently low interest rates on borrowing money to purchase and incorporate green energy improvements within its buildings with which the savings generated would then pay for the borrowing in the long term;
- (h) the Council's measuring standard ISO14064 was an internationally recognised measuring standard and showed that the Council was ahead of most other local authorities on carbon reductions;
- (i) the Council offered on an ad-hoc basis energy and carbon management advice to schools, including academies, at no cost, although this would be reviewed in the 'services for schools' work which was currently being undertaken;
- (j) the Council reduced its air travel spend from £111k in 2009/10 to £36k in 2010/11;
- (k) the Energy from Waste plant, being constructed in the Dockyard, was estimated to reduce the city's carbon emissions by approximately 70 thousand tonnes, due to transport and methane gases from landfill being significantly reduced;
- (l) approximately 90 per cent of the Council House's and Civic Centre lighting was provided by energy efficient light bulbs;
- (m) there was the potential to improve carbon reductions through increased use of public transport and reducing traffic congestions and pollution.

Agreed that –

- (1) Alex Hurth, would email all members of the panel with a breakdown of the air travel spend of £111k in 2009/10 and the £36k in 2010/11;
- (2) Alex Hurth, would email all members of the panel with a report on how the Council aims to work with other organisations, responsible for highways and transport management, to reduce traffic congestion;
- (3) the Support Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel receive a further update on carbon management following the Cabinet receiving a report on the Council's plans and projects on carbon management and green energy.

32. **HR UPDATE - TEMPORARY STAFF EMPLOYEE SICKNESS UPDATE**

In response to the agreed resolution in minute 28, Karen Brindly, Head of Human Resources (Corporate and Community) attended the meeting to update the panel on the reasons as to why the temporary staff employee sickness information had not been provided.

The panel was informed that –

- (a) the information had recently been provided by Pertemps, the company who provided temporary agency staff to the Council, and the Assistant Director for Human Resources and Organisational Development was analysing the data before sending it out to members the day following this meeting;
- (b) the Council was working closely with Pertemps to tighten up on the reporting of temporary staff sickness data.

Agreed that the information requested would be emailed to all panel members the day following this meeting.

33. **CIVIC CENTRE REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

The panel received a report on the Civic Centre Development Project which was presented by Councillor Lowry, Cabinet Member for Finance.

The panel were informed that –

- (a) a new timetable for the Civic Centre Redevelopment Project had been prepared, which set a revised contract award date for June 2013;
- (b) a recently held ‘bidder’s day’ had been very successful with 22 separate companies attending;
- (c) Pre-Qualification Questionnaires (PQQ) had been issued to interested parties and it was hoped that following submission of the PQQs the four highest scoring submissions would be invited to participate in the detailed tendering exercise;
- (d) it was hoped that as part of the redevelopment the Civic Centre car park would be released for construction so that it further added to the city’s landscape. The car park would not be used as a pay and display car park by developers.

In response to members questions it was reported that –

- (e) in order to relocate staff appropriately following the sale of the Civic Centre, the Council were working towards finding a solution that

would see staff from Ballard House, on a lease until 2014, and staff from the Civic Centre be relocated at the same time, preferably into a current Council property; this was an area that scrutiny could assist in the future;

- (f) the Council were aiming to lease back some of the thirteen floors in the Civic Centre from the eventual successful bidder;
- (g) the Council House was not part of the Civic Centre sale and as such would remain as freehold owned by the Council and would not be part of the procurement exercise;
- (h) the previous administration in 2007 sought legal advice on the decision to Grade two list the Council House by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Agreed that, if possible, the legal advice provided on the listed status of the Council House in 2007 is provided to the panel.

34. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Panel received its draft work programme for 2011-2012 and recommended to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board that -

- (1) Freedom of Information Targets is added to the work programme for 19 November 2012;
- (2) Revenue and Benefits monthly position statement is added to the work programme for every meeting.

It was agreed that –

- (3) School Academy Transfer update is provided at the next meeting;
- (4) Membership for the Shared Services Task and Finish Group, subject to the PID being approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, is Councillors Murphy, Ian Bowyer, James and one more Labour member.

35. **EXEMPT BUSINESS**

There were no items of exempt business.