

OPEN

FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

4th DECEMBER 2014

PRESENT:-

Conservative Group

Councillor Mrs Watson (Chairman) Councillors Jones (Vice Chairman), together with Councillors Mrs Hall, Murray, Stanton, Wheeler and Watson

Labour Group

Councillors Bell, Rhind, Richards. Southerd, Taylor and Wilkins

In Attendance

Councillors Mrs Plenderleith, Atkin and Harrison

FM/65 **APOLOGIES**

The Committee was informed that Councillor Hewlett and Councillor Smith had given their apologies. Councillors Stanton and Mrs Hall substituted for them.

FM/66 **DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

The Committee was informed that no declarations of Interest had been received from elected members of the Committee.

FM/67 **MINUTES**

The Open minutes of the meetings held on the 25th September and the 16th October were approved as a true record.

FM/68 **QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO.10**

The Committee was informed that no questions had been received from the public.

FM/69 **QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE NO.11**

The Committee was informed that no questions had been received from elected members of the Council.

FM/70 **REPORTS OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Committee heard about the progress made by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) on its investigation into customer services and that a report would be submitted to the next meeting of the OSC.

Members welcomed the progress that had been made in the investigation.

FM/71 **CORPORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

This report set out the progress which had been made against the Corporate Plan targets during the period 1st July to 30th September 2014 under the 'Value for Money' theme. Members were told that all targets for relevant projects and performance measures had been achieved, apart from one relating to Customer Access. The Committee was reminded that a review was underway to look at the viability of transferring some customer contact work from Planning Services to Customer Services. It was made clear that although the timetable for completing this review had slipped, this had not caused any significant problems.

Members were informed that overall performance on sickness absence levels had improved, but that the figures had been skewed by an increase in the number of employees absent due to long term sickness; from 7 to 9. These 9 absent employees, it was pointed out, accounted for 171 of the 262 days lost through sickness in September.

The Committee was told of the action that had been taken to address the problem. There were indications that the number of days lost due to illness was coming down and this should be reflected in the performance figures for the next quarter.

Members discussed the report. What emerged from this discussion was that there was no specific pattern for illnesses, especially among staff who were off for short periods of time. It was also made clear that the issue of 'trigger points' – or in other words the length of time after which point sickness absences could be investigated further – was being discussed with the trade unions. Finally, the Committee was told that a new Health & Safety Officer had been appointed, who was expected to start work before Christmas. Members welcomed this appointment and made it clear that they thought it important the authority have its own, on-site, health & safety expertise.

Resolved:-

To note and approve the progress towards achieving Corporate Plan performance targets.

FM/72 **BUDGET AND FINANCIAL MONITORING**

Members then considered the Budget & Financial Monitoring Report, which explained how Council had performed against its budgets during the first half of the 2014/15 financial year. The Committee heard that there was expected to be an budget surplus of about £147,000 and an estimated decrease in net expenditure of £476,000.

The Committee was told that since its last meeting, Derby City Council had agreed to participate in the Derbyshire Business Rates 'Pool' arrangement and to act as the 'accountable body' for its administration. Members welcomed this development.

The report also explained that the Council had now repaid a significant market loan. This would save the authority interest payments of approximately £828,000.

Members were reminded that they had agreed in September to revise the Council's lending policy and counterparty list, following on from changes in the rules regulating the banking sector and the potential impact of depositor 'bail-ins.' It was explained that it had already been necessary to update this list.

Members welcomed the report. They thanked the officers for their work in helping to ensure that the Council was in a robust financial position.

Resolved:-

To approve the first half-year budget and financial monitoring figures for 2014/15

FM/73 **COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS**

The Committee received a report explaining that the authority had received 30 compliments and 37 complaints between 1st April and 30th September 2014. In addition, it had also received 324 Freedom of Information requests over the same period. This was an increase of 88 information requests compared to the previous year.

Some specific questions were asked about complaints relating to the Woodville ward. The Director of Finance & Corporate Services agreed to investigate these.

Members asked about the increase in the number of complaints relating to housing and customer services. Many of these complaints, it was explained, were about waiting times and how benefit claims had been handled.

Finally, the Committee heard that there were strict guidelines in place, prescribing the limited circumstances when public bodies can make charges for responding to Freedom of Information requests.

To note the complaints and freedom of information requests received by the authority during the first half of 2014-15.

FM/74 **CORPORATE SERVICES CONTRACT AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2013/14**

Members then considered this report, which contained information on the Contract and wider partnership between the Council and Northgate Property Services (NPS). Under this Contract, NPS were required to achieve certain objectives. Their progress was monitored through a set of key performance indicators (KPI's). The report also explained that a sanctions framework exists, which could be imposed if the targets were not successfully achieved.

In this context, the report reminded members that there had been delays in processing housing benefits claims, which had been reported to the Committee at a previous meeting. It was recognised that the volume of work had increased because of nationally determined changes to the benefit system. However, it was also pointed out that a significant amount of public funds had been passed to the company to help them meet these challenges. The report explained that, taken together, there had been a total of 12 separate failures across Housing Benefits and other Customer Services during 2013/14. Discussions with the company had taken place to decide best to address these failings. Changes had been introduced and the time required for processing Housing Benefit applications was now falling. But it was not yet certain whether this improvement would be sustained over a longer period.

Concern was raised about how the backlog of benefit applications would be dealt with and the need to ensure that claimants continue to receive an appropriate level of service from the company when their applications are processed.

Members were also informed about performance on other aspects of the Contract. It was pointed out that they were still below target in terms of procurement savings. The Council had seconded an officer to assist NPS with this.

Similarly, it was pointed out that the Contract placed an obligation on the company to bring in a hundred jobs into South Derbyshire. It was explained that some progress had been on this and that plans were in place to bring extra posts into the service centre. These staff would carry out work for a range of authorities and not just South Derbyshire.

The Committee discussed the report. One of the points which emerged during this discussion was that there had been a very large increase in the number of phone enquiries dealt with. Members were concerned that many people may have to call multiple times and that sometimes they had to wait for unacceptably long periods before their calls were answered. Members gave examples of their own experience in this respect.

There was a general consensus that progress must be made to improve the amount of time taken to process housing benefit claims and to ensure that the Contract objectives were achieved. It was agreed that a further report be brought to the Committee in January 2015 on this, specifying what action had or was planned to be taken.

Resolved:-

The Contract and Strategic Partnership Annual Report for 2013/14 be approved.

FM/75 **PROPOSED CAPITAL INVESTMENT AND EVALUATION OF BIDS**

Members were reminded that the Committee had previously discussed the way in which the Council could use capital funding to provide one-off support to pay for improvements in local communities.

In this context, the report recommended that £300k be allocated for this support. It also set out the practical arrangements that would have to be put into place for these allocations to be made. In particular, it recommended that the Service and Financial Planning Working Group now be convened in order to consider relevant bids in line with the approved evaluation criteria.

The Committee agreed to this proposal and appointed Councillors Watson, Harrison, Wheeler, Southerd and Taylor to serve on the Finance Planning Working Group. Given the tightness of the proposed timetable, it was also agreed that bids be encouraged from community and other groups as soon as possible for the Group to consider

Resolved:-

That an initial sum of £300,000 is set-aside from the General Reserve Fund Reserve to fund new capital investment on a one-off basis.

That the Service and Financial Planning Working Group be convened to consider relevant bids in with the approved evaluation criteria as set out in the report.

That Councillors Watson, Harrison, Wheeler, Southerd and Taylor serve on the group.

That the exercise be completed during the forthcoming budget round, with recommendations for funding reported back to the Committee at its meeting on the 19th February 2015

FM/76 **LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2015/16**

The Committee was asked to decide if it wished to retain the Local Council Tax Support Scheme during 2015/16. It was felt that the scheme had worked well and ought to be retained.

Resolved:-

That the current Local Council Tax Support Scheme be retained for the 2-15/16 financial year.

FM/77 **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN**

The Committee was asked to approve the updated Housing Revenue Account Business Plan, which had been developed by a members and tenants sub group. The plan had been discussed and approved by the Housing and Community Services Committee. Members were informed that under the plan an additional 110 new build and acquisition properties could be afforded within the next five years, in addition to the 50 properties which had been agreed.

The Committee welcomed the Business Plan and especially the provision of additional affordable properties.

Resolved:

To approve the updated Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

FM/78 **COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered its revised work programme for the year.

Resolved:-

To approve the updated work programme

FM/79 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Resolved:-

That, in accordance with Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the press and public be excluded from the remainder of the Meeting as it was likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that there would be disclosed exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of the Schedule 12A of the Act indicated in brackets after each item.

FM/80 **EXEMPT QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL PURSUANT TO COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE No 11**

The Committee was informed that no questions had been received.

FM/81 **TO RECEIVE THE EXEMPT MINUTES**

The Exempt minutes of the meetings held on the 25th September and the 16th October were approved as a true record.

FM/82 **MELBOURNE PUBLIC CONVENIENCES**

The Committee was asked to approve the sale of the public conveniences on Market Place Melbourne.

Resolved:-

That the recommendations be agreed

FM/83 **LAND AT SWADLINCOTE**

The Committee considered a report on a request by a resident to purchase part of the Council's open space to provide off street parking Following discussion, members agreed to follow officer advice and to reject the request.

Councillor Wilkins voted in favour of approving the request.

Resolved:

That the recommendation to reject the request be agreed.

CLLR ANN WATSON

CHAIRMAN OF THE MEETING

The meeting terminated at 7.35pm