

## **CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

Thursday 3 January, 2013 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

<b>Panel Members Present</b>	Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair) Councillor M. Flower Councillor G. Illmann-Walker Councillor J. Rochelle Councillor D. Shires Councillor R. Worrall
<b>Portfolio Holders Present</b>	Councillor Mohammed Arif - Business Support Services Councillor Chris Towe - Finance and Personnel
<b>Officers Present</b>	Rory Borealis - Executive Director (Resources) Jennifer Collier – Senior Accountancy Officer Tracey Evans – Lead Accountant Lyn Hall – Head of Benefits

### **176/13 APOLOGIES**

An apology was received from Councillor D. Turner.

### **177/13 SUBSTITUTIONS**

There were no substitutions.

### **178/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

None received.

### **179/13 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

#### **Resolved**

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 3 November, 2012, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

### **180/13 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2013/14**

The Executive Director (Resources) introduced the report which afforded Members a second opportunity to consider the budget proposals. The report also set out the draft capital programme for consideration.

Officers advised that the final settlement would be received at the end of January, 2013 and circulated to all Members of the Panel.

In relation to the 'bring your own device security layers scheme', clarity was sought as to what it entailed, who would implement it and whether there were sufficient staff in

place to deliver the scheme. The Executive Director (Resources) explained that the scheme would allow people to use their own devices, such as ipads, for Council purposes. The scheme had financial and personal productivity advantages as an increasing number of individuals own ipads and other portable devices which could be used. Additional security would be put in place to keep the council's information secure. There were sufficient resources to deliver the scheme as the project was in planned work.

It was asked whether other slates (portable devices) had been considered along with the ipad should portable devices be provided to Members. It was explained that a number of devices had been considered and a windows based equivalent was likely to be used. There then followed a discussion on the issue of licence fees as it was understood that the council were considering a move away from windows based systems to reduce the costs of licenses. It was highlighted that should windows based tablets be used then the Council could end up paying for dual licensing fees. Members were advised that all options would be considered and a variety of alternatives were being investigated. The issue in regards to dual licensing was noted and would be investigated further.

The matter of Open Source solutions was discussed. It was suggested that council's could work together to support open source projects by assisting them in gaining appropriate certification. This would enable council's to then use the software. The panel were advised that Government decided upon certification to ensure information was kept secure. The Council supported open source software where possible and I.T. were skilled at procuring and developing software, in-house.

The Executive Director (Resources) stated that often government awarded ICT contracts nationally which restricted council's from tailoring systems to suit local demands.

A member of the panel requested the code of connection, which Officers agreed to provide.

## **Resolved**

- i) That the financial plan 2013/14 to 2017/18 and draft capital programme proposals be noted;
- ii) That the code of connection be circulated to Members of the Panel.

## **181/13 CENTRAL SUPPORT SERVICES**

The panel received an overview of the process of charging service areas for central support services.

Members were advised that the Service Reporting Code of Practice issued by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance stated that all support and management costs should be allocated directly or apportioned to service divisions before the closure of accounts each year. This enabled the true total cost of a service to be identified. It was further explained that whilst the Council worked with schools this was a traded service and so dealt with separately.

Attention was given to the basis of apportionment used for the allocation (recharge) of cost to services. In relation to Audit, a Member asked whether unplanned work was factored in and officers confirmed that it was.

Discussion followed on the work of the First Stop Shop (FSS) and how services were recharged. Officers advised that the number of queries in the FSS was the basis for apportionment. Customer queries were categorised by the service the customer was requesting to see. A member asked why it cost £9.00 per interaction for a customer to be referred. The Executive Director (Resources) explained that the system was being reviewed. Members asked for further detail on the work of the first stop shop together with statistics on the type of enquiries dealt with.

In relation to Communications, it was asked why the recharge was not billed by the hour, as was the case for legal services. Officers advised that this was under review and officers would update in due course when a decision had been reached.

Members queried the fact that the post room spent 55% of their day franking items. It was asked whether this was efficient and whether the Council as a whole posted too much. The Executive Director (Resources) advised that the post room were a small team and dealt with mail for the whole Council. The Council posted a large volume; however, it was not considered excessive given the size of the authority. The Portfolio Holder for Business Support Services explained that the number of franking machines had been reduced and the service centralised. Ways to improve efficiency were constantly being considered.

Members requested that a further report on the post room, including volume of mail be reported to a future meeting of the Panel.

In relation to ICT it was asked why the recharge was based on the number of service users with a login and the direct cost of ICT applications rather than per device. Officers advised that this recharge was being reviewed due to the implementation of hot desking as there would be fewer devices than people.

Members noted that Human Resources recharge was apportioned on the number of employees. It was asked whether this included part time staff as part of the headcount. On a point of general interest, officers advised that the budgets provided would match the cost and so services were unaffected when the calculation of central support services costs is charged. Officers were asked to produce figures to show the recharge costs if they were allocated on full time equivalents rather than headcounts.

## **Resolved**

- i) That a briefing note providing further details on the work of the first stop shop detailing the type and volume of work undertaken be circulated to Members;
- ii) That a report on the operation of the post room be considered at the meeting due to be held on 26 February, 2013;
- iii) That a note detailing the cost of the recharge in relation to human resources if it were carried out by full time equivalents rather than the head count be circulated to Members.

## 182/13 WALSALL CRISIS SUPPORT SCHEME

Members considered a report detailing the proposals for a local scheme replacing existing provision of Community Care Grants and Crisis Support Loans for general living expenses. A local scheme was required as the scheme administered by the DWP would be abolished by April, 2013.

Members noted that the new provision would be administered by council's in England and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. Officers advised that the timescales to develop a local scheme had been challenging and the nature of Walsall resident's demand on the new service would not be available until it commences in April, 2013.

The Chair expressed concern that the move to localise the Crisis Support Scheme appeared to be contrary to the Government's aim to centralise the Benefits Service.

A number of pertinent points were then raised as follows:-

**Application and Assessment Process** - It was queried why there were no timescales setting out how long it would take to process an application.

In response, the Executive Director (Resources) stated that having strict deadlines led to people focussing on bureaucracy and targets rather than providing help. Help should be provided straight away which is why timescales were not specified. Members suggested that the document should state that applications would be considered 'straight away'.

**Staffing, structure and processing applications** - It was asked where applications would be submitted, whether there would be an online presence, how the workforce would be organised and whether there would be sufficient staff to meet demand.

Officers stated that a team was being developed to operate the system. It would consist of a team manager, two senior officers and a team of five officers. It was explained that within the current centralised system, operated by Government, there was a lot of failure demand. The new localised system would remove failure demand which would make it more efficient and effective. The proposed level of staffing should therefore be sufficient, but this would be kept under constant review.

An online presence would be operational when the scheme became live. However applying online, initially, would not be available. It was suggested that the ability to download a form should be considered. Officers agreed to consider the option of enabling customers to download a form and provided assurance to Members that full details on how and where to apply would be advertised when the system becomes operational in April, 2013.

**Suppliers/payments of award** - It was asked whether suppliers had been approached and also how the voucher system, if implemented, would operate.

Officers advised that various options were being considered in relation to both matters. Members expressed concern that the voucher system could be demeaning to individuals. It was also stated that should cash be awarded there was no control to

ensure that the money would be used for the purpose intended. Officers agreed to consider this matter in more detail.

**Duplication of awards** - It was stated that a number of Charities provided similar assistance, such as washing machines, to individuals in need. It was asked how duplication could be avoided to prevent multiple awards being granted to individuals.

Officers advised that a catalogue of providers was being compiled to maximise availability to customers. Members were asked to provide details of any providers, such as Walsall Wood Allotment Charity, to Officers to enable them to populate the catalogue.

**Funding** - Officers clarified that funding was £1,098,510. No further funding would be provided from Government.

**Corruption/Fraud** - Members noted that applicants could apply using the telephone and expressed concern that this system was fraught with corruption, as evidenced in the centralised system operated by Government.

In response, it was stated that the centralised system was incredibly complex which resulted in a high number of errors. The localised system proposed by the council was much less complex and more streamlined which would reduce the number of mistakes and enable operatives to understand demand and develop relationships with customers. The Executive Director (Resources) made it clear that the Council were not administering a scheme but helping people.

Members stated that the role of staff should be to ensure the right level of support is offered rather than encouraging people to maximise their awards.

Officers stated that customers using the centralised system would tailor their applications to get a cash award. When the localised system commences staff would be able to better understand customers and gain trust so that they would be open about their needs. This would ensure customers receive the correct level and type of support.

**Repeat applications** - It was asked whether applicants would be restricted on the number of applications they could make within a twelve month period. Officers advised that the centralised system restricted this number to three; however, there were no limits prescribed in the proposal for the local scheme.

**Equality Impact Assessment** – Members stated that that the equality impact assessment needed to be closely monitored.

**Risk Management** – Members expressed concern that the legislative changes and the decisions required to support those changes posed a significant financial and reputation risk. It was suggested that the paragraph in the covering report be revisited as it was unclear. Members sought assurance that a suitable risk management plan was in place and that this matter was on the risk register. Copies of the risk management plan were requested.

Officers agreed to revisit this paragraph and advised that Welfare Reform was on the risk register but further work in relation to the crisis support scheme had not yet been undertaken. This would be carried out and circulated to Members, when available.

**Appeals** - Members requested that the wording should include reference to the fact that the appeals process would be independent. Officers agreed to amend the document.

**Demand v supply** - Concern was expressed that demand would outstrip supply mid-year resulting in the service being unable to offer support as funding would run out.

Officers explained that assistance would be drawn from a variety of areas and not just the crisis support scheme. Assistance would also be provided to help people become independent which may not necessarily be through providing awards of money.

**Consultation** – Clarity was sought on further consultation.

In response it was stated that consultation would continue with staff across the Council, Housing Associations, and other interested parties.

**Staff intensive housing** - It was noted that residents may be able to get a Community Support Award if they are leaving accommodation in which they receive significant and substantial care and supervision. Members asked whether this included individuals with mental health issues within staff intensive sheltered housing.

Officers agreed to investigate and advise Members in writing.

**Reasonable Evidence** - It was asked what reasonable evidence would be required to support an application.

Officers advised that they would check for examples from the DWP site and update Members.

**Appeals** - It was noted that appeals would not be undertaken face to face. It was asked whether, in essence they were two reviews.

Officers advised that the first review would be a conversation and that applicants could be invited in if required. The Executive Director (Resources) stated that it would always be preferable to get it right first time, but an appeal process provided a back stop.

## **Resolved**

1. That the Panel's concern that the move to localise the Crisis Support Scheme appears to be contrary to the Government's aim to centralise the benefits service be brought to the attention of Cabinet;
2. That clarity as to how grants will be awarded (in both cash and voucher terms) be provided as this is unclear;
3. That the Panel's concerns in relation to risk management be brought to the attention of Cabinet. Specifically that a risk management plan should be put in place swiftly and provided when available;
4. That further updates on the crisis support scheme be considered at future meetings so as to monitor its progress and implementation.
5. That officers clarify for members:-
  - Whether individuals with mental health issues within staff intensive housing would be eligible for a Community Care Award;
  - Details and examples of reasonable evidence.

### **183/13 UPDATE ON LOCALISED COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME**

Officers advised that a report would be submitted to Council on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 2013.

#### **Resolved**

That the update be noted.

### **184/13 SALE OF SCHOOL FREEHOLDS**

Officers advised that further clarity was being sought from the Department for Education. Once received an update would be provided to the Panel.

#### **Resolved**

That an update on the sale of school freeholds be provided to the Panel once clarification has been received from the Department for Education.

### **185/12 FORWARD PLAN**

Members considered the Forward Plan.

#### **Resolved**

That the forward plan be noted.

### **186/12 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting of the Panel would take place on 26 February, 2013.

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 8.10 p.m.