

**MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
held on 22 January 2013 at 6.00pm**

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**Present:** Councillors Richard Speight (Chair), Barry Johnson (Vice Chair)  
Wendy Curtis, Martin Healy (arrived at 6.08pm), Terry Hipsey  
(left at 8.10pm) and Charlie Key

**In attendance:** Councillor L Worrall – Portfolio Holder for Transformation and  
Community  
Councillor Phil Smith – Portfolio Holder for Central Service  
S. Cox- Assistant Chief Executive  
M. Hone – Director of Finance & Corporate Governance  
S. Clark– Head of Finance  
J. Hinchliffe – Head of HR OD & Customer Strategy  
C. Littleton – Head of School Improvement  
N. Warren – Community Development Manager  
S. Welton – Corporate Performance Officer  
K. Adedaji – Housing Manager  
M. Boulter – Principal Democratic Services Officer

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**24. MINUTES**

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7  
November 2012 were approved as a correct record.

**25. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

a) Interests

No interests were declared.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

**26. CORPORATE SCORECARD PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Committee asked a number of questions surrounding housing and it was confirmed through this discussion that housing complaints had been very high and the current target of 522 complaints for this year was still unacceptable and it was hoped that the council would receive far less than this. It was also confirmed that the completion of 99% of all emergency repairs was a reasonable expectation for any housing repair provider.

The committee briefly discussed the number of 16-14 year olds employed at the Council and felt that this was too low. Officers stated that the number

would increase now that Serco staff were included in the data. Members requested the Equality report due in March include a section on young employees.

Officers explained that five indicators did not have information for this meeting because they were either six monthly indicators which would be available in month nine or there were significant lags on data availability due to using other partner's data, such as the police, which took time to come through.

Concerns were raised over the performance of recycling and landfill and officers agreed that a response would be provided outside the meeting. Although, it was added that landfill performance had improved in month 7 as technical issues earlier in the year, relating to the particular plant dealing with this, had been rectified. Thurrock was still the best performing council for this in the East of England.

Officers also confirmed that they were closely monitoring stress related illness among employees and that the child protection performance indicator that was coded red was not a reflection on the quality of the service, simply an indicator of the number of children in care, which was higher than last year.

Finally, Officers informed the committee that the performance on invoices paid within thirty days had improved significantly from 84% to 91%. The Council would achieve the desired 97% by March 2013 and would maintain this performance going forward.

**RESOLVED: That:**

- i) The committee acknowledge and commend services where there is good delivery against priorities.**
- ii) The Committee notes the performance in areas of concern.**
- iii) Officers note the issues of concern raised by the Committee for further action or reporting back to committee.**
- iv) The Committee recommend the areas In Focus to be circulated to other relevant overview and scrutiny committee chairs.**

**27. BUDGET 2013/14- 2014/15 SAVINGS AND CAPITAL PROPOSALS**

Officers informed the Committee that the government grant settlement had been published and was £6 million less than the council expected. This meant that if all the savings proposals were agreed, there would remain a £1.5 million gap. The Council was using prudential borrowing and there were reserves of £8 million.

The Committee took each proposal in turn:

Equal Pay Claims

This budget was no longer required as the project had ended and residual costs had been paid for.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Fraud Team

The saving would be made by directly employing the fraud team, rather than using agencies. This did not affect the capacity or workload of the team and savings were through agency costs.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Freedom of Information and GIS Teams

These functions had now been centralised into one team and two vacant posts could be removed. This did not reduce the level of service.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Building Society Investments

The Council would widen its investments to building societies which would increase income through interest. Officers confirmed they would monitor this regularly and take advice from their treasury advisors. Investment would be gradual and would be started after Council approval in February 2013. There was a brief discussion on micro-lending and whether this could be a different way of investing. Officers stated that this could be done and there were currently some arrangements with the Credit Union on this matter.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Directorate Wide Restructure

The restructuring of the Finance and Corporate Governance Directorate would lead to savings through redundancies, which could well be vacant posts. Impact of this would be on the support provided to the Council rather than to the public. The equality impact assessment would be developed alongside the consultation with staff. Officers agreed there was scope to look into shared services within this area, including audit, fraud and the exchequer.

#### Insurance

The Council had employed Barking and Dagenham Council's Insurance Manager who was confident she could reduce the Council's insurance premiums by at least £200,000. This was hoped to take effect in 2014/15. The key to reducing the payments was to reduce the frequency of claims rather than the amount of each claim. Members suggested that the Council could self-insure for a period to save money and improve insurance premiums at a later date.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Staff Training Budget

The introduction of more e-learning was to reduce administrative costs. Members queried why not more savings could be made in future years and

officers agreed to look into this. Members felt that for the money spent on training, the successes could be celebrated more.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Administrative Support

The use of the new Oracle system would result in the reduction of a fixed term post filled by agency staff.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Clienting Budget

The Council was confident that it could reduce the number of specialists used by Serco, which were provided as part of the contract with them. The risk was that if those specialists were required at a later date, they would cost the Council more money to employ. However, officers stated that the council had a good relationship with Serco and this was not foreseen as a major risk.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Crown House

The saving was made by terminating the rental and maintenance of the property. The saving was only of direct costs and £18,000 had to be spent on the usual overheads of HR and legal support to the teams using the building and also some payment for dilapidation expenses to the landlord.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Deletion of PA post

This was linked to the Clienting budget item.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Service Reduction: Diversity

The Council proposed to reduce the staffing in diversity and seek to share services with another authority. The post deleted was currently vacant. It was planned for the business side of diversity to create enough money to sustain the projects undertaken by the team throughout the year. The business unit currently made between £20,000 and £30,000 each year.

Councillor Hipsey and other Members felt this was a big challenge to run the team at reduced capacity and resource. However, it was confirmed that all statutory obligations of the team would be covered.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

#### Reduction in consultancy budget

This proposal was to reduce the Chief Executive's consultancy budget by half. Members observed that the impact on the service was noted as 'none' and queried whether or not the whole budget could be taken away. Officers agreed that the reasons for keeping half of the budget still, would be made at the Cabinet meeting.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

### Procurement Savings

This saving was proposed by Serco and underwritten by them. If they failed to deliver the saving they would have to pay for it themselves. Officers were confident the saving would be achieved and any savings made above and beyond the £750,000 figure would be shared between Serco and the Council.

Officers added that the saving could be made through Serco but also through the Strategic procurement service that the Council still managed. Officers were confident that savings could be made in both areas but would require extra capacity in procurement services to make the savings and undertake negotiations with suppliers.

Officers confirmed that the savings did not include savings on housing items such as baths and sinks as this was related to the Housing Revenue Account. However, if the savings were achieved, the culture of the council's procurement would filter down to and affect this area. Shared services and the use of bigger buying power was also raised and noted.

The Committee agreed the proposal.

### Shared Services

There was scope to share back office functions further. There were plans to share Communications and Strategy teams but the detail would not be available until the Cabinet report.

The Committee agreed the proposal although Councillor Johnson was sceptical about the proposal without the sufficient detail on the proposals.

### Voluntary Sector Development Fund

The Committee felt this proposal was detrimental to the work of voluntary groups but understood that the current money funded twelve voluntary organisations, which would have to compete with other organisations in the next round of applications for funding.

Councillor Healy felt that this should be a growth area as it seemed investment in these organisations saved the Council more money in other services. The portfolio holder stated that the voluntary groups understood that the fund had been protected for three years and they were accepting that they would have to work differently in the future.

The Chair felt that the committee could well utilise its work programme next year to see how these groups could be sustained and drive through savings that could be used for the voluntary sector.

The Committee felt that this was not a saving they could agree with but understood the reasoning of it and also felt that the engagement with the sector on this had been good.

### Elections

The Committee agreed this was an area of potential savings but raised queries about additional cost, namely:

- The cost of bye elections
- The cost of any national or European elections.
- Constitutional issues and challenges, including any public consultations.
- How to progress this issue through the Council.
- Whether a first wholesale election could coincide with a boundary review of West Thurrock and Purfleet.

The Committee agreed this was an area that needed further information and debate and agreed to receive further information on this at the next suitable committee meeting.

The Committee moved on to the capital bids, going through each proposal. The Committee recognised that a number of refurbishment costs could be negated by the space optimisation project that was currently being undertaken. Officers confirmed that there was no start or finish date to fully optimise the civic offices, although four years was the current estimate. The project was flexible. The following issues were picked out for discussion:

- Officers stated that the modernisation of the fire sprinkler system would contribute to the reduction of insurance premiums.
- The demolition of former operational sites encompassed about six or seven properties.
- The Telephony, Networks and Wifi project was scheduled for three years. It would be monitored regularly so that technology did not become redundant soon after installation. The project also involved training staff to use different technology. The Committee agreed that site visits to other flagship councils would be a good idea.
- Mobile working was about improving staff access to council paperwork and data when working off site with the public. It did not necessarily mean that officers would be forced to work away from the offices.
- The Bring Your Own Device savings were delayed for a year because the suitable infrastructure needed to be in place first.
- A debate was had on the improvements to the council chamber. Members felt this was an unnecessary cost but officers highlighted that technological improvements in the chamber meant that it could be used more widely by officers and the public. The Committee agreed that a business case on this improvement would need to go to Cabinet before it was progressed.
- With regards to self service kiosks, the portfolio holder stated that there would always be a facility for someone to have a face to face meeting with a council officer. The Council needed to provide more online services as this was the methods used by younger sections of the community but vulnerable residents were fully catered for also.

**The meeting was adjourned at 9.09 pm.**

Approved as a true and correct record

**CHAIRMAN**

**DATE**

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact  
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