

Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2009

Present:

Councillor Watson - In the Chair
Councillors Bhatti, Clayton, Glover, Jones, McCulley, Morrison, P Murphy and Sandiford.

Councillor Priest, Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources

Apologies:

Councillors Lomax, Swannick and Trotman

RG/09/24 Minutes

Minutes of the meeting of Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 9 March 2009 were submitted.

Minutes of the meetings of the Human Resources Sub Group of Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 March and 28 April 2009 were submitted.

Minutes of the meetings of the Governance Sub Group of Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 15 April and 6 May 2009 were also submitted.

Members noted that their comments on the Annual Governance Statement made in the meeting of the Governance Sub Group on 6 May had been incorporated into the statement that was being submitted to Audit Committee.

Decision

To approve the minutes of these meetings as correct records.

RG/09/25 Information and Overview Report

A report of the City Solicitor was submitted providing information that the Committee had requested, tracking the implementation of previous decisions and overviewing the Council's forward plan.

The report included an analysis of peak periods in caseload in Legal Services and an interim report of the Neighbourhood Funding Strategy (NFS) sub group. Members noted the high response rate to the NFS questionnaire and that the majority of respondents felt that the system was an improvement in how local priorities were

addressed. A full report of the sub group with their findings would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

Members requested further information about how the Council's approach to land disposal had reacted to the changing economic climate. This would be included within the remit of the Committee's item on Corporate Property. Members also requested that they look at land use for park and ride sites as part of this.

Members requested that information regarding spend to save schemes be included within the Committee's item on Treasury Management.

Decision

To note the report and to request that the work programme be amended to include the revised scopes for the items on Corporate Property and Treasury Management.

RG/09/26 Work Programme

A report of the City Solicitor was submitted asking the Committee to make suggestions for its work programme, agree the terms of reference for the Human Resources and Governance Sub Groups and note the new powers available to Scrutiny Committees.

Members noted that the new terms of reference for the sub groups included a provision that they would meet in public and would allow access to their papers before the meeting unless they were confidential.

The Committee agreed that, following its investigation into business planning processes last year, it would scrutinise business plans at an early stage and comment on the development of the plan over time. During this investigation the Committee would adopt a focus on how well business continuity was provided for in the plans.

Members also agreed that they should allow a substitution system for sub groups where one member of the Committee could attend in place of another member where prior notice was given.

Decision

1. To request that the Chair of the Committee consult with the City Treasurer, Interim Assistant Chief Executive (Performance) and the Committee's support officer to draw up a work programme for the Committee to be submitted to the next meeting.
2. To agree the Terms of Reference for the Human Resources sub group as submitted and to appoint Councillors Clayton, McCulley, Sandiford, Trotman and Watson as members of the sub group.
3. To agree the Terms of Reference for the Governance sub group as submitted and to appoint Councillors Jones, Morrison, Sandiford and Watson as members

of the sub group and to appoint a further Labour member at the Committee's next meeting.

4. To introduce a substitution system where a member of the Committee could attend a sub group meeting in place of a member of a sub group where prior notice was given.

RG/09/27 Local Area Agreement: Commissioning

A report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Performance) was submitted outlining the development of the Manchester Model for Commissioning.

Members requested that they be provided with a concise and plain definition of commissioning. The Interim Assistant Chief Executive described commissioning as intelligence led business planning, a process involving putting yourself in the customers' shoes, asking what sort of service they need and then adapting the service so it meets those needs.

The Council had good practices in commissioning in those departments that carried it out most often, including Children's Services and Adult Social Care. Other sections of the Council, such as Housing, Crime and Disorder and Economic and Urban Policy also commissioned services and the Council was looking to spread best practice across the Council.

Emphasis was also placed on the role elected members play in commissioning, through the Executive and through Scrutiny Committee's role in commenting on how services meet local residents' needs. Elected Members saw the process as being one where the following elements would come together to shape how a service should be delivered: -

- current good practices and value for money products,
- previous experiences of delivering the service
- fresh information about what service users wanted.

The Committee agreed that it was not yet convinced, from the information submitted, that this process represented a new way of working. The Committee requested a further report providing a plain explanation of what commissioning was, how it will lead to improvements (and how this can be measured) and how commissioning interacts with the Neighbourhood Funding Strategy so that they could be convinced of its benefits to residents in the city.

Decision

To request a further report on commissioning providing a clear description of what commissioning is and demonstrating the value of the process to residents. This report should be provided to the Committee at a time when they are looking at business planning so that members can consider the interaction of the two processes.

RG/09/28 Revenues and Benefits

A report of the City Treasurer was submitted providing performance data for the 2008/9 financial year for the Council's Council Tax, Benefits and Business Rates services.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits introduced the report to the Committee and updated members that the improvement in 2009/10 Council Tax Collection rate had regrettably fallen from 1% to 0.9% since the publication of the report.

The Committee were informed that Business Rate collection levels had been affected both by the economic downturn and a change in the law, with the effect that business rates now have to be collected from empty business properties. The Committee asked the City Treasurer to explore the possibility of enforcing sales on derelict commercial properties to improve the collection rate levels and encourage regeneration.

Members noted that the current performance for processing new benefit claims was below the target level. The Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that the IT problems that had affected all services across the Council had caused particular problems for the Revenues and Benefits section because they were completely reliant on technology for their administrative processes including document imaging technology. The section had been deemed a priority area for IT support during this time which had allowed the section to be able to complete the annual billing process and update the benefit levels at year end. The section would now rise to the challenge of compensating for the IT problems and striving to improve the performance over the next few months.

Members queried how the Council estimated how much Council Tax it would collect over a year. The City Treasurer advised that it was estimated that the Council would collect 98% of debt raised and would factor into this figure an estimate of how the tax base would grow.

Members requested that further information be provided in the Committee's Information and Overview report setting out how well the service was doing in collecting Council Tax owed from previous years. The City Treasurer offered to provide an age-debt analysis to a future meeting of the Committee.

Members noted that the Council benefited from the Mobile Advice Centre (MAC), a modified bus which was designed to improve benefits processing by stopping at certain areas and providing advice to passers-by on their benefit eligibility to increase take-up. The MAC was owned by the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) and the Council benefited from the use of the bus for 4 weeks each year.

Members commented that overall the Revenue and Benefits service was performing very well and congratulated the Head of the service for her team's achievements.

Decision

1. To congratulate the Head of Revenue and Benefits on the successes enjoyed by the section over the past year.
2. To request that the City Treasurer explore the possibility of enforcing sales on derelict commercial properties from which the Council could not collect business rates to improve the collection rate levels and encourage regeneration.
3. To request that the City Treasurer provide an age-debt analysis to the Committee for information to demonstrate how much Council Tax owed from previous years had been collected.

RG/09/29 Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System, Information Strategy, SAP roll out and Corporate Contact Centre (CCC) – Capital Expenditure

A report of the Strategic Director of the Manchester Improvement Programme was submitted to the Committee. The report informed the Committee that on 27 May 2009 the Executive would be asked to release capital funds to deliver a range of projects aimed to transform the way the Council works.

The Executive would be asked to approve an increase to the Capital Budget of up to £5.8 million over the next three years to support the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) roll out, the implementation of the Information Strategy and aspects of the SAP software system. In addition it would be asked to approve an increase to the budget of up to £1.2 million over the next two years to support the creation of the Corporate Contact Centre.

The Strategic Director of the Manchester Improvement Programme advised the Committee that the CRM system would allow a member of staff to access information about a customer who they were in contact with. This information would enable them to assist any customer with whom they were in contact across a range of matters, and be able to offer a better service to them. Members sought assurance that sensitive information would not be made available to staff who did not need access to it. The Committee were assured that the system would strike the balance between privacy and customer service.

The new systems being developed represented an investment in new ways of working that would support the Council to work in more efficient ways that served its customers better and would realise savings in future years.

The Committee supported the increases to the Capital Budget and agreed that it would look at the implementation of the CRM system and the new document management system at a future meeting.

Members requested that they be informed of how much of the funding released was actually spent on the projects involved.

Decision

1. To support the increases to the Capital Budget recommended to the Executive.
2. To agree to look at and comment on the implementation of the CRM system and the document management system, and to be updated about how much of the increased funding was spent on the range of projects.

RG/09/30 Exclusion of the Public

A recommendation was made that the public be excluded during consideration of the next item of business.

Decision

To exclude the public during consideration of the next item which involved consideration of exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of particular persons which are commercially sensitive, and public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

RG/09/31 Town Hall Project

A report of the City Treasurer was provided updating the committee on identifying temporary accommodation for staff working in the Library and Town Hall Extension.

Members were informed that the results of a recent evaluation of the available options had produced an outcome for the location. The City Treasurer and Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources were confident that the outcome would deliver the specifications the Council wanted and was good value for money.

A communications plan would be drawn up to inform staff about the outcome.

Decision

To note the report.

(Councillor P Murphy declared a personal interest in this item as Chair of the Greater Manchester Police Authority)