

POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(Committee Rooms 1/2 - Port Talbot Civic Centre)

Members Present:

16 October 2014

Chairman: Councillor D.W.Davies

Vice Chairman: Councillor A.Jenkins

Councillors: A.Carter, M.Harvey, A.Llewelyn, A.R.Lockyer,
Mrs.K.Pearson, Mrs.S.M.Penry and I.D.Williams

Officers In Attendance H.Jenkins, Mrs.K.Jones, Ms.C.Furlow, B.Lee,
N.Evans and Mrs.S.Edge

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors A.H.Thomas and A.N.Woolcock

1. **TO RECEIVE THE MINUTES OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 4TH SEPTEMBER 2014**

The Committee noted the minutes.

2. **TO RECEIVE THE SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15.**

Members requested confirmation that the sickness report scheduled would be ready for the November meeting.

Officers confirmed that the sickness taskforce discussed at the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 4th September was underway and consequently it would be possible to provide a progress report for the next Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 27th November. It will be a summary report of the work done so far, and could include additional information at the request of Members.

Following discussion the Committee agreed that the report should include a breakdown of the additional costs of sickness absence.

The Committee noted and agreed the Forward Work Programme.

3. **TO SELECT APPROPRIATE ITEMS FROM THE CABINET BOARD AGENDA FOR PRE-SCRUTINY (CABINET BOARD REPORTS ENCLOSED FOR SCRUTINY MEMBERS).**

(a) Insurance Arrangements 2014/15

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services explained that the Council has insurance in place, and that the policies were changed to run from 1st October to 30th September each year, approximately 5 years ago. This was to avoid the busy periods for insurance companies of January and April, and meant that the Council gets preferential premiums.

The Committee chose not to scrutinise this item, but noted the report.

(b) Treasury Management Monitoring

Members considered the report on Treasury Management Monitoring, and officers highlighted that since the previous report on 24th July, the Council currently had £488k generated on investments made, but that there were no additional changes.

The Director of Finance and Corporate Services updated that since the report was written, changes in market information indicated a likely rise in interest rates next year, which meant that some loans would be called in, and so it was now prudent to make new arrangements. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services informed Members that on 8th October new borrowings of £15m had been arranged.

Members asked for clarification on which part of the council's budget the £10m invested for over 12 months had come from. Officers clarified that this was funds from the Council's reserves, which were invested whilst not being used, and would contribute to the £664k income target to be generated from investment this financial year.

Following scrutiny the Committee noted the report.

(c) Timetable - Review of Policy concerning Grants to the Third Sector

Members received a report proposing an updated timetable for the review of the policy concerning grants to the Third Sector.

Officers explained that the previously agreed timetable was no longer feasible. The new timetable would allow for the policy to be developed within a reasonable period of time and also provide a long lead in time for the voluntary sector bodies that might be affected by any policy change.

If the Cabinet Board approved the timetable, then Officers would look to work with the Voluntary Sector Liaison Forum throughout the period of the policy review. The draft policy would be reported back to the Scrutiny Committee before going out to formal consultation. It is anticipated that the draft policy would be ready for consideration at the beginning of the next financial year. Officers noted that involvement of the sector during the policy review period would provide for good engagement with the voluntary sector, however, a further period of formal consultation on the draft policy would also be conducted. The final draft policy would be brought back before the August 2015 recess.

Members highlighted the need to consider the impact of any cuts to funding for any voluntary sector providers, especially in the light of the frequent references to making use of the voluntary sector in the budget proposals that are currently out to consultation.

Members also noted that the involvement of the voluntary sector in the previous review had been very positive, and that it had held up well to scrutiny.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

(d) Pontardawe One Stop Shop/Advice Hub

Members received a report on the Pontardawe One Stop Shop/Advice Hub.

Officers highlighted the enhanced service that was now available through the library. Library staff were now dealing with many of the enquiries that the Customer Services staff had dealt with previously. Housing benefits staff were attending 2 days per week to deal with Housing Benefit and Council Tax enquiries, and were very busy on those days. NPT Homes staff were also attending on the same 2 days per week as the Housing Benefits staff to deal with NPT Homes enquiries. This was working better than previously, and there had been great improvements in the links between NPT Homes, and Housing Benefit due to the staff being in place on the same days.

Members were advised that the new service had realised £20k in savings, which was less than the originally anticipated £40k savings, but emphasised that there was now an enhanced service in place.

Prior to the removal of the Cashiers service, the customers were assisted in making alternative arrangements. Officers assisted approximately 80% of external customers who were paying by cash to set up direct debits. Those customers who still wished to pay in cash were still able to do so, but at the Post Office which was very close by.

Members asked whether the removal of the Cashiers Service had meant that there had been any increase in arrears. Officers confirmed that they were unaware of any impact on the arrears, and noted the high percentage that had now changed to make payments by direct debit.

Members were informed that an opportunity was taken to support claimants affected by changes to the Welfare Benefits and additional organisations were brought into the hub for the 6 month pilot.

Members asked whether other agencies pay for space in the building. Officers explained that there were different arrangements for each agency. NPT Homes pay rent for the days they are in attendance. Officers are currently in discussions with NPT Credit Union, and a proposal will be brought to the next Cabinet Board regarding this. Citizens Advice Bureau will not make a financial contribution, but it would be a condition of the grant from NPTCBC that they attend the hub on the relevant days.

Members queried whether further promotion of the service was being done, and officers confirmed that the hub had recently been re-advertised since NPT Credit Union had joined.

Members suggested that going forward in the next 12 months there should be further liaison between the Council and other local community resources to see how the hub could link into these other resources, perhaps assisting in disseminating information available through the hub to other local areas. Officers and Cabinet Members welcomed this, and noted that it could be particularly helpful with the implementation of Universal Credit, which was expected to be rolled across Neath Port Talbot soon. Officers emphasised the importance of the Council supporting those most vulnerable through the implementation of Universal Credit.

Officers explained that the service was only able to deal with general advice for Blue Badge applications, but that from 8th December a new service where applicants could be interviewed by video link to the necessary staff would be piloted.

Members noted that they had been getting increased queries from their constituents on Blue Badges, and asked whether there had been changes to the scheme. Officers explained that Welsh Government had changed their policy, and agreed to bring a new report back to Members to explain the changes. Officers noted that changes to Welsh Governments policy had included important changes regarding cognitive disabilities, and so was expected to be an impact on those with Learning Disabilities.

Members queried whether the reason that so many Council Tax enquiries were not dealt with one stop, was because the enquiries were now being dealt with by Housing Benefits staff. Officers were unsure of the reason why this was the case, and explained that this was why there was a proposal to further investigate this, and report back to Members.

Officers brought Members attention to the Equalities Impact Screening that had been carried out prior to the project beginning which was included in the report to Policy and Resources Cabinet Board on 14th November 2013 (and circulated at the meeting). Officers noted that the impacts of the project on the protected groups were what had been expected. The screening highlighted the need to maintain the availability for customers to access a service in the Welsh Language, and this had been done through the library staff. The screening also noted that entrances to the building had been adapted to allow disabled access.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by the Cabinet Board, and made the following proposals;

Going forward in the next 12 months there should be further liaison between the Council and other local community resources to see how the hub could link into these other resources, perhaps assisting in disseminating information available through the hub to other local areas.

The Blue Badge Scheme to be scrutinised by the Committee, and that this be added to the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

(e) Welfare Reform - Low Income Families Project - Employment

Members received a report on the Welfare Reform – Low Income Families Project – Employment.

Members were informed that prior to the pilot project, Job Centre Plus had been making informal referrals to the Libraries, and that library staff were

unable to deal with the entirety of the demand this had generated. Job Centre Plus has requested that the project be rolled out across all libraries, and officers were having discussions with them regarding funding towards it.

Members noted recent newspaper articles on the impact of this type of project, and asked whether other partners were involved in the programme, raising concerns that there may be some duplication. Officers explained that they were confident that other services were aware of this service and so this should minimise the risk of duplication.

Officers stated that 54% of those referred did need help, and agreed that there was scope for further involvement with partners. Part of the work going forward was expected to be mapping out the services, and it was agreed that this would be brought back to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

Members queried the apparently low level of referrals that actually attended the Library, and asked whether this could be increased. Officers acknowledged that this was a low percentage, but noted that some of those people referred may have been able to access the services from home. Officers informed Members that they had requested a meeting with Job Centre Plus to see how many people will be affected by the next set of changes.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

(f) Policy and Resources Cabinet Board Forward Work Programme 2014/15

Members asked whether the Access to Services report would be ready to come to the November meeting. Officers confirmed that it would come to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee in the New Year.

CHAIRMAN