

POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Members Present:

2 November 2016

Chairperson: Councillor D.W.Davies

Vice Chairperson: Councillor A.Jenkins

Councillors: Ms.C.Clement-Williams, M.Harvey,
Mrs.L.H.James and A.R.Lockyer

Officers In Attendance Mrs.K.Jones, Mrs.S.Rees, D.Rees,
Ms.A.Hutchings and S. Curran

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors P.A.Rees and A.N.Woolcock

1. **MINUTES OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 21ST SEPTEMBER 2016**

Members were updated on the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. Following the last meeting, Officers informed the Committee that after the Council had submitted their written response to the Welsh Government in response to their call for evidence the Council had been invited to the Sennedd to give evidence in person.

The minutes were noted by the Committee.

2. **SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2016/17**

The Committee noted the Forward Work Programme.

3. **CORPORATE IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVE - DIGITAL BY CHOICE - HIGHLIGHT REPORT - QUARTER 2 PROGRESS REPORT (APRIL 1ST - 30TH SEPTEMBER) 2016-17**

The Committee received information in relation to the Corporate Improvement Objective 'Digital by Choice' for the period between April 1st to the 30th September 2016 as contained within the circulated highlight report.

Members noted that the priorities are on track to be delivered. Work is progressing well with making the Council's website easier to use and work is ongoing to make more services available online this year. Members were pleased to note that 97% of the website is available in Welsh with most of the remaining pages are in the process of being translated.

Members observed that as per last year, a decrease in visitors to the one stop shops had been expected as customers access alternative service request channels. However it was noted that during quarter 2 this year there has been an increase in the number of personal callers to both the one stop shop sites which could be attributed to the service changes in refuse and recycling.

Members noted the ongoing work in relation to the Digital Inclusion Charter which was approved in May 2016 which will assist more people to become digitally included and enjoy the benefits that they can experience from being online. Work to upskill staff in relation to digital literacy is also progressing within the Council and in partnership with the Third Sector and Town and Community Councils.

Members were very pleased to hear that a 'Google Garage' will be taking place in November 2016 linked to the Enterprise Zone which will offer free sessions to small/medium businesses providing surgeries in relation to the benefits of getting online.

In relation to the devices being used to access the NPT website, Members asked for further information in relation to those who use 'mobile' devices. It was hoped that as 3G and 4G access improves so will the access via such devices. Members noted how the analytics available provide valuable data; for example in a recent survey 50% of those accessing the NPT website were in the 60-74 age bracket and did so via fixed PC computers and this sort of information can allow the Council to target its work going forward.

Members commented that while the work on the Internet is progressing there remains issues with the navigation and accessibility of the Intranet.

Members praised the work being done to progress this priority and looked forward to being kept updated particularly in relation to the Working Groups set up.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

4. **BENEFIT SERVICES AND INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT CARDS**

Members received information in relation to the Housing Benefits and Financial Assessments Service as contained within the circulated report card.

Members heard about the scale of the work of the section and how the section is responsible for the assessment and payment of approximately £54 million in housing benefit to 13,000 tenants.

Members observed that in 15/16 102,000 new claims or adjustments to existing housing benefit and council tax support claims were actioned and there were a total of 21 local authority errors resulting in an overpayment where the claimant wasn't a contributor. As a result of these errors the amount overpaid (and hence not recoverable) was only 0.01% of the total money paid out.

Members noted the ongoing priorities of the section which include ensuring the effective and efficient introduction of Universal Credit from the Authority's perspective and to help those entitled to Universal Credit to make their claims and manage their budget effectively.

It was observed that overpayment recovery rates appear low but that much recovery is done by a deduction from ongoing benefits and therefore the weekly amounts which can be recovered are low and take time for repayments to be made.

Members asked for more information in relation to overpayments and it was explained that usually overpayments are made due to change in circumstance of the claimant.

Members queried the overspends in the budget and were informed that an additional cost of a 'visiting officer' has been incorporated to improve efficiency in acquiring information required to determine financial assessments.

It was observed that 0% of staff had received a performance appraisal during 16/17. This was due to a new corporate framework being cascaded throughout the workforce. Members commented that appraisals for staff are vitally important and felt that they needed to be implemented as soon as practically possible.

The work of the team was praised, particularly in light of the restructure which had resulted in a smaller team.

Members then received information in relation to the Audit Service as contained within the circulated report card.

Internal Audit is a statutory service and provides audit coverage across all of the Authority's functions. Members noted that performance of the section is reported to and monitored by the Audit Committee.

Members were pleased to note that 99.35% of the clients who returned the client satisfaction survey were at least satisfied with the service provided.

While every effort is given towards progressing service priorities, it was observed that high risk audits are given priority when they arise.

Members noted that to continue to comply with the Public Sector Auditing Standards the Audit Team will be participating in a 5 year peer review with other Local Authorities across Wales.

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Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

5. **SICKNESS ABSENCE MONITORING REPORT FOR QUARTER 1 2016 / 2017.**

The Committee received information in relation to the Sickness Absence data for quarter 1 for 2016/17 as contained within the circulated report.

Members noted that whilst the Council's sickness rate marginally increased from 9.4 average FTE days to 9.7FTE days in 2015/16 so did sickness across Councils in the rest of Wales and Neath Port Talbot has in fact improved its position on the All Wales benchmarking table moving from joint 7th to 6th in Wales.

It was observed that services with fewer than 100 employees see more of a fluctuation in sickness absence figures as single employees represent a higher percentage of the total figures of the team.

Members discussed that stress is cited as the main reason for long term sickness absence and work is ongoing into targeting strategies in relation to stress related absences. It was noted that this is in-keeping with a national trend of stress related absences. Members made reference to the importance of conducting staff appraisals which should enable managers to understand any issues being experienced by their staff members and provide an opportunity for an open and honest discussion.

Stomach related absences remain the main cause of short term absences which is consistent with previous years.

Members commented on the significant cost of covering sickness absence and how important it is that the issue is continually monitored by management and Elected Members; Members noted that the service report cards that are scrutinised provide a good opportunity for Members to consider sickness absence on a regular basis.

It was noted that Schools Support Staff are the largest group of staff but they are also the group of staff with the most significant increase in days lost to sickness absence. The Chair of the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Scrutiny Committee informed Members that the Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning is undertaking a piece of work looking in detail at sickness absence in schools and is being continually monitored by the CYPE Scrutiny Committee. Members expressed their concern that sickness absence in schools has an effect on the education of our pupils and were pleased to observe that the CYPE Scrutiny Committee are making the monitoring of this a priority.

It was noted with disappointment that Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf's sickness absence figures were not included in the graph giving the number of days lost to sickness absence per Local Authority.

Following scrutiny it was agreed that the report be noted and requested:

- That the Committee receive an update on the work being done to combat short term sickness absence
- That the figures for the cost of sick pay from 2012 be provided
- That a presentation by the Long Term Sickness taskforce is presented to the Committee in the next meeting

6. **PRE-SCRUTINY**

The Committee scrutinised the following matters:

Cabinet Board Proposals

6.1 Unreasonable/Unacceptable Customer Behaviour Policy

The Committee received information in relation to the unreasonable/unacceptable customer behaviour policy as contained within the circulated report.

Members noted that the policy makes reference to unacceptable actions by complainants and how the Council will deal with the few customers who are unreasonable or persistent in their behaviour. This update to the existing policy is to provide officers of the Council with additional information to help them manage any special arrangements that need to be made when customers behave unreasonably.

Members commented that this policy is well worth having to ensure that our staff are kept safe and that a consistent approach is kept.

Following scrutiny, the Committee were supportive of the proposals to be considered at Cabinet Board.

CHAIRPERSON