

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

12 FEBRUARY 2013

Present :- Councillor Beverly Davies (Chairman)
Councillors Helen Chuah, Bill Frame, Pauline Hazell,
Peter Higgins, Kim Naish, Gerard Oxford and
Terry Sutton

Substitute Members :- Councillor Will Quince for Councillor Kevin Bentley
Councillor Nick Barlow for Councillor Nigel Offen

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Paul Smith

24. Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held **15 January 2013** and **28 January 2013** were confirmed as a correct record.

25. Councillor Locality Budgets

Mrs. Amanda Chidgey, Democratic Services Manager presented the report on the Councillor Locality Budgets.

Mrs. Chidgey explained that the Locality Budgets had been approved by Cabinet in March 2012, one of a number of Jubilee Projects, and were intended to support a diverse range of local community projects and opportunities.

The Panel was reminded of the agreed guidelines for the budgets as illustrated in Appendix A of the report, and the schedule setting out the applications and the amount of spend so far approved.

In response to Councillor Davies, Mrs. Chidgey confirmed that no carry forwards of the budgets into 2013-14 will be permitted, and the accountants had also confirmed that all requests for funds in this financial year must be submitted by 28 February 2013. Councillor G. Oxford said he believed the one year Councillors are given to spend the money was adequate.

Mrs. Chidgey responded to Councillor Frame, saying that all applications are considered but once approved it is on the understanding that the application is a one-off cost that cannot incur ongoing revenue expenditure. Whilst there needed to be clarity for funding joint partnership applications and applications which did not to constitute gaps in funding (e.g. salt bins) they had been approved during the year so as to avoid declining requests for funds. That said members appreciated that the allocation of funds will get smarter.

In response to Councillor Quince, Mrs. Chidgey said with respect to the cost to administer the scheme, it was a new scheme that had required time to learn and work through the process, and required the need for an accurate audit trail in respect of

budget expenditure. Whilst this had taken time, it was envisaged that this process will become more straightforward in future years.

Councillor Sutton said the report was succinct but informative, and whilst thanking officers for administering the scheme, still believed the process had incurred some additional costs. Mrs. Chidgey said outside of the administrative process, the scheme is reliant on the good will of officers from service areas such as Parks and Recreation, who even during busy times give time to support the scheme.

Councillor Paul Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources responded to Councillors Quince and Sutton, saying Locality Budgets was a fair scheme that embraced localism and applied equally to all Councillors. Councillors had the opportunity to spend money themselves or in partnership with other Councillors or Council partners on local community projects. Councillor Smith said the Locality Budgets are separate to the Government Grants passed directly to the parishes, provided a power to local councillors that they never had before, moved some funds away from centralised budgets and enabled individuality.

Councillor Quince still believed this amounted to a double taxation to local residents, and whilst it was nice to have these budgets, did not think the expenditure was essential and questioned whether it could be justified.

Councillor Naish believed the scheme would benefit from more cooperation between individual ward councillors including those from different political groups.

Councillor Smith, in response to Councillor Davies, could not see any reason why she should not allocate her budget towards a new CCVS vehicle, confirming that one other councillor had already committed funds to the CCVS Transport Scheme. Councillor Davies said it would be useful for members to receive some future guidance on the process and to include officer's advice on the types of projects that would benefit from funding.

Councillor Frame believed that overall the scheme had been a success, with a multitude of things accomplished that had all in some way added to the quality of life of local residents.

RESOLVED that the Panel:-

- i) Commented on and noted the Councillor Locality Budget scheme.
- ii) Consideration be given by the Member Development Group to the provision of an information gathering event on the Locality Budget process and to include officer's advice on the types of projects that would benefit from funding.

26. Sickness Absence

The Panel agreed to review the Council's Sickness Absence following the review of Half Yearly Performance report presented to the Panel at the meeting on 15 January 2013.

Mrs. Jessica Douglas, Senior Manager, Corporate Management presented the Sickness Absence report that provided a detailed analysis of current sickness levels and procedures, together with historical sickness data and benchmarking data to provide the Panel with some context.

In response to Councillor Oxford regards to the difficulty in identifying work related stress and depression in a changing and challenging environment, Mrs. Douglas said there is a need to drill down into current data to try and determine a more accurate assessment of this condition, and the Council has agreed for Anglia Ruskin University to carry out research that it is hopes will provide this information.

Mrs. Douglas also explained that the overall sickness levels for Colchester had recently been skewed due to the high sickness levels of staff within Parking Services, who had themselves been transferred-in from the Councils making up the North Essex Parking Partnership. Proactive management of the situation together with the help and advice of a Human Resources Business Advisor has seen the level of sickness in this service reduce to 9.52 days in December 2012 from a level of 21.65 days in December 2011.

Councillor Hazell expressed concern for staff who may feel a loss of belonging to the Council due to the continuous fundamental service review (FSR) process, prompting Councillor Davies to ask about what help and advice was available to staff in these situations. Mrs. Douglas explained that the Council ensures that each review is supported by a Communications and Engagement Plan, as the one to be considered at this meeting for the FSR for Customer Contact, and whilst the plan targets specific audiences, Council Staff are at the forefront of this process. More specifically staff receives regular updates via staff cascades with face to face briefings from managers, Executive Management presentations and staff workshops, and can self-serve via the intranet. Telephone advice is not available at present and comes at a cost, but the benefits from such a service are being considered.

Mrs. Douglas explained to Councillor Quince that in the past the cost of overtime and agency staff to cover sickness absence had been reported, and it will be possible to report this information in future reports.

RESOLVED that the Panel:-

- i) Considered and commented on the report providing sickness absence in the Council, including how sickness absence is measured and managed corporately and within services.
- ii) Agreed that any future reports on sickness absence will include the cost of overtime and agency staff to cover sickness absence.

27. Welfare Reform

Councillor Frame (in respect of being a Member of the Colne Housing Board) declared non-pecuniary interests in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

Mrs. Ann Hedges, Executive Director and Mr. Jason Granger, Customer Coordinator, attended the meeting for this item.

Mrs. Hedges provided an overview of the report that detailed the work being undertaken to support the implementation of welfare reform.

Mrs. Hedges informed the Panel that the Council is being very proactive and thorough in the groundwork needed prior to the welfare reform changes commencing on 1 April 2013. This work includes officers within the Customer Services Centre providing Advice Sessions for various groups including Councillors. The Cross Service Team of whom Jason Granger is a member, are identifying and contacting households where key residents are affected by the changes and facing a short-fall in welfare income, and for which a range of support is being offered.

Mrs. Hedges said the proactive communication and advice work in Colchester has led to very positive results, and that was reflected in the comments and praise by Councils and Government, and resulted in Mr. Granger speaking to a range of different Councils about our work.

Councillor Quince took the opportunity to thank officers for their excellent proactive work in forewarning local residents, work that had received national coverage. Councillor Oxford and later Councillor Hazell endorsed Councillor Quince's comments.

Mr. Granger agreed to provide Councillors with a simple guide explaining the changes and with contact names and numbers.

In response to Councillor Naish and his concern for residents who due to physical disability or a lack of on-line facility may feel further vulnerability, it was explained that the Council is sympathetic to this issue and officers are working with Job Centre Plus and the Department of Welfare and Pensions to endeavour to ensure that all affected residents are contacted and advised accordingly. It is acknowledged that these changes will be difficult for some residents but officers are trying to ensure residents are as well prepared as possible. Mrs. Hedges said the work had been helped by officers working in close partnership with Job Centre Plus. Letters and leaflets, and a You Tube video are being used to get key messages to local residents.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Mrs. Hedges and Mr. Granger explained that the implementation of Universal Credit will commence in October 2013, and leading up to this date, a number of pilot projects will be rolled out, starting in April including direct debit projects. This work is part of the overall Communication Plan for residents and partners.

Mrs. Hedges and Mr. Granger explained to Councillor Frame that officers had written to all households in respect of Under Occupation and this work was being done in partnership with landlords as well as residents, and continued in a coordinated approach. In regards to Universal Credit, whilst acknowledging there was a need to increase awareness, there will remain a risk that the new way of working will increase rent arrears. Many residents will require support and be advised on alternative methods of payment such as direct debit.

Councillor Smith said the Council has contacted all London Boroughs to ask if they will inform Colchester if they are intending to transfer residents to Colchester. This was in light of Councillor Quince's concern that welfare reform could force London Boroughs to purchase blocks of houses in Colchester with the sole purpose of transferring their own residents who have complex needs.

RESOLVED that the Panel:-

- i) Noted and commented on the work being undertaken to support the implementation of welfare reform.
- ii) Thanked officers for their proactive communication and advice work to local residents on welfare reform.
- iii) Requested that Councillors are provided with a simple guide explaining the changes and with contact names and numbers.
- iv) Requested that Councillors receive a link to the educational You Tube video.

28. Universal Customer Contact FSR - Communication and Engagement Plan, and Risk Register

Mrs. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director and Mr. Gareth Mitchell, Head of Strategic Policy and Regeneration attended the meeting for this item.

Mrs. Donnelly introduced the paper providing an update on the draft Communication and Engagement Plan and Risk Register for the Fundamental Service Review (FSR) of Customer Contact.

Mrs. Donnelly explained that the review was now well under way with the Governance Arrangements close to being finalised and an Implementation Board comprising of cross party members and executive officers now up and running and having met for the first time very recently. The Board will meet regularly to consider themed presentations and progress updates. The Senior Management Team will be updated regularly on the Engagement Plan and Risk Register, led by the Chief Executive and with a clear focus.

Following on from the earlier discussions on stress related symptoms due to the FSR process, Mrs. Donnelly reiterated that whilst the plan targets specific audiences, Council Staff are at the forefront of the process, engaged at every stage with regular updates via staff cascades with face to face briefings from managers.

Mr. Mitchell said the Engagement Plan and Risk Register presented to Members reflected where we have got to and as it was work in progress welcomed any feedback from the Panel.

Mr. Mitchell said the Plan was draft and needs further work but broadly sets out officer's thinking with key elements to focus on. The Plan provided an overview of what is required and the specifically targeted audiences.

With regards to the timetable, Mr. Mitchell said a Resident's Survey is now in progress and will provide a baseline on the satisfaction of the Council's key customers and will be used as a 'tracker' to gauge opinion year on year.

Staff had been contacted via the staff e-magazine and the fourth Staff Cascade fed through the organisation and with the opportunity to ask questions. The Employee Survey was in progress and will again be used as a 'tracker' to gauge how well the FSR is progressing as the changes take affect.

In response to Councillor Davies, Mr. Mitchell said it was hoped that the on-going self participating dialogue between staff and senior management will act as a 'rumour buster'.

Location changes as a result of the FSR are being led by Mrs. Ann Hedges, and the draft plans for the new Customer Services Centre in the Library will soon be at a stage to present to the Implementation Board. Mrs. Donnelly said officers are working with their counterparts at Essex County Council and once the final design is complete it will be made available for full engagement.

Councillor Sutton, member of the Implementation Board confirmed that the Board agree that the staff are extremely important to the whole process and are meeting on a monthly basis to consider progress updates and results of surveys.

Mr. Mitchell confirmed that online surveys provide useful feedback on how people find and use the Colchester website, and will form part of the thinking to encourage residents and general public to move online, and likewise, Mrs. Donnelly said feedback from face to face and telephony interaction will also help shape the organisation by encouraging customers to transact in many ways. In response to Councillor Naish who remained concerned about alienating residents without online facilities, Mrs. Donnelly said vulnerable residents such as the elderly and those with complex needs are at the forefront of the minds of those responsible for the implementation process, and she hoped to reassure members by saying the face to face environment being considered in the Library will be of a higher quality than that experienced by customers at Angel Court, and this was an important aspiration that the Implementation Board is committed to. The new contact centre will allow for confidential conversations and complimenting the customer contact centre, there will be a range of services currently available centrally, that will be made available locally to save residents the expense of travelling into the town centre.

Councillor Oxford said the relocation of the Contact Centre to the Library coupled with the changes to road access and parking in the High Street from March will

disadvantage disabled customers who will need to travel considerably further to get to the new location. It was confirmed that the Library building itself is fully DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant and Mrs. Donnelly said an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) had already been completed, but confirmed that as the process developed and more key milestones are reached, so further EQIAs will be completed. Mrs. Donnelly said she will talk to Mrs. Hedges about the plans for the Library so that as the plans develop a focus group to consider the location will be organised to test the locality for residents with different needs.

In response to Councillor Quince, Mrs. Donnelly said whilst work on the Library as the central point of contact for customers progresses, it has remained work that has been progressing towards a final conclusion since November 2012. In the meantime, the Council still remains obligated to Angel Court and discussions about the future of Angel Court are still ongoing.

Mrs. Donnelly confirmed the Risk Register was presented to the Panel in draft form, a dynamic document changing all the time. The risks are grouped into four headings, ICT, Cultural Change, Financial and External Factors and as the FSR progresses so risks are added and some will change with implementation. Mrs. Donnelly confirmed the register will be presented regularly to the Implementation Board.

Following the earlier discussions, it was agreed that there are risks concerning the Library as the new location and this should be added to the register. In response to Councillor Davies, it was also agreed, in light of the earlier discussions, to add absenteeism as a key risk.

Councillor Higgins said risks are events and some of the risks listed in the register are not events. Mrs. Donnelly said she will take advice on the risks, and ensure all listed risks are 'event' orientated. In response to Councillor Frame, Mrs. Donnelly said as themes within the FSR develop they will be added to the Risk Register

RESOLVED that the Panel:-

- i) Considered and commented on the draft Risk Register and Communications and Engagement Plan in relation to the Customer Contact Fundamental Service Review.
- ii) Requested a focus group is organised to consider the Library as the central contact centre for Council customers, with the sole purpose of testing the locality for customers with different needs, and to feed this information back into the scrutiny process.
- iii) Requested that the Library as the possible location for the Customer Contact Centre and Absenteeism is added to the risk register.
- iv) Agreed for further reviews of the Risk Register take place as part of the Panel's ongoing monitoring role.

29. Work Programme

The Panel noted the extra meeting on 12 March 2013 to review Bus Transportation, including working with the new Bus Station, and with invitations going to officers at Essex County Council and local bus operators.

Councillor Frame, in light of the recent national concerns over food safety standards requested that an item should be added to the future Work Programme for the review of Public Health - Food safety for children at school. Whilst there was not sufficient time to organise this for the March meetings, Mr. Robert Judd, Democratic Services Officer said he would add this item to the Work Programme for consideration by the Panel at the first meeting in 2013/14.

RESOLVED that the Panel commented on and noted the Work Programme 2012/13.