

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

30 OCTOBER 2012

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

Substitute Member :- Councillor Nick Cope for Councillor Helen Chuah

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Nick Barlow
Councillor Nigel Chapman
Councillor Annie Feltham
Councillor Sonia Lewis
Councillor Sue Lissimore
Councillor Will Quince
Councillor Paul Smith
Councillor Anne Turrell

15. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on **29 August 2012** was confirmed as a correct record.

16. Fundamental Service Review of Customer Contact

The following Councillors declared non-pecuniary interests in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

Councillor Bentley in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council.

Councillor Frame in respect of being a Board Member of Colne Housing.

Councillor P. Higgins in respect of his spouse being a Member of Essex County Council.

Councillor Turrell in respect of being a Member of Essex County Council.

Introduction

Councillor Anne Turrell, Leader of the Council introduced the review of the Fundamental Service Review of Customer Contact.

Councillor Turrell provided some context to the reasons for undertaking this review. The current operational ways of Council working has remained relatively unchanged for many years, but set against a backdrop of ever decreasing Government funding and the message from customers that they want to self serve, it was felt that changes to the way the Council works was the way to go forward, providing the efficiencies needed to fund the large costs of reinvestment.

The changes will mean a large investment in IT that will provide the opportunity to

customers to self-serve, whilst retaining some resources to help those who will continue to want face to face contact with officers.

Councillor Turrell said the Project Board leading this review was set-up almost two years ago and we are now at the stage where the Business Case is to be presented to Cabinet. Councillor Turrell asked the Panel to consider the content and welcomed any constructive criticism or comments prior to the decision being taken.

In response to Councillor Naish, Councillor Turrell said she was not advocating doing away with a face to face service, that this would be provided to customers, but evidence suggested the majority of customers do wish to have a self-serve system.

Councillor Frame said that paragraph 3.1 of the report on Alternative Options implied that any other option will delay what is being proposed or not deliver an alternative service, therefore suggesting there can be no alternative options / changes. Councillor Turrell confirmed that this detail could be adjusted or amended.

Councillor Sutton said he was concerned by the report that he felt did not provide the substance or evidence to support such a radical change and make the case credible. Councillor Turrell said the business case was drawn from a considerable bank of research and evidence and this detail could be provided to members if so requested. Members and officers had been briefed on some of the work to date, but if needed she would be happy to organise further briefings.

Councillor Offen questioned the title of the report, Fundamental Service Review of Customer Contact, saying it was an awful lot more than that, that the title could mislead the public because the review was far more outreaching than just customer contact.

Presentation

Mr. Adrian Pritchard, Chief Executive Officer and Mrs. Pam Donnelly and Mrs Ann Hedges, Executive Directors, gave a presentation of the Fundamental Service Review (FSR) of Customer Contact (CC).

Introduction

Mr. Pritchard said the review had commenced twelve months ago.

The review was about changes to the way we work, the way we deliver services, e.g. the introduction of Street Services Zone Teams as part of the Street Services FSR.

Research shows that 26% of customer contact is outside of the customer service centre. The review began by looking at how we could address this issue but as the review proceeded it began to encompass much more including government policy changes and future resource reductions.

That said, and in response to Councillor Offen, Mr. Pritchard said the title of the report did have some traction from the outset.

The Business Case

Mr. Pritchard explained that the Business Case is a detailed document that had nine key themes, grouped as: How we do business, the changes we have to make and delivery and business benefits.

The business case also incorporated a new way of working, a model different to the current governance arrangement, with a universal customer environment providing self serve, a delivery arm for Borough wide services and a trading / business support service. Mr. Pritchard said it was felt this model best suited Colchester, though other alternatives are being pursued by other local authorities e.g. a pure commissioning philosophy, a user pays model etc. Mr. Pritchard said the business case and the business model provided an opportunity for a more commercial approach to some of the business of the Council.

How the Council will do business

Mrs. Donnelly spoke in detail about how the Council will do business.

It would be a more efficient and effective customer journey that makes life simpler for customers, simplifying what are currently complex processes. Customers would be able to access services and have more choice, with the flexibility to serve themselves, but supported by officers providing complex case management for the most vulnerable customers.

There will be a more commercial philosophy, with the creation of a commercial trading arm governed by a trading board, working within a public service ethos, important to the overall need to reduce costs or increase income in the climate of reducing public expenditure.

Changing behaviour would mean more flexible working arrangements and a more positive behaviour change from our customers. This will require changing the way we work and how services are delivered, and being proactive in the management of the increase of customers requiring services.

Operating Model

Mr. Pritchard spoke about the operating model.

It would need to respond to customers, with the universal customer environment encompassing contact via the web, telephone and face to face, operating within a triage process that will provide immediate advice or direction.

Mr. Pritchard said there would be less change in respect of service delivery but management would like to build on zone teams and zone working.

An improved commercial approach will look to improve existing procurement practices, improve existing income stream levels; better utilise the Council's assets; and the selling of expertise to others where possible.

It was confirmed that the Customer Contact, Service Delivery and Commercial arms of

the Council will be supported by one Professional Support Unit rather than the four currently within the Council.

ICT and Locations

Mrs. Hedges spoke about the development of ICT and locations.

The Council had invested in major ICT three and a half years ago, though very little investment had been made since then. In that time things have moved on, and with the current systems working to full capacity and with new ICT underpinning the changes, new investment was imperative to delivering the customer journey. Whether or not the new operating model was adopted, Mrs. Hedges said investment will be needed to maintain what is already being done.

Mrs. Hedges said the location(s) needed to be more accessible to customers, though the task was to reduce overall office accommodation space to reduce costs or increase revenue. Positive talks are progressing with Essex County Council in regards to moving the face-to-face contact to the Library, a location central to the town centre. Talks with other interested parties are still ongoing hence the need for a part of the supporting evidence having to be treated in confidence. Later in the debate and in response to Councillor Sutton, Mrs. Hedges acknowledged that some of the confidential information may have become public knowledge, though local press reports suggested a certain amount of misinterpretation.

Cultural Change

Mr. Pritchard provided more detail around the cultural change needed to bring about success to the overall changes and the governance arrangements to support the new structure.

The size of the task could not be underestimated, that to provide an organisation focused on customers would require full support from staff to implement and deliver the changes. This will be managed in a sensible stage by stage approach, moving through the transformation, taking people with us.

With regards to the new governance arrangements, Mr. Pritchard referred members to the structure chart provided within the presentation pack. The Committees to the left hand side of the page will remain in place, set by statute. Many of the companies / Joint Committees to the right hand side of the page are already in place, including Colchester Borough Homes and Colchester Community Stadium Company, Council owned companies. The scrutiny function was in place but there would need to be further discussions around the number of panels and terms of reference. The Trading Board was central to the new arrangement, sitting beside the Cabinet. Members of the board would need to be at the heart of the work of the Council's commercial activities, finding the most appropriate way of generating income / saving money. Task and Finish Groups have worked well within the current structure and these will remain a feature of the new arrangements, though allowing the Council to dispense with the Policy and Development Review Panel,

Financial Implications

Mrs. Hedges expanded on the financial implications, explaining that the figures are work in progress, and a more detailed analysis would be provided as the implementation progresses.

The implementation is dependent on ICT investment and mainly in the first two years, to provide future efficiencies and a positive ongoing revenue impact of up to £1.42m by year four of the implementation (2016/17), and a return on capital investment of £1.97m by year four.

It was felt that there was the potential for additional income over the first four years of £1.985m from other commercial activities.

In conclusion

Mr. Pritchard concluded the presentation by confirming the next steps following this scrutiny review, with the decision to be presented for approval to the Cabinet on 28 November.

This will be followed by the formation of an Implementation Group (IG) and Board, with the Chief Executive Officer chairing the IG. There will be a further round of roadshows in December as part of the staff consultation process and the introduction of the Communication Strategy.

Councillor Bentley thanked officers for the presentation.

In respect of the business case, Councillor Bentley asked that the word 'customer' was used appropriately, that whilst he accepted the use of the word to describe a range of customers, he felt residents and local taxpayers should be referred to as such. Councillor Bentley also agreed with Councillor Offen that consideration needed to be given to the name of the document.

Have Your Say

Councillor Will Quince addressed the Panel saying he was supportive of the concept that was presented, that in tough financial times there was a need for a fundamental change to the way the Council did business and improve the processes for the external users of Council services. Councillor Quince was very supportive of this direction of travel.

Councillor Quince did though, have an issue with the document being presented to the panel for scrutiny. Councillor Quince said the document, though well put together, did not constitute a business case. The document did not provide any detail only bottom-line figures, was very light in content even omitting details about cost savings and job losses.

Councillor Quince said he found it hard to understand how the Panel could effectively scrutinise the report with confidence, that more information was needed. But sadly this was the Panel's only opportunity to scrutinise the business case.

Councillor Quince said that given the scale of the project he would of hoped the Administration is passionate about the future change, but he doubted this because he hadn't heard from them. Councillor Quince asked the Administration to stand-up and back the proposals and say why they are needed.

Councillor Turrell in response, said scrutiny of the project will continue stage by stage, providing the detail members were requesting. This presentation was about the overall strategic direction to be taken by the Council. This had been the first opportunity to put the concept proposed into the public domain, a concept that was to be approved by Cabinet in November and one the Leader hoped will be owned by all Councillors and staff.

General Discussion

Councillor Cope said he found the diagrams illustrated within the business case and showing the current and proposed operating models difficult to follow and to determine the relationship between both.

Mr. Pritchard said he would be happy to populate the operating model with services once it was approved. It was the intention to undertake this work once the Cabinet had approved the proposals.

Mrs. Donnelly explained that the customer experience as illustrated in scenario 2 on page 6 of appendix A was intended to show the future experience of a very vulnerable customer, to show that the process was about ensuring at a very early stage of contact that the person had as much information to hand to be able to have their enquiry qualified with help and advice given as required. It was also the intention that in more complex cases the customer would where required meet with an officer sooner than is the case at present.

Councillor Cope said the information he was now being given should have been reflected in the business case.

Councillor Davies said that given the explanation of the illustrated models on page four of the business case, this was not clear in the illustration and she had misread what had been presented. Councillor Davies also felt appendix F, the Theme summary for Cultural Change read like something copied from an external publication, made little sense and didn't believe it would be understood by many people reading it. Mr. Pritchard said the intention of the operating model illustrations was that by showing the 'As is' model with the current structure of six service provider blocks, plus the separated block showing the management activity it could for comparative purposes be assessed against the 'To be' model.

Mr. Pritchard confirmed that appendix F had not been copied from any publication, but was drafted by himself, and whilst you can never be sure of what people want to be included within the document, the intention was to provide some text that explained the current model in respect of procedures and processes, the way people work (with examples), was embedded in the culture of the Council, but this would need to change if the proposed model was to succeed. Mrs. Donnelly confirmed that a new Strategy

was being drafted that will include the cultural changes needed to fulfil the needs of the new operating model. Mr. Pritchard said the current way of working was how things have always been done, but now it was imperative that the organisation began to think as a commercial organisation where appropriate to ensure all aspects of service are provided effectively, efficiently and to a higher standard.

Councillor Sutton expressed surprise that the document had been nearly two years in the making giving that until now there had not been any political input into the process. Councillor Sutton reiterated the need for the business case to provide more statistical and evidence based information and governance detail. For example, membership of the Trading Board, figures to support the quoted bottom line savings and the expected number of staff redundancies.

Councillor Turrell said this decision was about approving the strategic vision that a lot of the detail is not known at present, but will be presented for scrutiny as and when the information becomes available. Councillor Turrell said she would be happy to discuss all the information presently available with all the groups.

In response to Councillor Sutton, Mr. Pritchard said the Council had completed many fundamental service reviews over the last 2.5 – 3 years that had resulted in significant staff redundancies, though the number of compulsory redundancies in that time had been something like nine. The intention always is to firstly create a structure and to ensure space from existing staff by not filling vacancies or filling on an interim; part-time or temporary basis. Mr. Pritchard gave the Senior Management Team as an example, where two posts, those vacated by the Heads of Resource Management and Strategic Policy remain vacant pending the outcome of the FSR. Mrs. Donnelly confirmed that officers can provide the supporting documents that underpin the business case.

In response to Councillor Hazell in respect of governance, and the effect on Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) and whether there was adequate provision for scrutiny, Mr. Pritchard said discussions concerning the CBH Housing Revenue Account review are still ongoing and included arrangements with CBH in regards to moving to an all embracing universal customer contact environment. Ultimately, residents and tenants remain Council customers and a fully integrated environment would be a preferred option. Mr. Pritchard said the CBH Management Agreement comes up for renewal in August 2013 and there are options on how to progress beyond this, including continuing with the current ALMO model or bringing the company back in-house. Mr. Pritchard agreed that the second option would mean a change in role for the current Chief Executive Officer of CBH.

In respect of scrutiny, Mr. Pritchard said the number of scrutiny panels was not being suggested or finalised and a lot will depend on the remit of e.g. The Trading Board. This could reduce the current remit of the scrutiny panels.

Councillor Frame was supportive of the concept presented to the Panel, welcoming the opportunity for the Council to move with the times and addressing the current economic problems facing all Councils. Councillor Frame noted the ICT risks as mentioned in the report but wondered what the risks would be associated with the Trading arm of the Council, given in his opinion that the suggested £30k cost in year one of the

commercial trading arm was very low. Mr. Pritchard said the risk associated with the commercial development was high level given this was a newer area of work. There are a number of governance models that the Council will consider for its own trading arrangements. The way officers worked and the physical use of resources had to be done in a commercially minded environment, to be able to increase future revenue streams, rather than just selling off assets for a short term gain.

Councillor Frame said it would be helpful if members had more detail around the estimate of year on year income from commercial activity leading to a £1.46m of anticipated income by 2016. Councillor Turrell said it was anticipated that revenue streams could be improved e.g. trade waste and the use of Council owned land. Mrs. Hedges said to improve trade waste income was about competing more effectively, and it had been shown e.g. Business Alarms, that income generation was more than just an aspiration and that there is a level of resilience in the estimates.

Giving that so many councillors held the view that a greater level of detail was required within the report so that the scrutiny process could be more effective, they requested that for future reports the detail is provided at a separate briefing in advance of the meeting.

Within the Executive Summary, Councillor Offen requested the wording for the fifth bullet point to be amended to read 'effective and efficient service delivery based on the standards of the best providers', not as stated in the report the 'best private sector providers'. Councillor Offen also requested clarification over the suggested £0.5m net saving from the HRA, saying he was of the understanding that this money was untouchable. Councillor Offen also believed there will be a need for more scrutiny throughout this overall process and suggested the comment of one single scrutiny panel meeting on a monthly basis as mentioned in the future governance arrangements should be taken out of the business case.

Mrs. Hedges said the HRA account is not untouchable, but it is ring-fenced and cannot normally benefit the Revenue Account. No savings mentioned in the business case included HRA money, and was all pure revenue.

Councillor Naish said despite all the assurances made about providing resources for those customers who would wish to retain a face-to-face contact with Council officers, he remained concerned about the ordinary people who will inevitably disappear off the radar. Councillor Naish was not surprised at this proposed new concept, saying the scruffy appearance of the Angel Court building gave weight to the rumours about vacating the building. Councillor Turrell said there will be a cultural change for customers as well as the organisation, with a need for the customer to deal with the Council in a new way. Councillor Turrell understood some customers will not wish to change, and the Library, plus other satellite libraries will provide the opportunity for customers to speak to officers face-to-face.

In response to Councillor G. Oxford, Councillor Turrell said the makeup of the Trading Board will be politically balanced. Mr. Pritchard said the existing staff resources will ultimately be reduced to make the anticipated savings, that there would be no growth, but some reductions. Mrs. Donnelly understood that some of the text within the

business case was inconsistent and these will be changed for inclusion in the November Cabinet report. Mrs. Donnelly said simplified processes will enable a reduction in face-to-face and telephony enquires but understood the need to retain a face-to-face resource. There was however an expectation that the 83% of current Customer Service Contact through face-to-face and telephony will be reduced significantly.

Councillor P. Higgins said when the future ICT needs is determined consideration should be given to 'cloud computing'. In response to Councillor Higgins in respect of the style of writing within the business case, Mr. Pritchard said it was written for the Cabinet but with the knowledge that staff also understood the language. A document intended for the public would be written differently. Councillor Hazell said members are members of the public and as such the report should be written in a language for all to understand, and questioned whether it was right for staff to be talking this language.

Councillor Bentley said the document sets out the direction of travel for the Council and whilst the business case without detail was difficult to understand he considered the document to be a visionary aspiration. That said he still wondered what the staffing implications will be, how many posts would be lost.

Mr. Pritchard said the staff modelling exercise had been completed and it was anticipated that there would be a reduction of between 35-40 posts. In addition to this, the level of management was anticipated to shrink from 10% to 9% reducing the staff levels further, with an anticipated overall reduction of approximately 45 posts, to be lost over a period of time. Councillor Bentley said he couldn't understand why this information needed to be teased-out, that a lot of the information provided verbally to the meeting could have been included within the business case.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Thanked officers for their presentation and responses to questions from the Panel.
- ii) Considered the report 'Fundamental Service review of Customer Contact', and asked the Administration to consider and note the comments made by the Panel members, particularly in relation to sense checking future documents on English, and the use of Local Government phrases, and references within the report to one scrutiny panel meeting monthly.
- iii) Requested a change of title to properly reflect what the review is about and that more detail in respect of the staffing implications should be included in the business case.
- iv) Requested the opportunity to pre-scrutinise the new Communication Strategy before being formally adopted.
- v) Requested that when future reports on the FSR UCC are reviewed, the detail is provided at a separate briefing in advance of the meeting, to avoid numerous requests for that information at the meeting.

- vi) Requested further detail on the risk matrix as soon as possible.

17. Localised Council Tax Support 2013/14

Mrs. Sara Wilcock, Project Manager, and Mr. Sean Plummer, Finance Manager presented the report on Localised Council Tax Support 2013/14.

Mrs. Wilcock informed the Panel that Council Tax Benefit is to be replaced with a Local Council Tax Support Scheme, regulated through the Local Government Finance Act.

Providing some context, Mrs. Wilcock said the Welfare Reform Act abolishes Council Tax Benefit and replaces it with a Local Council Tax Support Scheme which has to be approved by the Council by 31 January 2013. A new Local Government Finance Act with associated regulations will set out how Councils must create a new scheme. This will mean all Working Age Local Council Tax Support awards will be based on criteria set & administered by each Billing Authority, having consulted with major preceptors such as the County, Fire & Police authorities. The new Act will prescribe exactly how authorities will support pensioners with little change in how their entitlement is currently decided.

Mrs Wilcock said the Council must agree a Scheme, but if it did not then the 'default scheme' will be imposed upon us the cost of which would almost certainly be higher than the level of grant funding provided. An agreed approach across Essex has been to deliver a cost neutral scheme, all be it individual authorities have tailored their schemes to reflect local circumstances.

It was explained that due to the financial risks associated with Local Council Tax Support, representatives from all Essex billing authorities & Essex County Council have worked together to develop a county wide framework, which are reflected in the proposals in the report. Draft proposals for the Scheme were considered by the Policy Review & Development Panel (PRDP) on the 6 August 2012, resulting in the Panel recommending the development of a cost neutral scheme & that the criteria proposed be approved.

The current Government subsidy meets the full cost of Council Tax Benefit and this year our expected cost is expected to be around £11.5 million, rising to £11.9 million next year. From April 2013 the Government will provide a fixed grant to be paid to the billing & major preceptors. Indicative grant figures for the level of funding for our scheme indicate we will receive a total of £9.9 million, leaving an estimated funding gap of £2 million.

The funding gap can only be born by Working Age claimants and currently 61% of these pay no Council Tax. The main effect of spreading the cost over all Working Age claimants is that the majority who currently pay nothing will therefore have to pay something. Using the recommended scheme criteria as agreed by the PRDP and model this against the number of people affected (as illustrated in paragraph 5.6 of the report) it is anticipated that there will be a saving c£2m.

Mrs. Wilcock said the scheme seeks to protect vulnerable claimants and to safeguard against child poverty with a variety of measures such as allowing additional allowances & premiums. Some current safeguards for customers who are blind or who also receive Attendance Allowance or Disability Living Allowance will also continue, such as exempting them from non-dependant deductions.

To incentivise work, in essence the current Extended Payment scheme will continue, this provides assistance to help long-term unemployed people in the form of an additional four weeks Council Tax support at the level they were previously entitled to before they started work. The PDRP also supported the principle to develop an Exceptional Hardship fund, this would avoid distress and financial hardship for vulnerable customers, and funding for this is currently being reviewed.

In conclusion Mrs. Wilcock said the proposed scheme was open to consultation for the period 1 August 2012 to the 12 September, during which time 119 responses were received. 75% of these were from customers who are currently in receipt of Council Tax Benefit. A summary of the answers & the detailed comments are provided within the papers.

Since the publication of the agenda papers further additional information has been announced by the Government in the form of a one-off grant.

Mr. Plummer said the Government is to make £100m available for one year to support local authorities who adopt schemes that comply with criteria set by Government.

If the Council was to agree a scheme that complied with the criteria the grant that would be received is as follows:-

Colchester Borough Council £35,006, Essex County Council £196,952, Essex Police £24,776 and Essex Fire £12,037, providing a total of £268,771.

Mr. Plummer said the deadline for applications for the grant is 15 February 2013 with payments made in March 2013. Authorities can only apply after 31 January (i.e. when local schemes are required to have been agreed).

Mr. Plummer explained the criteria for applying for a grant namely; i) Those who would be entitled to 100% support under current council tax benefit arrangements pay between zero and no more than 8.5% of their net council tax liability; ii) The taper rate does not increase above 25%; and iii) There is no sharp reduction in support for those entering work.

Mr. Plummer said for Colchester, the main area affected in the current Council proposal was the maximum liability being set at 80% (i.e. paying a minimum of 20% of Council Tax). To qualify for the grant would mean that the scheme would need to change to ensure that those currently in receipt of 100% Council Tax benefit would pay a maximum of 8.5%. Other parts of the current proposals may also be impacted if the scheme was to be altered to comply with the grant. A prudent approach has therefore been taken to estimating the impact.

A table was presented that showed the best estimate of the total saving that would be

delivered if the scheme was altered to comply with the grant, and the overall net funding gap for the proposals. The table showed the funding gap to be nil for the proposals in the report and £1.061m for the grant compliant scheme.

The Panel was notified of the timetable and consultation, with the Cabinet being asked to recommend the scheme in November, for approval by Council on the 6 December 2012. The current proposals within the report have been considered by the Policy Review and Development Panel and have been subject to the required consultation with the public and major precepting bodies. If the Council was to propose significant changes to the current proposals to comply with the grant it would be necessary to consider whether to complete an updated consultation exercise.

Councillor Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, confirmed to Councillor Bentley that the recommendations to Cabinet would not change as a result of the Government's announced grant, and also confirmed that as far as he was aware, only Uttlesford District Council in Essex would apply for the said grant.

Mr. Plummer confirmed to Councillor Bentley that the timescales were so tight it would not be feasible to undertake further consultation before the 31 January 2013.

Councillor Offen commended officers on the report, saying the decision to be made by Cabinet was fair and straight forward and the £35k benefit by entering into the Government grant scheme for one year was not worth the risks and felt the Cabinet should not enter into this scheme. Councillor Oxford concurred with the comments of Councillor Offen.

In response to Councillor Naish's concerns regards to the continued long delays in processing benefit claims in general, Councillor Smith said the proposed changes to the scheme will simplify the process, make it more effective and in turn reduce the time to process claims.

In response to Councillor Davies's concerns about the possible increase in fraud, Mrs. Wilcock said the Fraud Team within Resource Management will continue their stringent check of the information provided as part of the current fraud prevention and detection policy. The Fraud Team are very active and this work will continue. Councillor Smith said Resource Management continue with the risk-based assessment of claims, concentrating resources on 'high' risk claims and this has and continues to prove very effective.

Mr. Plummer concurred with Councillor Frame concerning the importance of a arrears contingency given the risks associated with billing many residents with Council Tax Bills who had previously not been required to pay. Mr. Plummer said officers are being proactive in this work and when officers are making contact with these residents the residents are being forewarned of their duty to pay under the new regulations. Colchester will seek to maintain the current level of collection rates to minimize the level of write-offs. Essex County Council is making a provision for a 'Hardship Fund', but this will a very small amount, thought to be in the region of £20k. Councillor Smith said the feature of the bid was the need to be proactive in advising customers in advance of the changes, and Colchester has been pro-active. Mrs. Hedges said the work so far

undertaken had attracted attention and Colchester was happy to share this work with other authorities.

Mr. Plummer confirmed to Councillor Hazell that in the region of 8,000 local people are effected by the changes to varying degrees. But it is the Billing Authorities responsibility to collect as high a percentage of the Council Tax Bills as is possible though the risk of non-payment is a shared risk to the Council, Essex County Council and the Fire and Police services.

Councillor Frame said the Council Tax Policy Guide was a long complicated document though it was intended to help Council Tax Payers. He could not envisage many people wanting to plough through the document and suggested it was simplified. Mrs. Wilcock said the document will be simplified in anticipation of the scheme being approved. Resource Management will be writing to customers and explaining how they will be affected personally in advance of the billing operation, and officers are involving and advising the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and voluntary welfare groups about the changes. Mrs. Hedges said the CAB are experiencing increased enquiries about the future changes to welfare benefit, but they to are experiencing a reduction in resources and there is evidence that customers are being signposted back to the Council.

Councillor Bentley asked that the Chairman of the Finance and Audit Scrutiny Panel is briefed on these changes and requested that a note was added to the Cabinet report to support the partnership work with the voluntary sector.

RESOLVED that the Panel commented on and noted the report on Localised Council Tax Support 2013/14 to be presented to the Cabinet meeting on 28 November 2012.

18. Work Programme

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