

**COMMERCIAL & HUMAN RESOURCES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

4 November 2003
(4.30 – 7.50 pm)

PRESENT: Councillors White (Chair), Adigun-Harris, Boyce, Bradnack, Downham, Dryden, Ellis-Miller, Howell, Liddle, and Stebbings.

Executive Councillor: The Leader, Ian Nimmo-Smith deputising for Amanda Taylor

FOR THE INFORMATION OF THE COUNCIL

03/CHR/40 **MINUTES**

Councillor Adigun-Harris asked that his name be removed from page 5, second paragraph, first bullet point, as he had not made these points. The minutes having been amended they were agreed as a correct record.

03/CHR/41 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence.

03/CHR/42 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Howell declared a personal interest in minute number 03/CHR/44 as he now worked for the Council's external auditors.

03/CHR/43 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

No members of the public wished to address the Scrutiny Committee.

03/CHR/44 **SERVICE PLANS and General Fund Revised Revenue & Capital Budgets 2003-04** (see also *Record of Decision 03/CHR/25*)

The Director of Central Services introduced the item highlighting that the plans at this stage gave the current financial position and the performance against performance indicators approved last year.

The Accountant explained a change to the figures in Appendix A of the report because the capital accounting charges were a contra to the Asset Management Revenue Account and did not require funding from Reserves. So, recommendation b) should read "Approve, with any amendments, the revised revenue budgets for 2003/04, as shown in Appendix A to this report for submission to Council, including a request **to repay to reserves £51,410.**" (changes highlighted in bold).

Councillor Bradnack spoke of his concerns about 2 aspects of the Service Plans:

1. Actions described as relating to the Medium Term Objectives of Better services

did not necessarily mean an improvement in the quality of the service. He wanted this criterion re-considered. It would also be helpful to have a Service Improvement Plan for each service.

2. In some plans, target completion dates were described as 'on-going' so it was difficult to assess progress.

The Director of Central Services spoke to the overview of the Service Plans for her department. There had been slippage on the service plan actions in some areas because of recruitment problems but overall there had been good performance against performance indicators.

Members then asked questions about each Service Plan in turn.

Democratic Services

Councillor Liddle asked about charges for receiving committee agenda and reports. The Committee Manager explained that all agenda and reports were now on the Council's website. Commercial organisations who still wished to receive paper copies were charged.

IT Contract Management

Members focused on the fact that most target completion dates were passed or very near and yet the individual projects had not been completed. Was there a more useful way to assess progress for that service?

Legal Services

In response to Councillor Liddle's question about the absence of a rationing mechanism, the committee noted that there was more work for the Service from customers internal to the Council than there were resources to meet the demand.

Property and Building Services

Councillor Bradnack asked why there was no target set for performance indicator BV180a. The Head of Property and Building Services explained that it was difficult for the Council to set its own target for this indicator and that figures from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister were being used.

Reception and Office Services

The Committee noted, in relation to the Project Appraisal presented with the Service Plan, the Record of Decision from the Executive Councillor for IT Strategy tabled at the meeting. The decision made on 28 October was not to pursue the idea of members' dial up connectivity but to further research the options for Data Connectivity and report to a subsequent meeting of the Strategic IT Scrutiny Committee. Members were not satisfied that the proposed Data Connectivity scheme would provide the most cost-effective

solution. They were concerned that the Voice connectivity should meet individual members requirements and circumstances.

Accountancy Services

The Head of Accountancy Services introduced the plan, highlighting the improvements in efficiency obtained through co-operation with other departments and joint working arrangements. Work planned in relation to the development of on-line payment facility for debtors accounts had been delayed as this was linked to the corporate project to redevelop the Council's website. Performance against the local performance indicator for closure of accounts was achieved and superior to that of most other local authorities and that for the percentage of supplier invoices paid by BACS compared very favourably with other councils.

The Committee noted these achievements.

City Services External Trading

The Director of City Services said that the key element to the plan was partnership working.

In response to questions, the Committee noted that, should the limit to the expansion of the service without the need for additional staff be reached, then they would be consulted and that the service worked to the standards required by external customers even though those were different to the standards for internal clients.

Internal Audit

The Head of Internal Audit spoke of the considerable improvement in the service during the year due to a low turnover in staff. She was confident that all targets would be met by the end of the year.

In response to questions about the target costs per £million of turnover and per chargeable day, she said that the figures were based on those provided by CIPFA and agreed to provide members with further clarification of the meaning of the figures.

Economic Development & Tourism

Councillor Bradnack saw the use of the word "on-going" to describe the performance against targets as not allowing the committee to assess outcomes; evidence was required if scrutiny was to work. Councillor Howell raised the issue of whether targets were in fact measurable. The committee noted that improvement plans might be a way to address these issues.

Human Resources

The Head of Human Resources highlighted the major pieces of work during the year – single status and the Occupational health provision.

She said that performance indicators relating to the percentage of top 5% of earners that are women/ are from BME communities and the number of working days/shifts lost to sickness absence had action plans in place to address their below target performance.

Members asked questions about the cost of the Employee Transport Incentive Scheme and possible future problems in staff recruitment and retention which would impair the capacity to meet targets and could add to costs.

Revenue Services

Councillor Bradnack was particularly concerned about the performance for benefit renewals against targets especially as the forecast for 2003/04 was less than the actual for 2002/03 which in fact had been 9% below target. He was concerned that the explanation of installation of new software for the previous year was not the only reason for performance coming in below target.

Councillor Howell asked if the service was taking the lead for the whole council in the provision of on-line payment systems and what safeguards there were that the best system would be obtained.

Having considered each individual service plan, the Committee prepared to vote on the recommendations in the covering report.

Following the Record of Decision mentioned above, the Committee and the Leader agreed to amend recommendation 2c by deleting the words "and data" so that the recommendation read " Approve the project appraisal for Members Voice Connectivity Implementation (contained in the Service Plan for Reception and Office Services and Corporate Telephones)".

The Committee agreed with recommendations 2a and 2d (by 6 votes to 0) to recommendation 2b, as amended above, (by 6 votes to 0), and to recommendation 2c, as amended above, by 6 votes to 1.

The Leader agreed to the recommendations as amended.

03/CHR/45 PROCUREMENT OF A REPLACEMENT HUMAN RESOURCES/PAYROLL SYSTEM (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/26*)

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed to the recommendation.

03/CHR/46 PROCUREMENT OF REPLACEMENT OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/27*)

In response to questions, the Head of Human Resources explained that the current provider held surgeries for staff in Cambridge itself and that the previous provider had

not been re-appointed as they were not flexible about what they were prepared to provide.

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed to the recommendation.

03/CHR/47 **KEY DECISION REVENUE SERVICES BEST VALUE FUNDAMENTAL SERVICE REVIEW [BVFSR]** *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR28/)*

Councillor Bradnack commented on the challenging but realistic targets suggested by the consultants but that the performance against targets in the service plan was dropping. So, were the targets set good enough?

The Head of Revenues Service said that targets had been set on the cautious side because other changes to regulations were anticipated.

The Leader said that setting the targets for the coming year at the January Committee meeting would be important and that they needed to be robust. The recommendation was the best way forward and the situation was under on-going review.

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed to the recommendation.

03/CHR/48 **RECOVERY OF OVERPAID HOUSING & COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT** *(see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/29)*

The Head of Revenue Services introduced the report saying that the request for members to approve the procedures was as a result of feedback from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate and the Best Value Fundamental Service Review.

Councillor Bradnack asked if there had been any discussion with the independent advice centres as they had more expertise than members in the practical aspects of implementing these procedures and the consequences for the public affected. The Head of Revenue Services assured him that there had been considerable discussions.

In response to a question from Councillor Howell about whether the new procedures were to address the poor performance of this activity, the Head of Revenue Services said that the new software system meant that letters were produced more quickly and that there were better payment facilities. The Leader endorsed this view.

Councillor Adigun-Harris raised concerns about the procedure where the overpayment had been made to a landlord who then refused to pay and the council

could claim from the individual claimant.

Despite assurances, Councillors Bradnack and Howell asked that the committee not approve the recommendation until the advice agencies had been consulted.

The Leader proposed an amendment to recommendation 2.2 (changes in bold) so that it read "The Executive Councillor is asked to approve the procedures to be adopted by Revenue Services in the recovery of overpaid Housing and Council Tax Benefits **subject to comments from the independent advice agencies**".

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 1) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as amended.

The Leader agreed to the recommendation as amended.

03/CHR/49 **APPOINTMENTS TO OUTSIDE BODY** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/30*)

As there were no other nominations, the Committee agreed the appointment of Mrs Sandra Baker as the Council's representative as a Trustee of Cambridge United Charities.

The Leader approved the appointment.

03/CHR/50 **COUNCIL TAX IRRECOVERABLE DEBTS TO BE WRITTEN-OFF** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/31*)

The Committee agreed (by 7 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed to the recommendation.

03/CHR/51 **NNDR [Business Rates] IRRECOVERABLE DEBTS TO BE WRITTEN-OFF** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/32*)

The Committee agreed (by 7 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed to the amended recommendation.

03/CHR/52 **GENERAL DEBTS – BAD DEBTS FOR WRITE OFF** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/33*)

The Committee agreed (by 7 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Executive Councillor agreed the recommendation.

03/CHR/53 **THE FRATER, 6A PRIORY ROAD - PROPOSAL TO USE STRATEGY
FUND RESOURCES & EXTERNAL RESOURCES TO REFURBISH AND
EXTEND** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/34*)

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed the recommendation.

03/CHR/54 **KEY DECISION LAND ON THE NORTH SIDE OF KINGS HEDGES
ROAD** (*see also Record of Decision 03/CHR/35*)

The Committee agreed (by 6 votes to 0) with the recommendations for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed the recommendations.

03/CHR/55 **KEY DECISION THE DISPOSAL OF LAND, SEYMOUR STREET
CAMBRIDGE, KING STREET HOUSING SOCIETY** (*see also Record of
Decision 03/CHR/36*)

The Committee agreed (by 5 votes to 0) with the recommendation for the Executive Councillor as stated in the report.

The Leader agreed the recommendation.

The meeting ended at 7.50 pm

CHAIR