

## **BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET**

### **RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

Monday, 15th July, 2013

**Present:-** Councillors John Bull (Chair), Colin Barrett, Charles Gerrish, Barry Macrae and Nigel Roberts

#### **14 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

#### **15 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

#### **16 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Councillors Roger Symonds (substituted by Councillor Manda Rigby) and Paul Myers (substituted by Councillor Patrick Anketell-Jones) sent their apologies.

#### **17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were none.

#### **18 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN**

There was none.

#### **19 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING**

Shelagh James made a statement to the Panel regarding 'Save Our Larkhall Public Toilets'. A copy of the statement can be found on the Panel's Minute Book.

In response to a question from Councillor Barrett, Mrs James explained that there were no alternatives as the Oriel Hall is only open for short periods and the local cafes and pubs are not happy for members of the public to use their toilets. She further explained that the ladies toilet in the pub was located upstairs so there would be access issues.

In response to a question from Councillor Bull, Mrs James said that she did not agree that people should pay to use public toilets as there are public health considerations.

In response to a question from Councillor Anketell-Jones, Mrs James that she did not think it was realistic to think that the building could be sold and a smaller provision for public toilets could be made.

Councillor Bull thanked Mrs James and explained that the Panel would pass on her concerns to the relevant Cabinet Member (Councillor Dave Dixon).

## **20 MINUTES**

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chairman.

## **21 CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURES**

Ian Savigar - Divisional Director Customer Services and David Langman – Customer Services, introduced the report. It was explained that complaints come in to all departments and are collated by Customer Services and at present a new system 'Customer Relationship Management System' is being introduced. The new system will encourage officers to see complaints as feedback and opportunities. They also explained that the new system would drive a standardisation of approach to complaints. The officers explained that the new policy is detailed at Appendix 2 to the report.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Roberts asked that officers be trained to record all complaints, he also asked if there would be any trend analysis. The officer explained that using the word 'feedback' will hopefully open out reports of complaints and officers are encouraged to capture wider information than they do at present. Regarding trend analysis, the officer explained that some analysis has been started with some experienced complaints officers. The Divisional Director explained that there was some work to be done at Divisional Director level on how complaints are perceived. Councillor Roberts asked the officers to pass on to the Divisional Directors that the Resources Panel see complaints as an important way of understanding ways we can improve as a Council.

Councillor Gerrish endorsed the above comments. He added that customers should have the process of complaints explained to them, for example why an officer from a different department would be dealing with the complaint. He added that an organisation is judged by the way it handles complaints and officers should be encouraged to see this as a positive process. He added that Cabinet members often pick up complaints and deal with them direct with their lead officer, he asked that these complaints be picked up by the system. Overall he felt that the system was moving in the right direction. The officer acknowledged these points.

In response to a query, the officers explained that in the new system, complaints would be tracked and costs would be reduced, the plan is to correct the old system. Councillor Macrae stated that he hoped that in the new system there would be more of a degree of urgency in how complaints are dealt with. The Divisional Director

explained that the ethos of Customer Services was to deal with complaints at the point of contact.

Councillor Anketell-Jones explained that a lot of time and money can be spent with a complaint if it is allowed to proceed to stage two. He felt a lot more complaints could be settled at stage one or before. He pointed to the Ombudsman leaflet which recommends that complaints are dealt with by direct contact with the complainant; he recommended that in the new system, stages 1 and 2 could be preceded by face to face contact. The officer agreed that dialogue is the key and that was built in to the new system. The Strategic Director, Andrew Pate commented that the personal touch does not come across in the policy but that this must be conveyed to staff. He added that he would like to see a tightening up around vexatious complaints.

Councillor Rigby stated that having a named person as the contact in a complaint would be helpful. She added that she had had feedback in her ward that Council Connect do not always respond until a Councillor writes to them.

Councillor Barrett asked about a report on complaints to Members, the officer explained that this was very labour intensive but he could provide the figures. The Chair stated that maybe performance figures could be provided as part of this information.

Councillor Roberts thanked the Council Connect staff for their work.

## **22 BUSINESS RATES AND COUNCIL TAX - COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT**

Ian Savigar – Divisional Director Customer Services, introduced the report and explained how the new system would work with regards to business rates. He explained that he was also learning from other authorities who had a higher rate of collection. He also explained that after taking questions on business rates, he would give the Panel information regarding Council Tax.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Bull asked when the figures would be given as to the potential amount that could be collected. The officer explained that this would be contained in the Panel's performance report.

Councillor Barrett noted that there had been a 1% reduction in collection and asked what this amounted to? The officer explained that this would be approximately £600,000 of which this Council's share would be £300,000. He explained that he wanted to improve the collection rate. Councillor Macrae stated that he hoped that staff cuts had not been the cause of this reduction in collection rates.

### Council Tax

The officer gave a verbal update on Council Tax collection. He explained that full Council agrees the tax base level and then his department issue the correct bills (with the correct exemptions, discounts etc.) and then carry out debt recovery. He reported that the collection rate is 98% for this authority which was 8<sup>th</sup> in the UK which was excellent. He explained that there would be a change this year with the

Council Tax Benefit System and the issue would be how the collection rate is affected and so far there had only been a 0.1% drop which is good considering the changes.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Bull asked if the problems may come when the second instalment is due and the officer agreed that there were more problems later in the year. He explained that some people have suggested that the Council Tax be attached to benefits and that he had suggested this as a change in the process.

The Chair thanked the officers.

## **23 REVIEW OF DELIVERY OF BUDGET SAVINGS AND INCOME**

Tim Richens – Divisional Director Finance, gave a presentation to the Panel (a copy of this presentation is kept on the minute book for this Panel). The presentation covered the following:

- Budget savings and income delivery update
- Background
- Delivery and Monitoring
- Savings and Income Update
- Years 2 and 3 Items
- 2014/15 Budget Process

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Gerrish asked that the issue of adult care services be looked at in terms of the impact of budget savings. The Chair stated that he would flag this up with the Wellbeing Panel.

Councillor Macrae stated that it looked like staff are consulted on budget savings but service users are not. He stated that it also looked like services are cut before other things are looked at. The Strategic Director stated that this was a harsh interpretation.

Councillor Gerrish stated that it should be a learning curve for Members not to put something in the budget in February when consultation has not yet taken place and expect the saving to be made by 1<sup>st</sup> April of that year.

Councillor Gerrish asked for an update in September from the Property Estates Manager on how much of the budget savings he hopes to achieve.

The Strategic Director explained that this was a major programme of delivery on savings and good progress had been made on the three year budget and programme but it was early days. He explained that the next budget will contain some possible amendments to the current budget and that this was a different way of working. Councillor Roberts stated that it was better to have a three year budget and that he felt it allowed members to think about priorities.

Councillor Bull stated that we should not be complacent regarding reduction of expenditure without thinking about the loss of jobs.

## **24 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE**

Councillor David Bellotti – Cabinet Member for Community Resources updated the Panel on the following:

- He reported that the benefits cap had come in this week and there had been a rise in the number of people getting back into work. He is monitoring the situation carefully.
- The Corporate Audit Committee had recommended that this authority find a partner to provide internal audit, he explained that when there is a proposal, he will bring it to this Panel.
- Keynsham regeneration is doing well, the development is on time and on budget.
- He reported that the authority is working with the Government on the pilot for Universal Credit and had been invited to be one of the path finders which means we would have an influence on how the policy develops. He explained that Ian Savigar – Divisional Director Customer Services had done a lot of work on this and is one of the country's top officers.
- Regarding City Deal (South Gloucestershire meet on 17<sup>th</sup> July and the LEP Board meet on 16<sup>th</sup> July) the approval process is progressing.
- Regarding the spending review, he explained that the media have reported some funding for the Council regarding health, he did not yet know if this was new money. Some bad news is that the Government have decided to take £400million from the new homes bonus and put it in Enterprise Partnerships, he explained that the Council is lobbying against this.

The Panel raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Regarding a question from Councillor Gerrish, the Cabinet Member reported that we are still on target for a lead tenant for September regarding Keynsham development.

Councillor Gerrish asked that the process be explained fully to staff regarding the new building. The Cabinet Member agreed.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member.

## **25 PANEL FUTURE WORKPLAN**

With the following additions, the future work plan was noted:

- September – Update from Property Estates Manager – how far he is achieving budget savings (from Councillor Gerrish)
- November – Update on Budget Savings and Income Delivery – T.Richens

The meeting ended at 8:20pm

Chair(person) .....

Date Confirmed and Signed .....

**Prepared by Democratic Services**