

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CUSTOMER AND CENTRAL SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held at Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Monday, 15 November 2010

PRESENT

Cllr J G Jamieson (Chairman)
Cllr D J Hopkin (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs J A E Clarke
P A Duckett
A Fahn

Cllrs M Gibson
D Jones
Ms J Nunn

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs R W Johnstone

Substitutes: Cllrs J N Young (In place of R W Johnstone)

Members in Attendance: Cllrs D Bowater
M R Jones
Mrs J G Lawrence
H J Lockey
S F Male
A Shadbolt
B J Spurr
R C Stay
J Street
Mrs C Turner
Mrs P E Turner MBE

Officers in Attendance: Mr J Atkinson – Head of Legal and Democratic Services
Mr P Ball – Finance Manager
Mr M Bowmer – Assistant Director Financial Services/Chief Finance Officer
Mr I Brown – Interim Assistant Director Assets
Mr B Carter – Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Ms D Clarke – Interim Assistant Director People
Mr R Ellis – Director of Customer and Shared Services
Mr C Jones – Assistant Director Customer and Systems
Ms E Malarky – Head of Planning and Programme Management
Mr L Manning – Committee Services Officer

CCS/10/79 **Minutes**

RESOLVED

that the Minutes of the meeting of the Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 October 2010 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CCS/10/80 **Members' Interests**

(a) **Personal Interests:-**

Member	Item	Nature of Interest	Present or Absent during discussion
Cllr M Gibson	10	A Central Bedfordshire Council representative on Mid Bedfordshire CAB.	Present

(b) **Personal and Prejudicial Interests:-**

Member	Item	Nature of Interest	Present or Absent during discussion
Cllr A Fahn	13	Operates a business within a Central Bedfordshire Council property.	Absent (Note: Cllr Fahn had to leave the meeting before this item was discussed)

(c) **Any political whip in relation to any agenda item:-**

None notified.

CCS/10/81 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman advised the meeting that the running order of the agenda had changed and Item 16 (Treasury Management Quarter Two Report) would now

be considered after Item 11 (Capital Programme Review) and before Item 12 (Budget Task Force Recommendations – Portfolio Holder's Response).

CCS/10/82 **Petitions**

No petitions were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 2 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

CCS/10/83 **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

No questions, statements or deputations were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

CCS/10/84 **Call-In**

No decisions of the Executive had been called-in to be reviewed in accordance with the Call-In Procedure as set out in Part D2 of the Constitution.

CCS/10/85 **Requested Items**

No items were referred to the Committee for consideration at the request of a Member under Procedure Rule 3.1 of Part D2 of the Constitution.

CCS/10/86 **Portfolio Holders' Updates**

The Committee received verbal updates from the Portfolio Holders for Customers, Systems and Assets, Finance, Governance and People and Policy and Performance.

The Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets reported that, following the introduction of the single contact centre, there had been a marked improvement in the service level response to customer telephone calls. He stated that the number of customer calls received in August had been approximately 43,000 with a successful service level response rate of 47% but by October this had risen to 82% for approximately 43,400 customer calls.

With regard to ICT projects the Portfolio Holder reported that the electoral administration system had been replaced, former Mouchel employees had been transferred to the Council, the SWIFT software had been completely disaggregated and the Code of Compliance (CoCo) to enable the Council to access Government information on-line had been completed.

The Portfolio Holder next stated that although the medium term property strategy had only recently started the means of reducing the current range of office space occupied by the Council was being identified.

Following a query regarding the service level response at the single contact centre the meeting noted that callers could expect their calls to be answered within 20 seconds. Following a further query the Assistant Director Customer and Systems undertook to email Members with information on the longest waiting times experienced by callers. Based on his personal experience another Member praised the quality of the service offered with regard to telephone calls and emails but expressed concern that it was not possible to follow the progress made following the submission of a form. The meeting noted that, whilst it was not possible to do so at present, a customer relationship management system had been specified for future adoption and this would allow Members to monitor progress. In connection with this the Assistant Director Customer and Systems advised the meeting that the Customer and Shared Services Directorate did not administer all services and, should a problem arise relating to an area administered by another Directorate, then it was not until a member of the public complained that the Customer and Shared Services Directorate became aware that a problem existed.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People stated that the Quarter 2 budget monitoring report for 2010/11 would be submitted to committees at their December meetings. He stated that he was pleased with the efficiencies which had been made and that consideration was also being given to alternative measures to ensure the budget met the efficiencies target. He added that the base budget proposals for 2011/12 would also be submitted for consideration in December.

A Member queried the late availability of various reports to the Committee. The Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets explained the reason for this and apologised for the inconvenience caused.

In response to another Member's query the meeting noted that an employee suggestion scheme for cost savings existed and that Members also had the opportunity to make suggestions.

The Chairman suggested that an index be provided in the form of a 'reverse' forward plan that listed the topics previously discussed by the Committee and the dates on which consideration took place. The Assistant Director Customer and Systems suggested the use of the search facility of the Modern.gov software to locate such information and the Chairman undertook to examine this.

The Portfolio Holder for Policy and Performance reported that, following discussions with senior civil servants, the Government's policy intentions were clearer as were the associated implications for the public sector. He warned of the possible greater loss of external funding to the Council than had been anticipated and he emphasised the need for efficiencies wherever possible.

The Portfolio Holder referred to a programme of briefings on Community Leadership to be provided for Members. He also advised that he had seen the proposed changes to the Council's web design and stated that he had been impressed by how user friendly the system appeared as a result of these.

CCS/10/87 **Corporate Budget Strategy - Savings Proposals**

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People which provided Members with the opportunity to assess all savings proposals for financial robustness and to consider the viability and suitability of the specific proposals relating to the Customer and Shared Services Directorate and the Office of the Chief Executive. Members also had before them two additional documents. The first was the report of the Portfolio Holder to the Executive on 2 November 2010 setting out a number of outline savings proposals (at Appendices A and B to the report) affecting all four Directorates and the Office of the Chief Executive. The proposals had been approved in principle subject to further consultation with the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The second was an extract from the Executive Decisions Digest (issued on 4 November 2010) setting out the Executive's decisions on the report in full together with Appendices B(ii) and B(iii) which had been amended to reflect these decisions.

The Committee made the following general comments and recommendations regarding financial robustness:

a) Supplementary Savings Proposals

Members were made aware of the supplementary savings proposals (in the order of £5 - £6m) that would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee and requested that the Executive consider submitting proposals to a value greater than that required in the form of options so that Members were able to exert an element of choice over the matter.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive considers submitting proposals to a value greater than that required in the form of options so that Members are able to exert an element of choice over the matter.

b) CS1 Children's Services Directorate Restructure

In terms of financial robustness, Members queried the size of the savings that would be generated by this proposal i.e. c. £1m p.a. given that a total of 66.5 full time equivalent posts would be deleted as a result of the restructure. It was Members' opinion that this saving seemed low when compared against the reduction in posts proposed and requested the Executive re-examine the issue.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive re-examines this proposal to assure itself that the savings to be generated are accurate.

c) Overheads

With regard to the significant reduction in staff numbers proposed within the Corporate Budget Strategy report Members expressed concern that the Council would not immediately benefit financially through the removal of associated overheads such as accommodation, IT and other central support services. It was Members' opinion that the Executive should expedite the removal of these overheads at the earliest possible opportunity and requested a report from the relevant Portfolio Holders in due course outlining how this would be achieved.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive expedites the removal of overheads associated with proposed redundant posts at the earliest possible opportunity and submits a report to the Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course outlining how this will be achieved.

d) Budget Management and In Year Savings

Members acknowledged the magnitude of the savings proposals contained within the Corporate Budget Strategy report and the impact these would have on front line services. The Committee was therefore keen to ensure that the Executive captured as many in year savings (i.e. budget underspends) as possible from areas of discretionary spend in order to minimise this impact. A Council-wide culture of robust financial management was required to facilitate this, supported from the centre by the finance division of the Customer and Shared Services Directorate.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive captures as many in year savings (i.e. budget underspends) as possible from areas of discretionary spend in order to minimise the impact that savings proposals will have on front line services.

e) Vacancies

Members were keen to minimise compulsory redundancies wherever possible by, for example, reducing the use of agency staff and consultants and by taking full advantage of the Council's redeployment and retraining opportunities. In this context, Members' were also aware of the continuing and relatively high turnover of staff within the organisation and the opportunity this presented in terms of the management of staff vacancies and associated budgets.

It was Members' opinion that when a vacancy exceeded 3 months in length, the budget associated with it should be eliminated from the Council's base budget unless there was strong justification from the Director concerned that the post was still required by the organisation in order to meet its key objectives.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive agrees to eliminate from the Council's base budget all posts vacant in excess of 3 months unless there is strong justification from the Director concerned that the post is still required by the organisation in order to meet its key objectives.

f) Administrative Costs

There was a perception from Members of the Committee that much more could be done to extract greater efficiencies from the organisation with regard to the provision of generic administrative support. A corporate approach to the provision of administrative support was required, which would remove directorate boundaries and deliver a reconfigured and rationalised service providing more for less, and the Committee called upon the relevant Portfolio Holder to submit a report to its next meeting, which would set out in detail the total cost to the Authority of its administrative support and begin to explore opportunities for greater efficiencies. In response the Portfolio Holder for Policy and Performance undertook to carry out this task.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the relevant Portfolio Holder submits a report to the next Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting setting out in detail the total cost to the Authority of its administrative support and which begins to explore opportunities for greater efficiencies.

g) CC1 Income Revenue

Whilst Members were supportive of the need to identify opportunities for income growth, the Committee felt unable to support this particular proposal without further information. Members were informed by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People that greater detail would be forthcoming as part of the Council's Fees and Charges report, which would be presented to the Committee at its meeting on 17 January 2011.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People submits further details regarding this proposal to the meeting of the Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny

Committee on 17 January 2011, as part of his Fees and Charges report.

h) CC22 to CC29 Energy Efficiency Programme

Whilst Members were supportive of the need to identify opportunities to improve energy efficiency, the Committee felt unable to support this particular proposal without further information. Members acknowledged that further information would be forthcoming, with specific measures being set out in the Carbon Management Plan. It was the Committee's opinion, however, that this Plan would be more appropriately received by the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers reviewing the Council's Carbon Management Plan at a future meeting.

The Committee made the following specific comments and recommendations regarding the Customer and Shared Services Directorate and the Office of the Chief Executive:

a) OCE7 Non-renewal of Credit Union Funding

Members were provided with further context regarding this issue and noted the low demand for the service.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

That the proposed non-renewal of the Credit Union funding when the current contract expires at the end of 2010/11 be endorsed.

b) OCE8 10% Cut to Core Voluntary and Community Sector Grants

There was a general feeling amongst Members of the Committee that cuts to Voluntary and Community Sector grants should mirror the Council's own i.e. a 28% cut over 4 years. It was also Members' opinion that such cuts should be targeted intelligently rather than applied evenly across all organisations i.e. a more surgical approach was required through the review of funding for each organisation.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the relevant Portfolio Holder re-examines funding to the Voluntary and Community Sector with a review towards making savings beyond 10% over 2 years and that any such savings be made on a targeted basis through the review of funding for each organisation.

c) C&CS2 Ampt Hill Customer Services Closure – Efficiency

There was a general feeling amongst Members that this proposal was being considered in isolation and without reference to the Council's overarching Customer Services Strategy or the drive towards Total Place/Place-Based Budgeting. In this respect, mention was made of the potential for more efficient use of existing facilities and/or collaborative development opportunities with partners in the town and Members cited Parkside Hall, the CAB and the library as prime examples of such.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the Executive considers delaying this proposal by one year whilst investigating the opportunities for greater collaboration and/or rationalisation of existing/new facilities and services.

(Note: The Committee adjourned at 12.05 p.m. for a short break and reconvened at 12.15 p.m.)

The Committee was aware that discussion on the following items within the Portfolio Holder's report would contain information which specifically referred to officers present at the meeting. On behalf of the Committee, therefore, the Chairman requested that all officers, with the exception of the Director of Customer and Shared Services and the Assistant Director Financial Services, leave the meeting room during consideration of these items. On this basis it was also agreed that the items should not be dealt with in public.

RESOLVED

that in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information under paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act:

- a) OCE1b Reduction of Staffing – Overview and Scrutiny Team
- b) C&CS9 Legal and Democratic Services Review – Efficiency

Members expressed concern over the proposed reduction in staffing in the Overview and Scrutiny Team, which in their opinion would reduce support for Overview and Scrutiny to an unacceptably low level. Whilst Members acknowledged the need to realise the savings identified, it was argued that this should not be at the expense of effective, independent Overview and Scrutiny support and every effort should be made to identify compensatory savings from elsewhere within the organisation and in this respect, particular mention was made of the need to consider this proposal alongside the concurrent review of Legal and Democratic Services.

RECOMMENDED to the Executive

that the proposed reduction in staffing in the Overview and Scrutiny Team be put on hold and the Executive be requested to consider it in the round alongside the concurrent review of Legal and Democratic Services (and other such reviews elsewhere within the organisation) in order to ensure the retention of effective, independent, support for Overview and Scrutiny.

(Note: The Committee adjourned at 1.20 p.m. for lunch and reconvened at 1.50 p.m.)

CCS/10/88 Capital Programme Review

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People which provided Members with the opportunity to review the Council's revised Capital Programme for 2010/11 following submission to the Executive on 2 November.

The Committee sought and received clarification regarding Creasey Park Community Football Centre, the provision of the Greenfield VC Lower replacement school, maintenance and improvement works to the Flitwick Leisure Centre and improvements to Oakbank Special School. In connection with Oakbank the Overview and Scrutiny Manager advised that a report on the future delivery of Special Education Needs (SEN) services in Central Bedfordshire, which included Oakbank, would be considered by the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 23 November.

NOTED

the report.

CCS/10/89 Treasury Management Quarter Two Report

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People which provided an update on treasury management activity for Quarter 2 of the financial year 2010/11.

The Chairman reminded the meeting that he had previously requested information to enable access to cash flow requirements. He added that, based on the information before Members, the Council had excessive levels of investment. Given that the Committee was due to receive a report on the Treasury Management Strategy in December he asked that the information he had requested be submitted to Members prior to this.

In response the Assistant Director Financial Services stated that the information was being compiled and would cover the first half of the current

financial year. He added that it would be circulated to Members before the Committee's December meeting.

With regard to the Council's investment levels he explained that the Council currently held cash on account at 1%, the base rate was only ½% and the Council charged 1.3% - 1.8% for lending out. He explained that the Council had a single balance sheet for the first time and that at the Committee's December meeting it would be possible to explain why the Council undertook certain actions.

NOTED

the report.

CCS/10/90 **Budget Task Force Recommendations - Portfolio Holder's Response**

The Committee considered a joint report by the Portfolio Holders for Finance, Governance and People and Customers, Systems and Assets which set out their response to the Budget Task Force's recommendations regarding the management of capital projects.

Arising from the Task Force recommendations the Portfolio Holder for Finance, Governance and People stated that he acknowledged the need to examine how efficiently the Code of Financial Governance (and other related documents) was working with regard to the capital programme process. However, he also stated that the Assistant Director Financial Services, as the Section 151 Officer, did not have the capacity at this point to undertake such a review. The Portfolio Holder therefore sought a deferral of this task until the next financial year. The meeting concurred with this suggestion.

NOTED

the joint report.

RESOLVED

that a review of the Code of Financial Governance (and other related documents) by the Assistant Director Financial Services, as the Section 151 Officer, with regard to the management of capital projects, be deferred until the 2011/12 financial year.

CCS/10/91 **Property Portfolio Position Statement**

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets which provided Members with information on the Council's land and property portfolio. The meeting noted that the portfolio included the Authority's schools, corporate offices, libraries, residential homes, leisure centres, housing, car parks, miscellaneous areas of land and buildings, the

Central Farms Estate, commercial and industrial holdings, highway land, commons, parks and grazing and ex-depots and sub stations.

In response to a query the Interim Assistant Director Assets advised the meeting that the Council currently made use of 36 corporate offices of which 13 were leased properties. The Portfolio Holder set out the procedure for the disposal of surplus property whilst the Director of Customer and Shared Services added that the Council would, in future, be undertaking a far more proactive approach in this area.

In response to queries regarding the provision of schools and leisure facilities the Portfolio Holder referred Members to the relevant Directorates for information.

Following a query by the Chairman regarding the possible alternative use of some funds arising from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) the Portfolio Holder referred to the legal constraints in this area but undertook to investigate the matter further and report back.

NOTED

the report.

CCS/10/92 **Corporate Asset Management Plan**

The Committee considered a report by the Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets which provided an overview of how the Corporate Asset Management Plan (CAMP) would be developed through following a best practice approach. The Portfolio Holder drew Members' attention to the development of the Plan in two stages with the first, involving consideration the strategic short term objectives, being finalised in tandem with the finalisation of next year's capital programme. The second stage, involving the medium to long term strategy, would be developed during the next financial year to coincide with the budget setting timetable for 2012/13.

A Member stressed the need to secure the sale of redundant assets to reduce the need for the Council to use its funds.

Following a query by the Chairman regarding the provision of information on the operational costs of assets the Interim Assistant Director Assets stated that a whole life costing approach had been adopted.

The Chairman referred to the proposed establishment of a Corporate Property Group and its chairing by a Corporate Director and suggested that, as the meeting was strategic rather than technical in nature, it should be chaired by a Customer and Central Services Directorate Portfolio Holder.

NOTED

the report.

RESOLVED

That the Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets consider chairing the proposed Corporate Property Group.

CCS/10/93 Your Space

The meeting was aware that this item had been withdrawn and would need to be rescheduled (minute 94 also refers).

CCS/10/94 Work Programme 2010-2011 & Executive Forward Plan

The Committee considered an amended version of its current Work Programme and the latest Executive Forward Plan. The meeting noted that during the December committee cycle all committees would consider their base budgets before submission to the Executive following which the Customer and Central Services Committee would review the final budget proposals in January. It was further noted that the Executive would submit its recommendations to Council and should committees disagree with these they could submit their own alternative recommendations to Council.

The Chairman advised that in view of the Committee's workload it would be necessary to hold two meetings in January, the first to focus solely on the review of the final budget proposals and a second to consider any non budget items. The Portfolio Holder for Customers, Systems and Assets requested that Portfolio Holders be advised if they were required to attend the budget review meeting and an approximate time at which their Directorate's budget would be considered.

RESOLVED

- 1 that the meeting of the Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee scheduled to be held on 17 January 2011 solely undertake a review of the final budget proposals for the 2011/12 financial year;**
- 2 that an additional meeting of the Committee be held on the afternoon of 24 January 2011 to consider any non budget items originally scheduled for submission to the meeting on 17 January 2011;**
- 3 that the review of the Your Space programme, withdrawn from the current meeting, and the ICT Strategy Work Programme, scheduled to be considered at the Committee's December meeting, be submitted to the Committee's additional meeting on 24 January 2011.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 2.43 p.m.)