

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE** held in Room 15, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Tuesday, 29 July 2014.

PRESENT

Cllr P A Duckett (Chairman)
Cllr Miss A Sparrow (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs Mrs B Coleman Cllrs N Warren
Mrs M Mustoe

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs Mrs C F Chapman MBE
Dr R Egan
R W Johnstone
T Woodward

Substitutes: Cllrs B Saunders (In place of Mrs C F Chapman MBE)

Members in Attendance: Cllrs J G Jamieson Leader of the Council and
Chairman of the Executive
D Jones
M R Jones Deputy Leader and Executive
Member for Corporate Resources

Officers in Attendance: Mrs P Everitt Scrutiny Policy Adviser
Mr G Muskett Head of Revenues & Benefits
Mrs R Preen Scrutiny Policy Advisor
Mrs G Stanton Chief Communications Officer
Mr C Warboys Chief Finance Officer

Others in
Attendance

CR/14/12. **Minutes**

RESOLVED That the Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 24 June 2014 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

CR/14/13. **Members' Interests**

None.

CR/14/14. **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

The Chairman announced there would be a briefing relating to the Asset Management Strategy comprising of all OSC Members.

CR/14/15. **Petitions**

None.

CR/14/16. **Questions, Statements or Deputations**

None.

CR/14/17. **Call-In**

None.

CR/14/18. **Requested Items**

None.

CR/14/19. **Executive Member Update**

The Executive Member for Corporate Services provided the Committee with an update regarding the following:-

- Despite the 10% increase in workload in Revenues and Benefits, the service had maintained performance levels.
- Council Tax collection was on target although Business Rate collection was slightly below target. This was predominantly due to changes in the way payments were occurring.
- Residents had been able to pay their Council Tax over a period of 12 months for some time, Business Rate payers could now also pay over 12 months. As time goes on the collection rate would rise.

In addition to the update the Executive Member and chairman thanked the Revenues and Benefits department for their hard work.

CR/14/20. **NNDR Discretionary Relief Policy**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits delivered a presentation on the Non Domestic Rates Discretionary Relief Policy and provided the Committee with an update regarding the following:-

- The department were currently in the process of reviewing arrangements for awarding rate relief prior to a public consultation.
- The existing regime had been in place since 1990, it was explained that although the authority had been operating a Discretionary Relief Policy, it had never been formally endorsed by Members. The plan would go out to consultation in August 2014 and subsequently be ratified by the Executive.
- The uniform approach was required due to historical slight differences between the North and South of Central Bedfordshire.
- The local authority had a vested interest in collecting Business Rates as we now retain some of the money ourselves.

- The next steps were to consult in the summer, following which a detailed paper would be brought forward to the OSC in September 2014 prior to Executive in January 2015. If the proposal was endorsed the Council would write to all recipients with the new rate relief amounts they were entitled to.

In response to the presentation and the further clarification provided, the Committee discussed the following issues in detail:-

- The degree of effort made by the department to inform businesses of possibility of rate relief. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that a detailed leaflet was sent with every bill and that the information contained therein provides full information regarding rate relief. The new national relief introduced in April 2014 targeted the High Street, shops and retailers, was initially a 12 month initiative. It was anticipated however that this assistance would continue.
- The checks that were made to ensure charities were genuine and so qualified for relief. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that information was rigorously checked and the Council would visit premises if there were any suspicions with regards to authenticity.
- Whether charities were informed of the relief they may be entitled to. The Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed that most charities were very knowledgeable about entitlement. If however the team saw information on an organisation which appeared to have obvious charity status they would be proactive and send the relevant form to them. It was better to calculate the correct entitlement and offer the relief they should be receiving straight away rather than charge too much and then have to recalculate several months down the line.
- Whether local charities affiliated with national bodies were treated as an individual unit or their revenue would be 'pooled'. The Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed that local charities would be treated as separate units and their individual circumstances looked at respectively.
- Whether farms were classed as rural businesses. The Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed this was not the case and that agricultural farms were exempt from paying business rates.
- Concerns regarding rural employment and the business being located near to where a person lived and the impact that had upon the local area. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that the department would look at the number of employees who work in the rural location and use their discretion where necessary.
- Concerns regarding charities being penalised by having to spend their reserves before qualifying for rate relief. The Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed the Council would look at the last audited accounts. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that close dialogue would be undertaken with charities in this situation by asking why they had possible reserves and what they needed them for. The Council would work with them to obtain the correct outcome for them.

RECOMMENDED that the NNDR Discretionary Relief Policy be fully supported by the Committee.

CR/14/21. Fees and Charges Task Force

It was proposed that the Fees and Charges would be reviewed by Members of all O&S Committees. The main changes were that the policy had previously referred to 'Members', it would now refer specifically to O&S, Executive and Full Council respectively. The main basis of the policy remained the same and it did not cover Service Level Agreements with other public sector bodies. The Deputy Leader and Executive Member asked Members to support the proposal of one OSC reviewing the Fees and charges schedule.

RECOMMENDED that the policy is approved by the Executive and the preferred approach was for Fees and Charges to be scrutinised by one OSC involving all Members.

CR/14/22. Revenue, Capital and Housing Revenue Account Outturn 2013/14

The Chief Finance Officer delivered a presentation on Revenue, Capital and Housing Revenue Account Outturn 2013/14 and in particular highlighted the following:-

- The caveat that the information contained within the report was subject to audit.
- The pressure of taking on additional court work in particular for Children's Services.
- Large savings had been achieved on assets, a one off benefit from farm estates had also been received.
- A large receipt of income had been received at the end of the financial year from Central Government which had not been expected.
- £800k was being set aside to deal with Deprivation of Liberty assessments. It was explained that the rules around this had changed, more assessments would need to be carried out creating a budget pressure. Setting aside this sum of money would enable the Council to plan for this.
- Children would be supported up until the age of 25 instead of 19, additional funds were required to offset the increase in work this would generate.

In response to the presentation and further clarification provided, a Member asked for details regarding the age changes to Children's Services. It was explained that this was due to recent changes to the Children's and Families Act. The Act has been designed to support Looked After Children and their transition to adulthood. More details Would be made available to the SCHH O&S Committee in due course.

Members were also informed that the Right to Buy scheme had an impact and that a significant uptake had been noted but not one which would impact upon the Housing Revenue Account business plan.

The Chairman expressed concerns with regards to revenue generated by the Right to Buy scheme and the cost to replace the units sold, namely in that houses on the scheme sold very cheaply compared to the open market and the cost to replace them would barely be covered.

NOTED the presentation

CR/14/23. **Work Programme 2014/15 & Executive Forward Plan**

The Committee considered its current Work Programme and the latest Executive Forward Plan and noted that the Corporate Property Assets Disposal and Acquisitions Protocols had been removed from the Work programme.

RECOMMENDED that the Corporate Resources OSC Work Programme be amended as outlined above

(Note: The meeting commenced at 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 11.15 a.m.)

Chairman.....

Date.....