

Executive

Committee

Tuesday, 7 June 2016

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Bill Hartnett (Chair), Councillor Greg Chance (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Juliet Brunner, Brandon Clayton, John Fisher, Mark Shurmer, Yvonne Smith, Debbie Taylor and Pat Witherspoon

Officers:

Clare Flanagan, Jayne Pickering and Amanda Singleton

Democratic Services Officer:

Amanda Scarce

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Work Programme

The Leader confirmed that the following reports which were due to be considered, or possibly considered, at this meeting had been deferred until a later date:

- Housing Business Case
- Borough of Redditch Plan No. 4 – Modifications, Revised Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement; and
- Applying Article 4 directions to the Council's schedule of locally listed buildings.

The Reorganisation and Change Policy had been removed from the Work Programme until further notice.

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Chair

4. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 19th April 2016 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Committee received the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12th April 2016.

It was noted that there were no recommendations to consider.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12th April 2016 be received and noted.

6. **REDUCTION OF OPENING HOURS - CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE**

Officers presented the report in respect of the reduction of opening hours for the Customer Service Centre. The Committee was informed that the report set out a request to reduce the hours for the Customer Service Centre on a Saturday. The intention was not merely to make savings, although there would be a small saving in the salaries budget, but also to re-focus resources.

The report detailed the work which had been carried out in order to assess the reduction in opening hours. From the data gathered it was clear that the first Saturday in the month was the most popular date together with payments in cash. It was noted that since the Centre first commenced opening on a Saturday there had been a considerable change in the way services were delivered, the number of services provided and to customer behaviour. The majority of enquiries were dealt with by specialist Officers and therefore those making enquiries on a Saturday were returning to the Centre on a week day to receive the support needed. Changes had been made to the way that Worcestershire County Council enquiries were dealt with together with a move to using automated systems. This had led Officers to consider whether it remained useful to continue to open on a Saturday and whether those resources could be redirected to other times when the Customer Service Centre was most busy.

Officers highlighted the data which had been collated in respect of the percentage of enquiries relating to Council Tax, Benefits or

Housing together with comparative data on customer volumes, with demand on a Saturday morning being 75% less than that on an average morning in the week. The data also showed that 40% of the customers making payments on a Saturday used credit or debit cards or paid by cheque. This was a growing trend with a 90% increase in the number of card transactions since 2012/13 with 70% of customers paying by card in April 2016.

Details were provided in respect of the staff and it was confirmed that although there were a reduced number of customers using the service, there was always a minimum of three staff on duty for the three hours of opening; the rota allowed for those who worked the Saturday to take the time back during the week. However, due to the transformation work and changes which had been carried out together with the reduction in funding and increased demand, this had proved increasingly difficult.

It was stressed that prior to the implementation of the reduced service in September 2016, consultative work would be carried out with those customers affected in order to ensure that they were not disadvantaged by the changes. Members noted that the changes would be reviewed after a six month period had elapsed and a report would be brought back to Committee with its findings.

Following consideration of the report, Members discussed how circumstances had changed since the inception of Saturday opening and sought confirmation that there would not be a reduction in staff, but staff would be utilised where most needed. Clarity was given in respect of vacant posts which had not been included within the previous budget setting process. Whilst Members had been concerned at the potential impact on customers they were reassured that work was being carried out to support those that would be affected and the new arrangements would be monitored. It was acknowledged that the report showed that there was no evidence to suggest that any group of customers would be unfairly disadvantaged and that monitoring of those customers using the service suggested that no specific group was more likely to use the service on a Saturday.

After further discussion it was

RESOLVED that

- a) the Customer Service Centre reduce Saturday opening hours to the first Saturday of each month, with effect from September 2016 in light of the low levels of customer demand, and to enable resources to be utilised more effectively at times when demand is highest; and**

b) demand be reviewed and reported after 6 months to enable the Executive to consider future opening arrangements.

7. WRITE-OFFS APRIL 2015 - MARCH 2016

Officers presented the Write Offs report for the period April 2015 to March 2016. The report set out data in respect of the write off of irrecoverable debts in 2015/16 together with a revised Write Off Policy which took account of changes to best practice and streamlined the administrative procedures.

Details of written off debts during the period for Council Tax, Non-Domestic Rates, tenant arrears and overpaid housing benefit were detailed within the report, with a total of £452k being written off during the financial year. Officers explained that there was an element of fluctuation in the value of write offs due to the timing of action being taken. A debt was only written off as a last resort and officers were confident that there was no further action that could be taken to recover it. It was also explained that due to the introduction of a new finance system there had been no write off of sundry debts during the period. These were being reviewed by Officers as a number of them were old. It was likely therefore that this would show an increase in sundry debtors for the current financial year. It was also highlighted that Officers were able to “write back” debts where information later came to light that enabled further recovery action to take place.

In respect of the Write Off Policy it was highlighted that the amendments were merely to ensure best practice was followed and to streamline the administrative procedures. In future it was proposed that formal write offs would be agreed by the Director of Finance and Corporate Resources in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management. Members were also provided with details of a debt matching agreement which, although not used frequently, could be put in place if required. The policy allowed Officers to check debts across all Council systems to ensure that customers could be offered the correct level of support and to streamline the process of debt recovery.

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management reassured Members that he would work closely with Officers. The aim would be to ensure that decisions were made as quickly and efficiently as possible to enable the Council to recover as much as possible.

Members questioned the lack of a set timetable for debt recovery and Officers explained that at the early stages there was indeed a timetable which was adhered to. However at the later stages of recovery, it was often more difficult to do this as each case was

judged on its own merits and the circumstances of each customer varied greatly.

The reference within the policy to a debtor's circumstances and in particular the reference to the debtor's mental or physical health was questioned as to whether it was necessary or appropriate. Officers assured Members that this was simply added in order to provide some context as to how customers' circumstances were taken into account when making decisions.

RESOLVED that

the revised Write Off Policy be adopted and the contents of the report in respect of the level of write offs be noted.

8. MINUTES / REFERRALS - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, EXECUTIVE PANELS ETC.

There were no outstanding referrals to consider.

9. ADVISORY PANELS - UPDATE REPORT

There had been a meeting of the Planning Advisory Panel prior to this meeting and a further meeting would be arranged for the near future.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 7.43 pm

