

Report to: Council

Agenda
Item

11(ii)(b)

Meeting Date: 29 April 2014

Public/Private*: Public

Title: **Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Chairman's Report**
Councillor Reg Watson OBE

Minutes of Previous Meeting

In response to a query from a Member the Director of Resources advised that the voluntary redundancy initiative and the savings in 2015 would realise the required £1million saving in the staffing budget. The voluntary redundancy initiative was currently going through the appeal process and had saved £150,000. The Director explained that the Executive had given clear direction that compulsory redundancies would be minimal if at all.

Sickness Absence Report April to December 2013

The Chief Executive presented Report CE.03/14 which set out the authority's sickness absence levels for the period April 2013 to December 2013, 2013/14 benchmarking and other sickness related information. He explained that there had been an 18% reduction in absenteeism in 2012/13 compared to the previous year, which had been attributed to less stress related absences, revised attendance management policies and the introduction of a wider employee assistance programme. Referring to the report the Chief Executive advised that in the same period as last year sickness levels had again reduced, by 4% and for the rolling twelve months to the end of December 2013 97.4% of return to work interviews were completed. That was an increase on the previous two years' figures. North West Employers produced a benchmark summary of the region's local authorities' sickness absence statistics at the midpoint of the financial year. For the first six months of 2013/14 Carlisle were fifth out of thirteen district council; the authority had previously been placed fourteenth out of eighteen in 2012/13 and worst performing in 2011/12. A Member was concerned at the level of sickness due to stress and depression and queried whether that was due to the current circumstances. The Chief Executive was of the view that those levels were not due to the consequences of changes within the authority due to required savings and there had been a relative decrease in the last couple of years.

Quarter Three Performance Report 2013/14

With regard to Service Standards relevant to the Panel the Policy and Performance Officer explained that the average number of days to process new benefit claims had improved since the end of last year and the Council was now in the second quartile compared to other authorities. The Policy and Performance Officer advised that the other service standards were on target and that the priorities of the Carlisle Plan were being successfully delivered. A more detailed overview of the progress made in the delivery of the Carlisle Plan would be included in the end of year report due at the Panel in the summer. A Member requested that the

proposed Art Centre be included in the Work Programme for this Panel and the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel and queried whether the Council was committed to producing a full business case. The Member had attended two recent events at the Arts Centre which were very poorly attended. The Finance, Governance and Resources Portfolio Holder explained that any project had to go through a process and that a business case would be developed further through the process. Plans had to be developed and an accurate cost of work calculated before a business case could be produced. The Executive were convinced that the Arts Centre would be successful and that it was what people wanted. Evidence showed that there was a great deal of interest and as part of the strategy moving forward Officers would monitor the levels of support. The Chief Executive explained that a lot of information was needed before a business case was developed and when a final decision had been made and a business plan produced it would be presented to Members. The Chief Executive believed that members of the public would attend specific events rather than visit on a day to day basis. Any decision to proceed would be discussed at a meeting of the full Council and Scrutiny Panels.

Organisational Development Plan

The Organisational Development Manager advised that there would be a National Apprentice Week at the beginning of March and a bid to take on four apprentices had been included in the 2014/15 budget. She was working with the Chief Executive and the Deputy Chief Executive on finding providers. In considering the report Members raised the following comments and questions: Apprentices could be used in areas where most needed. Would four be sufficient? The Organisational Development Manager believed that four was the right number to start with and of the four apprentices employed by the Council in the last 21/2 years three were now employed by the Council. The Chief Executive explained that a pot of money had been identified for apprentices and managers were required to bid and explain how they could fit into their service. He further explained that the type of management required would change over the period of the apprenticeship and he wanted to see how managers could use the apprentices for their own development. The Finance, Governance and Resources Portfolio Holder stated that if a post had been made redundant it would not be replaced by a person on the apprenticeship scheme.

Thursday 3 April 2014

Asset Review Business Plan

Refresh of Disposal Programme – the item had been scheduled to be considered by the Executive 7 April 2014. Since the publication of the Notice the matter had been deferred as it was not yet ready for publication. The Overview and Scrutiny Officer drew the Panel's attention to the draft Scrutiny Annual Report which had been attached to the report as Appendix 2. Panel Members were asked to comment on the draft report before it was formally approved by the Scrutiny Chairs Group on 17 April 2014. A Member wanted the Council to give more consideration to vulnerable people and asked that all of the Council's reports, policies and decisions reflected this. The Deputy Chief Executive responded that there was a framework in place to ensure vulnerable people were considered as part of the decision making process and he agreed that it was worthwhile reviewing the process.

Corporate Risk Management

Team (SMT) and the following risks had been reviewed and updated, details of which were set out in Appendix A of the report: Asset Business Plan – Asset Disposal Strategy, Asset Business Plan – Asset Acquisition Strategy, Delivering the Carlisle Plan, Council's Income targets, Housing Needs of Vulnerable Groups, Workforce Planning. The Deputy Chief Executive gave an overview of each of the Risks as set out in the Register and an update on the current actions and Target Risk Scores. He explained that the Asset Business Plan risks had been moved to the Director of Governance following the recent Senior Management

Team restructure. Members had been informed that work would begin on the Arts Centre in May and asked when the Arts Centre Business Case would be available for scrutiny? The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the Business Case was under development. The building work would begin in May and the planning application would be considered by the Development Control Committee on Friday 11 April 2014. The Town Clerk and Chief Executive added that there was clear direction from the Administration that the Arts Centre would go ahead. The Business Case would be subject to scrutiny to ensure it was the best, most robust and deliverable Business Case that it could be. What risk was there to the Authority if Scotland became independent? The Town Clerk and Chief Executive reported that he would be attending a meeting in the afternoon to meet other Leaders and Chief Executives from local authorities including southern Scotland to discuss the impact on Local Government in the north of England and the Borders. The meeting was a result of the IPPR Borderland report. The Director of Resources added that the impact on Carlisle would depend on the two Countries tax regimes.

Transformation Board

In response to questions the Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that the savings to be achieved from Bereavement Services were on track and comparison work was being undertaken between the authority and other local authorities with regard to waste provision. The Chairman expressed his disappointment with regard to the reduction to the neighbourhood forum grants. Members had a detailed discussion on the way grants were given out to community groups and the effect the reduction may have. They hoped that the reduction would not affect the pro active engagement with local communities. The Town Clerk and Chief Executive explained the reason for the reduction in the grant to the County Council and how it was hoped that the way City Council Ward Councillors engaged with their communities would become more proactive.

Employee Opinion Survey 2014

In considering the Employee Opinion survey results Members raised the following questions and comments: Members were pleased that staff morale continued to improve despite the changes that were happening within the authority and the pressure that staff were under. Members felt that all managers should understand the value of positive feedback on staff. The percentage of staff that had taken part in a team or individual appraisal was very low. The Town Clerk and Chief Executive agreed that the figure should be 100% and work was needed to make the appraisal system more relevant and easier to understand. The Organisational Development Manager added that the appraisal process for 2014 had just begun and she would report the figures to a future meeting. She added that the question with regard to appraisals would be changed to a yes/no answer in 2015 for clearer results. A Member commented that it was important to retain staff and questioned the level of staff and resources required to ensure the authority could move forward. The Town Clerk and Chief Executive explained that the Medium Term Financial Plan showed a required saving of £3m and he felt that this was sensibly achievable. The Senior Management Team was looking at the running cost of the authority and comparing it to other similar authorities to identify where money was being spent to inform the options available to Members. He added that the City Council was viable for the future. The panel welcomed the Employee Opinion Survey 2014.

Cllr R Watson OBE,
Chairman