

**CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –  
SPECIAL MEETING**

**TUESDAY 3 AUGUST 2004 AT 2.00 PM**

PRESENT: Councillors Farmer P (as substitute for Councillor Guest), Glover, Hendry (for part of the meeting - as substitute for Councillor Mrs Bradley), Jefferson, Joscelyne, Mrs Prest, Ms Quilter and Mrs Styth (for part of the meeting).

ALSO

PRESENT: Councillors Firth (Portfolio Holder for Policy, Performance Management, Finance and Resources) and Mrs Geddes (Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources) for part of the meeting.

In the absence of the Chairman, Councillor Mrs Prest (Vice-Chairman) took the Chair.

**CROS.115/04      APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs Bradley and Guest (Chairman).

**CROS.116/04      DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest affecting the business to be transacted.

**CROS.117/04      CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRE DEVELOPMENT**

The Executive Director presented report CE.23/04 updating Members on progress achieved to date on the development of the Customer Contact Centre.

Mr J Nutley, Head of Customer and information Services, and Ms Carolyn Mitchell, Programme Manager, were also in attendance at the meeting.

Dr Gooding indicated that he was aware that in the past Members had expressed concern that they had not received all of the information necessary for them to scrutinise certain items of business. Report CE.23/04 was of necessity a lengthy document and, if Members had any particular areas which they wished to pursue, then he would be happy to meet with them individually or as a group at any time. That offer also extended to any Member of the City Council.

Dr Gooding outlined the background to the matter, which represented a significant, flagship project for the Council. The project, adopting a holistic approach to customer service development within the Authority, was the most comprehensive and progressive within Cumbrian local authorities.

One of the most difficult issues to deal with had been the people aspect of the project. Unison, in particular, had been very helpful in working with Officers to establish a good way forward. The proposed structure, which was out for consultation, would provide staff with a graduated and defined career path within the Customer Contact Centre. The Centre would require skilled personnel who should be rewarded accordingly.

Through a rigorous procurement process, Capita had been selected as the supplier best able to deliver the combination of IT, consultancy and support to facilitate the development of the Customer Contact Centre.

The contract consisted of four key areas of work, progress on each of which was provided:

- (i) Accommodation
- (ii) IT hardware and telephony
- (iii) Computer software
- (iv) Change management

Referring to the accommodation aspect, Dr Gooding advised that there had been an issue as regards positioning of windows to ensure sufficient light was provided. That had caused a slight delay but had not impacted on the project overall.

Project management was based around PRINCE2 methodology, a project management method preferred by the ODPM for use in the public sector. Details of the project management, reporting structures, governance and other elements of the programme's initiation were contained in the Project Initiation Document appended to the report.

An overarching project plan, with detailed individual workstream level project plans, had been developed and was being monitored on an ongoing basis. The overarching Customer Contact Centre Development Programme Plan was also appended to the report.

Dr Gooding then explained the current position as regards workstream progress and change management.

He advised that the Customer Contact Centre Project was progressing in accordance with the key dates in the Project Plan. Where problems had arisen those had been addressed as soon as they became apparent and staff from the Council and Capita were keen to work together constructively to find appropriate solutions.

The development of the Centre had, thus far, provided some good examples of cross Unit working and a catalyst for 'joining up' corporate activity. Certain of the strategy documents which had been developed could be used as foundations for, or contribute to, corporate strategy development.

A layout plan for the Customer Contact Centre was made available at the meeting. Dr Gooding, Mr Nutley and Ms Mitchell explained the layout in some detail and responded to Members' questions.

In scrutinising the matter Members raised various issues and concerns, to which the Officers responded:

- (i) Works on the Rates Hall were being undertaken by Commercial and Technical Services and issues associated with the windows would be addressed via the use of tinted glass, etc.
- (ii) Clear directional signage would be provided throughout.
- (iii) Capacity had been built into the project to deal with telephony workload peaks and troughs throughout the day. Call management facilities or help lines could also be used to alleviate such problems.
- (iv) The Customer Contact Centre would be the initial point of contact for the public when visiting or contacting the Council. It was very important therefore that the Customer Service Advisors received the necessary training and opportunities to develop their skills and expertise.

The proposed staffing structure, which included accelerated salary progression dependant upon skills obtained, would apply only to staff within the Customer Contact Centre. Work on a training plan for staff was ongoing which would be closely linked to a skills matrix. The project plan included four weeks training for Customer Service Advisors during October to ensure that skills matched need. Training provision would be split between in-house, that provided by Capita and externally.

Internal recruitment of staff for the Centre remained on target for this month. Efforts had been made to minimise gaps elsewhere in the Authority caused by the transfer of staff. As and when posts became vacant those would be evaluated in conjunction with Business Unit Heads to determine whether portions of such posts could be transferred. Should any member of staff not wish to transfer then every effort would be made to re-deploy them elsewhere.

- (v) Knowledge management was a massive issue for the Authority and was crucial to the success of the Centre.
- (vi) Panic buttons should be provided for the safety of staff.
- (vii) The security of the Civic Centre was a concern, but public access to the building should be better controlled when the Centre was operational.
- (viii) A change control mechanism would be implemented to safeguard the Council's position should it become apparent that the contract was falling behind schedule. Dr Gooding was working on a zero tolerance level and if costs exceeded budget then he would report back to Members. Monitoring of the project would be ongoing and reported back to this Committee.
- (ix) Concern that there was very little mention of Member involvement within the project as a whole. There was a need to ensure that Capita was aware that Members were ultimately responsible for Council policy and the success or otherwise of the project.
- (x) The "Executive Board" was not a formally constituted Board, but rather a group comprising the Corporate Resources Portfolio Holder, Town Clerk and Chief Executive, Dr Gooding and a Director from Capita. The terminology had been taken from PRINCE2 and apologies were given for any confusion caused.

A Member stressed (for the future) that the involvement of the Portfolio Holder did not constitute Member involvement. In response, the Portfolio Holder reminded the Committee that Capita had given a presentation to full Council and there was an ongoing consultation process as well.

- (xi) The Connected Cumbria Partnership had funded the development of 80 standard e-forms, with Capita providing a further 25. Those would not be sufficient but Council staff would develop expertise to produce additional forms in the future.
- (xii) There was also concern that mail from Members to Officers would be opened. Dr Gooding assured Members that if it was marked 'Private and Confidential' it would not be opened at the Customer Contact Centre.
- (xiii) A draft Benefits Realisation Strategy had been developed to define the benefits which the Council would achieve through the implementation of the Customer Contact Centre. Further work was required and this Committee would need a monitoring role in that regard.

- (xiv) Development of the Customer Contact Centre technology should assist in area working in the future.

Mr Nutley advised that many other organisations had restricted opening hours for members of the public and asked for Members' views on the matter. In response a Member stated that opening hours should be limited from say 9 am – 4 pm, which would allow staff time to undertake other aspects of their work.

Members then thanked Dr Gooding for what was a comprehensive report and for the superb work undertaken to date. They looked forward to receiving further updates on progress in due course, including sight of the highlights report in order that performance could be monitored.

RESOLVED – (1) That progress made on the development of the Customer Contact Centre be endorsed, subject to the issues raised above by the Committee.

(2) That Dr Gooding be requested to liaise with the Chairman and the Overview and Scrutiny Manager as regards circulation of the highlights report to Members.

(3) That the Committee would welcome a presentation following the opening of the Customer Contact Centre, together with feedback on suggested opening hours for the Civic Centre.

The meeting adjourned at 3.22 pm and reconvened at 3.27 pm.

## **CROS.118/04      STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2003/04**

Pursuant to Minute CROS.100/04, the Accountancy Services Manager presented report FS.14/04 attaching the Council's draft Statement of Accounts for 2003/04, which had been prepared in accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003.

To a large extent the format of the Statement was prescribed and included detailed revenue and capital out-turn information on all the City Council's activities. Summarised financial information had previously been considered by the Committee and the financial information included within the Statement, attached at Appendix 1 to the report, was very much in accord with those figures.

One exception related to the requirements of a new Financial Reporting Standard No. 17 (FRS17) regarding the accounting treatment of retirement benefits. That FRS required authorities to account for the true assets and liabilities of pension funds through the Consolidated Revenue Account (CRA) as opposed to recording the cash payments that had been made to the pension fund in the year of account. The relevant assets and liabilities of the

Cumbria Pension Fund had been calculated by the Fund's actuary and had been incorporate into the Statement as presented thus fully complying with the requirements of FRS17. However, the accounting entries for the Pension Fund assets and liabilities were fully reversed out of the CRA through the Pension Reserve so that they did not impact on the overall sum to be financed from Government grants and local taxpayers. Therefore the outturn reports had been reported to reflect the cash payments made by the authority so as not to distort the true year end position and resulting carry forward requests.

Once approved by Council on 3 August 2004 the statements would be subject to audit and that process would be concluded by the end of November 2004 which was the statutory deadline. The results of the relevant Best Value Performance Plan Performance Indicators for 2003/04 were also attached for information.

A Member referred to the receipts generated by right to buy sales and asked whether those would be ring fenced or go forward into the General Fund.

In response, Ms Taylor advised that for the purposes of the report the receipts received had been used to finance the 2004/05 programme on the basis that the schemes to which capital receipts funding had been applied would meet the definition of creating "sustainable communities". That definition was wide ranging and further guidance was required from the ODPM.

The Member added that the Committee should monitor that particular issue.

With the permission of the Vice-Chairman, the Policy, Performance Management, Finance and Resources Portfolio Holder stated that he could see no reason why a proportion of that income should not be used for the benefit of the local community. There was, however, a danger in ring fencing monies too tightly.

RESOLVED – (1) That the draft 2003/04 Statement of Accounts be endorsed for recommendation to Council.

(2) That it be noted that the Statements would now be subject to audit.

(3) That the results of the Best Value Performance Plan Performance Indicators be noted.

#### **CROS.119/04      BEST VALUE REVIEW OF REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICES**

The Head of Revenues and Benefits Services presented report RB.5/04 updating Members on work undertaken in progressing the Best Value Review of Revenues and Benefits Services in the period 1 April 2004 – 30 June 2004.

Mr Mason reminded Members that the aim of the Review was to turn a 'good' performing Service into an excellent service. That would be measured by effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery and taking account of customer satisfaction and its contribution to the broader aims of the Council.

Mr Mason and Ms Turner (Benefits Manager) then gave presentations on each of the following areas:

- (i) Managing Backlogs Review
- (ii) HB/CTB Performance Standards 1<sup>st</sup> Review
- (iii) Review of Staff Security (lone workers)
- (iv) Telephone Service to Public

Members were requested to scrutinise investigations undertaken, findings and proposed action (and timetable) to improve service delivery in respect of the above.

The Action Plan detailed at Appendix A to the report had been updated to include required actions to progress service improvements as set out above and to advise on progress on improving appeals administration as agreed by Committee on 1 April 2004.

In considering the matter, Members raised the following issues:

1. Concern at the distress caused to members of the public when Court action was taken against them for non-payment of rent/council tax. Would it be possible to interface systems so that when backlogs occurred people would not receive such summonses?

In response, Mr Mason commented that systems were in place to "fast track" claims irrespective of whether there was a backlog. Welfare Officers were available to visit those who required assistance to shortcut the process. Problems arose in situations where the Council was not aware that a person was in difficulty. Ms Turner added that she was in contact with Carlisle Housing Association on a daily basis.

2. Would the benefits associated with achieving an "excellent" CPA rating, as opposed to the Council's current rating for Housing Benefits of "good prospects for improvement" merit the amount of work and stress placed upon staff in striving to achieve such a rating?

In response, Mr Mason considered it to be his job to provide an excellent service for Members to scrutinise. Striving for continuous improvement also presented a challenge to staff.

3. Referring to paper 4 (Telephone Service to the Public) a Member noted that the telephones were particularly busy on days immediately after annual Council Tax bills or reminders or annual benefit determination letters were sent out. She questioned why the issue of such

documentation could not be staggered which may go some way to alleviate problems with the telephone service.

In response, Mr Mason explained that there was a statutory duty upon the Council to issue those bills/letters together and it was not therefore possible to stagger the same.

Members welcomed the actions undertaken to resolve the issues identified and congratulated Mr Mason and his staff for the considerable amount of work undertaken as part of the Review.

RESOLVED – That the report be accepted.

[The meeting ended at 4.40 pm]