

CORPORATE RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**THURSDAY, 6 DECEMBER 2001 AT 2.00 PM**

PRESENT: Councillor Guest (Chairman), Councillors Bain, Mrs Blackadder, Mrs Bradley, Morton (as substitute for Councillor Jefferson), Mrs Parsons, Mrs J Prest and Mrs Styth.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Mrs Geddes attended the meeting as the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Resources to answer questions in relation to the call-in of Member Support Needs

CROS.23/01 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Jefferson.

CROS.24/01 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors Mrs Styth and Mrs Prest declared non-pecuniary interests in the budgetary report on Carlisle Works estimates in accordance with the National Code of Local Government Conduct.

CROS.25/01 MINUTES

RESOLVED – (1) That the minutes of the meetings held on 11 September and 18 October be signed by the Chairman as a true record of the meetings.

(2) That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2001 be noted.

**CROS.26/01 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS – EX.078/01 –
REVIEW OF MEMBER SUPPORT NEEDS**

The Chairman of the Committee had called-in Executive Decision EX.078/01 – Review of Member Support Needs Resolution (3). Copies of the Town Clerk and Chief Executive's report TC.221/01 and the Executive Decision had been circulated to Members.

Mr John Mallinson, the Head of Corporate Policy and Strategy attended the meeting to answer questions on the report and Councillor Mrs Geddes, the Corporate Resources portfolio holder attended the meeting to answer questions on the Executive's decision.

Questions to Mr John Mallinson on the contents of report

TC.221/01

Members then raised a number of issues and the following responses were given by Mr Mallinson:

Response to Members' Support Services Questionnaire:

35 out of 52 members is within an accepted accuracy level of plus or minus 10%. There was no reason to doubt the honesty of any responses

Additional Research referred to at the Executive meeting:

The officer had not played any part in obtaining the additional research referred to.

Job Descriptions and Workloads of Research Assistants:

Originally, when Assistants were first appointed, officers had written job descriptions, since then Group Leaders had added to these descriptions.

Group Leaders are responsible for setting workloads of Assistants and it was accepted that if an Assistant has not got enough work to do, this is down to the management of the Group Leader.

Comments of the Conservative Group Leader on the Review:

The Conservative Group Leader had not chosen to records his views separately, he had included them in his questionnaire. As the questionnaires were anonymous, his specific comments could not be identified.

Involvement of the Head of Personnel Services in the preparation of the report:

The comments of the Head of Personnel Services were included in the report. He was involved in the CMT meeting where workload was discussed and he would be involved in further consideration or pursuing of options.

Questions to Councillor Mrs Geddes on the Executive's decision:

Members then raised a number of issues and the following responses were given by Councillor Mrs Geddes:

Hours worked by Political Assistants and Management of their workloads:

As the portfolio holder responsible for Health and Safety, Councillor Geddes was concerned that the hours worked by Assistants may be excessive. Therefore, Personnel were asked if flexi hours had been logged as being owing to any of the Assistants for the work periods covered in the report. She had been advised that no hours were owing, but she stated at Executive that she was not saying that the hours had not been worked.

There was agreement that management and setting of the Assistants' workload was the responsibility of respective group Leaders.

Members' awareness of Secretarial Support:

There was concern that some Members were not aware of the Secretarial Support available, its availability should be promoted. Mr Mallinson confirmed that 40-41% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they used the Secretarial services available.

Decision made by the Executive:

In response to a question as to whether the decision was part of a cost cutting exercise, Councillor Geddes answered that the Audit Commission had asked the Council to look at all sorts of areas. She then explained that any decision to make any changes in relation to Political Assistants would be the responsibility of the full Council. The Executive had only proposed a further report to be considered by the full Council.

In the past there may have been consultations with Group Leaders, but under the new political arrangements, the Executive could consider the matter and suggest a report to Council.

Requirements for Political Assistants in relation to Development Control and Licensing and Regulatory matters:

As Development Control and Licensing are non political in nature, there is not a requirement for advice of Political Assistants. If the assistance was being given eg in relation to a development control matter in a Member's ward area, this would come under a different category of Ward matters.

Part time Working Arrangements for Political Assistants:

The implications of Assistants working part time, in terms of what hours or days they would work and attendance at meetings being held at different times throughout the day and evening would be examined further in the report to go to Council.

Other authorities had introduced part time working and taken into consideration effects on attendance at conferences and training. The implications would be examined further in the report to go to Council.

Research referred to at the Executive – Extent and methods of research:

Mr Mallinson confirmed that some research had been done a number of months ago for the Local Government Reform Working Group. Of the respondents, 19 authorities said they had Political Assistants and 106 said they had not, but there had been no indication of whether they had been full or part time.

Councillor Geddes spoke about the research she had referred to at the Executive meeting. Four authorities had been consulted, namely North Yorkshire, London Borough of Hounslow, Vale of the White Horse and West Berkshire. The Councils were of different political control. Councillor Geddes had assembled the information, which she had gained through telephone calls to the authorities. She declined to give further details on how the research was obtained, but stated that she had taken the information she had been given as being reliable.

Councillor Geddes then advised that she was not aware of 35 authorities being contacted by the Conservative group.

The information gained had not been placed in front of the Executive in writing. It was done

in preparation for the further report to go to the City Council. These Authorities could be looked at further, in terms of exact working arrangements for Political Assistants, whether they have evening meetings, or whether they are currently downgrading, as part of the further report to Council. The report to go to Council, would contain a lot more research.

Challenge of the accuracy of this research:

Members then challenged the accuracy of the research. They indicated that they were aware of 48 Labour authorities and almost 30 Conservative ones which have Political Assistants. The research and information on which the decision was based was said to be flawed eg West Berkshire does not employ Political Assistants within the meaning of the Local Government Act, it has a Group Support Officer.

Councillor Geddes advised that she had taken the information which she had been given as being reliable. She had built up a network of contacts through her involvement with the North West Employers organisation. There would be a lot more research undertaken by officers in the preparation of the further report to go to the Council. If Members were questioning the credibility of research, it would have to be looked at.

Sliding Scale for Political Assistants:

In response to question on which authorities used sliding scales, Councillor Geddes stated that other authorities used it and named North Yorkshire. This was disputed by Members, who claimed that North Yorkshire did employ a full time person and two part time, but that it was set up differently, with Groups being allocated money on a proportional basis and being allowed to decide what to do with the money.

Sliding scales came into consideration as a result of a suggestion. Lots of other things are done by percentage in Councils e.g. representation on Committees. In response to a question about whether sliding scales had been discussed at the Group meetings, Councillor Geddes stated that what happens at group meetings is confidential and there had been no Party Whip.

Issues in relation to legality and specifically the Local Government and Housing Act 1989:

Councillor Geddes stated that she had not looked at the relevant parts of the Act covering these posts. Although she was not aware of the details of paragraph 9.2.d of the Act, she would look closely at it and it could be examined as part of the further report. Other Authorities would not have other arrangements for these posts in place if they were illegal.

Councillor Geddes stated that Standing Orders indicated that if an Assistant is provided for one Group then Assistants have to be provided for the others. She was not aware, without taking legal advice, of any court case or legislation which might apply to the part of the Act regarding posts being filled from time to time in accordance with the wishes of the Group to which the posts have been allocated.

There was no reason to believe that the Political Assistants had not been appointed appropriately and given appropriate contracts. She undertook to draw Personnel's attention to the part of the Act that refers to a period of 12 months beginning with the third anniversary of the appointment to the post.

Options rejected by the Executive:

The option of no change had been rejected as the Audit Commission had suggested that Councils should reflect on the role of Political Advisers , in view of the new political arrangements in place. The abolition of Political Assistants posts was also rejected as their work was valued and 80% of respondents to the questionnaire had stated that they wanted to keep political assistants.

Other members then stated that Political Advisers are different from Political Assistants. Councillor Geddes stated that she would have to take advice on this.

Good employment practice:

In response to whether the introduction of a sliding scale was good employment practice, Councillor Geddes advised that it may be good for some and not for others. The implications of changing an employee's working hours as a result of what happens in elections, would have to be looked at in the further report to Council. Current contracts are full time renewable contracts and although it was not legal to change someone's contract, it is legal to draw up a new one at the end of the contract.

In relation to the attraction of good quality people to posts, Councillor Geddes stated that there were good quality people who preferred to work part time.

Executive Decision Resolution 2 re separate budgets for Members surgery and stationery and Member training:

Councillor Geddes was not aware that this was part of the call-in. Mr Mallinson advised that surgery advertising was not considered to be appropriate for a cash limited budget.

Training of Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Geddes stated that she had received training in employment and industrial law but not as a researcher. Further advice had not been taken on employment law as Executive were only suggesting that a further report be submitted to the Council, not making a decision on the posts.

Arrangements for Consultation to take place on options as part of the report to Council:

The options would be fully looked at and consulted on as part of the report to go to Council. The usual consultation arrangements with staff , Trade Unions and other relevant organisations would take place. Trade Unions' views would be included in this report.

Role of Political Assistants in light of modernisation:

In response to a Member's suggestion that modernisation means the role of Assistants in undertaking research for Members is even more vital as members are at less Committee meetings, Councillor Geddes replied that support could be provided in other ways e.g. support to the Executive, to Overview and Scrutiny and Administrative support. She did not believe that members would not have research assistance at all.

Executive Decision was only in relation to the further consideration of options and not a final decision on the future of the posts:

In response to a question as to whether it was right to consider the matter at this meeting as the Council is the place where a final decision will be made, the Chairman advised that Overview and Scrutiny was the appropriate place to scrutinise Executive decisions. The decision had been to ask that a further report go to the City Council and that decision had been called in as some of the evidence considered at the Executive meeting had not been made available to Members.

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive then commented that it was appropriate to look at the matter now, and to make comments. The Executive could have asked for another report to Executive or referred it straight to Council. The route taken of the report going straight to Council wouldn't allow another opportunity for Executive or Overview and Scrutiny to look at the matter. He advised that the Committee could ask Executive that the report go back to the Executive and not to the Council.

A Member then moved, it was seconded and after a vote agreed that: The decision EX.078/01 Resolution (3) be referred back to the Executive with a request that the further report on the review of Member Support Needs go to the Executive and not directly to the City Council.

The Chairman then thanked Councillor Geddes and Mr Mallinson for attending the meeting and answering questions.

RESOLVED - That the decision EX.078/01 resolution (3) be referred back to the Executive with a request that a further report on the Review of Member Support needs goes to the Executive and not directly to the City Council.

CROS.27/01 WORK PROGRAMME

The Head of Corporate Policy and Strategy submitted the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2001/02 which contained details of the work programme for the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He reminded Members that a special meeting of the Committee had been arranged for 8 January 2002 to consider the final budget papers.

RESOLVED – That the work programme for the Committee and the special meeting to be held on 8 January 2002 be noted.

CROS.28/01 EXECUTIVE RESPONSES TO MATTERS RAISED BY THIS COMMITTEE

(a) Budget Issues

Further to Minute CROS.15/01, the Committee considered the Executive's response, in decision EX.62/01, which stated that all the draft budget reports which had been submitted to the Executive had been forwarded to Overview and Scrutiny Committees for comment. The final draft budget would be submitted to the Executive in December 2001 and this would also be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Committees for observations. Any views would be taken into account prior to a final budget being recommended to the City Council.

RESOLVED – That the Executive's decision be noted.

(b) Charges Review – Bereavement Services

Further to Minute CROS.22/01, in relation to charges review on bereavement services, the Committee considered the Executive's decision EX.088/01, which stated that the views of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be considered as part of the budget process.

RESOLVED – That the Executive's decision be noted.

CROS.29/01 BUDGETARY MATTERS

The Committee considered the following reports which were referred to this committee for comments as part of the budgetary process:

(a) Leisure and Community Development Services – Revenue Estimates – 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 101 containing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 for Leisure and Community Development Services (Executive Decision Reference EX.46/01).

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the Executive's decision that the estimates be approved for the purposes of formulating a recommended budget to Council, be noted.

(b) Corporate and Democratic Core and Other Central Costs Revenue Estimates 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 107 detailing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 for corporate and democratic core and other central costs (Executive Decision reference EX.47/01).

In response to Members' questions, the City Treasurer commented on the impact of the global economic situation arising from the events of 11 September 2001.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the Executive's decision that the estimates be approved for the purposes of formulating a recommended budget to Council, be noted.

(c) Economic Development Services Estimates 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 105 detailing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 for economic development services (Executive Decisions reference EX.48/01).

In response to Members questions the City Treasurer advised that a report on corporate property issues had been submitted to the Executive and would be considered by the City Council.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the Executive's decision that the estimates be approved for the purposes of formulating a recommended budget to Council,

be noted.

(d) Environment and Development Services Revenue Estimates 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted report Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 106 detailing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 for Environment and Development Services (Executive Decision Reference EX.49/01).

RESOLVED – That the report and the decision of the Executive that the estimates be approved for the purposes of formulating a recommended budget to Council, be noted.

(e) Carlisle Works Revenue Budget 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 108 and report EN.167/01 detailing the revised estimates and projected trading results for Carlisle Works in respect of 2001/02 and the estimates for 2002.03 (Executive Decision reference EX.50/01).

In response to Members' questions on the transfer of housing and potentially leisure, the City Treasurer advised that a more detailed consideration of the impact would be undertaken as part of the HACAS report on the organisational review. The Director of Environment and Development added that a report on Carlisle Works would be contained in the Forward Plan, for consideration by the Executive in March 2002.

RESOLVED – That the report and the Executive's decision that the estimates be approved for the purposes of formulating a recommended budget to Council, be noted.

(f) Housing General Fund Revenue Estimates 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo No. 2001/02 No. 102, detailing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 for Housing General Fund Services (Executive Decision reference EX.51/01).

RESOLVED – That the contents of the report and the Executive's decision that the estimates be approved for the purposes for formulating a recommended budget to Council be noted.

(g) Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Revenue Estimates 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 103 containing the revised revenue estimates for 2001/02 together with the estimates for 2002/03 in respect of Housing Revenue Account. The Executive, in decision reference EX.072/01, had requested a further report when the subsidy and guideline rent parameters for 2002/03 had been announced by the DTLR.

The City Treasurer added that the DTLR announcement had been made after the Executive meeting and that a further report would be provided to the next meeting of the Executive, at which time level of rents to be applied in 2002/03, the desired level of year end balances and garage rents would be considered.

The City Treasurer then answered Members' questions in relation to convergence of rents, advising that the objective of convergence was to ensure that local authority rents are

comparable with private sector rents for similar properties. He added that the only way local authority rents could come down is if other Social landlord rents in an area were already lower. He then commented on the means by which convergence would be achieved, i.e. by the Government withdrawing subsidies to the same level as rents are increased.

RESOLVED – That the report and the fact that a further report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Executive be noted.

(h) General Fund Budget Review 2002/03 to 2004/05

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 113 presenting the revised 2001/02 estimates and the first forecasts for 2002/03 base level estimates together with a projection to 2004/05, estimates of the financial resources which may be available to the Council to finance its spending, and comments on a number of areas which would have a significant bearing on the final budget for 2002/03. The Executive had considered the matter in decision EX.073/01 and had noted that the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources would co-ordinate the Executive's draft budget for submission to the next meeting of the Executive.

RESOLVED – That the report and the Executive's decision be noted.

(i) Estimated Capital Resources and Capital Programme 2002/03

The City Treasurer submitted Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 114 detailing the estimated capital resources in 2002/03 on the basis of the capital allocation and capital receipts projection for the year and proposing a division of the estimated total resources over the constituent parts of the capital programme. The Executive's decision on the matter was contained in decision EX.074/01 and further reports were requested based on the capital allocation for the City Council which would be announced by the Government later in December.

The City Treasurer then answered Members' questions in relation to share of future right to buys. He advised that details of the Council's share would be subject to negotiations with Riverside.

RESOLVED – That the report and Executive's decision be noted.

(j) Repair and Maintenance of General Fund Properties and Compliance with Disability Discrimination Act 2002/03

The Director of Environment and Development submitted report EN.179/01 setting out the programme of work for 2002/03 for planned maintenance of general fund properties and the works required to ensure that properties comply with Disability Discrimination Act. The Executive had considered the matter in decision EX.076/01 and approved the proposals as a basis for inclusion in the budget.

RESOLVED – That the report and the Executive's decision be noted.

CROS.30/01 COMMUNICATIONS BEST VALUE ACTION PLAN

The Head of Communications submitted a report outlining progress with the implementation plan which had been approved as a result of the Communications Best Value Review. The report detailed the main points included in the implementation plan and outlined actions

taken so far and further actions which are still required to be taken.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

CROS.31/01 WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT

Further to Minute reference CROS.15/01, the Head of Communications submitted a report outlining proposals for the further development of the City Council's website.

A number of issues needed to be addressed in the development and improvement of the website and these included: making it more user-friendly, introducing the potential to be more interactive, delivery of services on-line, development of an Intranet, and allowing more departmental ownership and proactive updating. The Executive had considered a report on E-government which had set out the resource and funding implications of the further development and improvement of the website.

Members agreed that the website needed to be more corporate and user-friendly and supported any move towards improvement of the website. A further report on website development was due to be considered by the Executive in December 2001.

RESOLVED – (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Committee support any proposed improvement and development of the website.

CROS.32/01 E-GOVERNMENT

Further to minute CROS.8/01, the Town Clerk and Chief Executive and the City Treasurer submitted joint report TC.232/01 and Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 117, detailing government proposals to encourage local authorities to implement electronic service delivery and containing recommendations for the development of electronic service delivery within the City Council.

The Executive had considered the matter in decision reference EX.098/01 and had referred the report to this Committee to be considered as part of the Best Value Reviews of Customer Contact and Organisational Review.

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive commented on specific elements of the report including the possible development of Geographical Information Systems.

A Member referred to Executive's decision resolutions 6 and 7, namely:

(6) - That the Town Clerk and Chief Executive be requested to investigate the possibility of partnership opportunities in delivering E-government; and

(7) - That the Council does not become a partner in the ISB Cumbria Information Hub Project.

The Member was concerned that the Council's decision not to become a partner in the Cumbria Information Hub Project seemed very final and they sought clarification that, if at a later stage there would be benefits from involvement in the project, there would still be an opportunity to be involved.

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive gave an assurance that in the investigation of possibility of partnership opportunities in delivering E-government any further development of the Cumbria Information Hub Project would continue to be monitored as part of that investigation.

RESOLVED – (1) That the report and the Executive's decision be noted.

(2) That the Town Clerk and Chief Executive's assurance in relation to the investigation of the possibility of partnership opportunities in delivering E-government be noted.

CROS.33/01 CUSTOMER CONTACT BEST VALUE REVIEW UPDATE

The Head of Information Technology presented Financial Memo 2001/01 No. 119 updating Members on progress so far on conducting the Customer Contact Best Value Review.

An Officer Project Team had been set up and had met several times. The Team felt that in addition to the scope approved by the Scoping Panel two other areas should be included, these were home visits and corporate complaints. The Committee was asked to confirm the original scope of the review with these two amendments.

The Team had commissioned a number of consultation exercises in order to understand the customer contact service currently provided. The Head of Information Technology provided details of the different types of consultation which would be taking place.

Targeting had been considered and it had been agreed that elderly and disabled clients should be targeted as they were considered to be a significant group of clientele for the authority. Approaches to include these groups in consultation were being considered.

The Project Team were also:

- undertaking a review of customer contact policies in operation at other Councils with a view to informing a new policy
- attempting to determine the amount of resources currently put into customer contact:
- compiling a list of current access points and policies to produce a complete picture of customer services within the authority.

Members then referred to the questionnaire which was to be used as part of the consultation exercise. They queried the use of the word "effective" in relation to the questions on how effective are the staff. They suggested that a customer's interpretation of effectiveness would depend on the outcome of whether their claim or problem. This would not necessarily reflect on the staff, but on the outcome or determination of their problem. They suggested that other words could be used, for example, helpful, professional, efficient, as these would give a better indication of the overall impression of staff.

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Information Technology provided details of the Officers involved on the Project Team.

RESOLVED – (1) That the contents of the report be noted.

(2) That the original scope of the review be confirmed with the addition of the areas of home visits and corporate complaints.

(3) That the Best Value Project Team note the comments of the Committee in relation to the use of the word effective in the questionnaire.

CROS.34/01 COMMITTEE'S ROLE IN RELATION TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL AUDIT

The Audit Manager attended the meeting and presented Financial Memo 2001/02 No. 115 outlining the proposed programme and areas of work for Members of the Committee in relation to their Overview and Scrutiny role for internal and external audits.

Members welcomed the proposals and thanked the Audit Manager for his report.

RESOLVED – (1) That the proposed programme and areas of work for the committee in relation to its role for the Overview and Scrutiny and internal and external audit, as set out in the report and in Appendix C be approved.

(2) That the role of internal and external audit as outlined in Appendices A and B be noted.

(3) That the internal audit charter as detailed in Appendix D be noted.

(4) That the report be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee for their information in order that they are made aware of the detailed areas of scrutiny to be carried out by this Committee in relation to audit matters, in accordance with the outline work plan recently approved by the Management Committee.

CROS.35/01 ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN/ CORPORATE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive and Director of Environment and Development submitted reports TC.234/01 and EN.173/01 on Funding Corporate Property Management and the Asset Management Plan. The Executive had considered the matter in Executive decision EX.075/01 and referred the reports together with the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources' response to this committee for comment. The response indicated that the Members agreed in principle to the recommendations in the reports, subject to financial implications being considered as part of the budget process.

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive presented report TC.234/01 which identified a number of corporate and strategic issues to be addressed to improve the management and operation of the Council's corporate property, having regard to the interim observations of the Best Value Inspectorate and comments of the District Auditor. The Town Clerk and Chief Executive had given a detailed response to the observations by the Inspectorate and District Auditor and these were contained in an Addendum to the report.

The Town Clerk and Chief Executive highlighted a number of main issues in relation to improvements. Report EN.173/01 set out proposals in relation to the funding of the Asset Management Plan process.

Members referred to the Best Value Inspection of Corporate Property Management and commented that there was a need to address the issues identified in that inspection.

RESOLVED – (1) That reports TC.234/01 and its Addendum dealing with Corporate

Property Management and report EN.173/01 dealing with an Asset Management Plan, together with the response from the Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources, be noted.

(2) That the Committee note the need to address the issues which had been raised as part of the Best Value Inspection process.

(The meeting ended at 4.10 pm)

dms gh Commin 284 Corporate Resources O S Cttee 06 12 01