

PERFORMANCE PORTFOLIO DECISION RECORD

24 November 2010

The meeting commenced at 3.00 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor Jonathan Brash (Performance Portfolio Holder)

Officers: Andrew Atkin, Assistant Chief Executive
Joanne Machers, Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer
John Morton, Assistant Chief Finance and Customer Services Officer
Damien Wilson, Assistant Director (Regeneration and Planning)
Jo Wilson, Democratic Services Officer

23. Local Government (Access to Information (Variation) Order 2006

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs below of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order

Minute 24 –. Qualification Based Training Applications. This item contains exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006) namely (para 1) information relating to any individual

24. Qualification Based Training Applications – *Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer*

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

To seek approval from the Portfolio Holder for an application for qualification support.

Issues for consideration

The report gave details of the corporate policy on post entry training and the funding request.

Decision

That the application for post-entry training be approved.

The meeting returned to open public session.

25. Half Yearly Diversity Report – *Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer*

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

- I. To report progress made in respect of planned actions detailed in the Single Equality and Diversity Scheme 2008-11 and Corporate Equality and Diversity Action Plan and other diversity achievements in the first six months of 2010/11 and planned diversity actions for the remainder of the year.
- II. To obtain Portfolio Holder's endorsement of the half yearly Diversity report.

Issues for Consideration

The report provided details of the Council's progress in respect of the actions planned to implement the Equality and Diversity Scheme in its third year, corporate and departmental diversity achievements to date and planned diversity actions for the next six months.

The Portfolio Holder expressed some confusion regarding the information provided as to the progress on actions as of 30th September 2010. The Chief Customer and Workforces Services Officer clarified that the report did contain a mistake and that 28 actions were making satisfactory progress, 3 had not progressed because of the timing of the half yearly report and 4 were to be removed because funding was no longer available. The Portfolio Holder queried what measures were being put in place to maintain diversity in the light of budget cuts. The Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer advised that the proposals were still subject to consideration by Cabinet and consultation with affected employees. It was proposed however that implementation of statutory requirements would remain with individual departments. The option of sharing diversity resources with another local authority would also be considered. The Portfolio Holder asked whether all

council-owned buildings were fully accessible to the disabled, he was informed that all buildings which were accessible to the public were, as required by law. The Portfolio Holder also highlighted issues with disabled access around the Tall Ships event.

Decision

That the report be endorsed and the achievements and progress made noted.

26. Chief Executive's Departmental Plan 2010/11 – 2nd Quarter Monitoring Report – Assistant Chief Executive & Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer

Type of Decision

Non key

Purpose of Report

To inform the Portfolio Holder of the achievements made against the Chief Executive's Departmental Plan for 2010/11 for the six-month period ending 30th September 2010.

Issues for Consideration

The report detailed the progress against the actions contained in the Chief Executive's Departmental Plan 2010/11 that are the responsibility of the Corporate Strategy Division and the Customer and Workforce Services Division. Of 53 actions 52 had been reported as having achieved their targets, being on track to achieve target or making acceptable progress. However, the remaining action, relating to the completion of the 2010 Place Survey, would not be achieved. The Assistant Chief Executive indicated that this was due to the abolition of the requirement to complete. The Portfolio Holder questioned why the target had not been removed from the plan but the Assistant Chief Executive advised that this would have required the approval of the Portfolio Holder and necessitated an additional report. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that this target could now be removed from the plan.

13 performance indicators had been assessed as being on track or making acceptable progress. Each division also assesses risks identified within the Chief Executive's Risk Register and these were reported quarterly as having either red, amber or green status. There were two risks currently identified as being 'red' although it was possible that neither of these risks was the responsibility of Corporate Strategy or Customer and Workforce Services. Further details were provided within the report.

Decision

That the achievement on actions and indicators be noted.

27. Comprehensive Spending Review – Proposed Housing and Council Tax Benefits Changes – *Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer*

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

To inform the Portfolio Holder of planned future changes to Housing and Council Tax benefit administration and potential impacts on the Council.

Issues for Consideration

The Council currently administers Housing and Council Tax Benefit as an agent for the Department for Work and Pensions with over £50 million awarded to residents each year. Nationally housing benefit costs the taxpayer £21 billion a year, a cost which has grown rapidly with the introduction of a new system of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) in April 2008. The coalition government has introduced reforms to reduce the cost of LHA while a July 2010 consultation paper (21st Century Welfare) set down a commitment to reform Welfare Benefits by the introduction of a new Universal Credit to cover housing and living expenses for working age individuals. The Comprehensive Spending Review confirmed these commitments while clarifying the preferred model for future support with council tax for the disadvantaged. There were also proposals to cap the overall level of state welfare support to a maximum of £500 per week from 2013 and details of new arrangements to tackle fraud and error in the benefit and tax credit systems which would impact on counter fraud investigative activity currently undertaken by local authorities.

Detailed information on the proposed reforms to Housing and Council Tax Benefit was given within the report. For Housing Benefit there would be the introduction of a system of national maximum rent caps for different types of property, an increase in non-dependent deductions in respect of other occupiers of a property and an increase in the Discretionary Housing payment budget allocated to each local authority. There would also be fundamental changes to the Local Housing Allowance system from October 2011 covering local rent levels which will then be based on a lower 30th percentile figure rather than the current median figure. In the case of Council Tax Benefit this would be abolished and replaced with a new and cheaper locally determined “rebate scheme” from April 2013. A new Universal Credit would be introduced for working age claimants to cover all out of work benefits including Housing Benefit. It would be designed to simplify the claim process and encourage households to move into work.

On the basis of this information the Council was analysing its claimant

database to establish those whose benefit might be affected and the intention is to write to this group in future. The Council will engage with private sector landlords on the planned changes via the local Landlord Forum whilst the Benefits Service had been in dialogue with the Homeless Unit. A publicity strategy would be developed and a review of the Discretionary Housing Payment arrangements carried out.

The Portfolio Holder queried whether this so called simplification of the benefits system would mean additional work for Council staff. The Assistant Chief Finance and Customer Services Officer confirmed that there would be significant additional work in the short term and also in the future in developing a new local council tax rebate scheme. The Portfolio Holder expressed concern at the additional workload and asked if officers expected to be able to cope with the increased demand on current staffing levels. The Assistant Chief Finance and Customer Services Officer reported that there had been indications from the Government of additional monies in 2011/12 to address benefits workload issues but not specifically for the changes. However the drafting of the proposed council tax rebate scheme would be a huge undertaking which would have to be completed using existing resources. Regarding the proposed rent caps the Portfolio Holder asked whether these would be linked with inflation. The Assistant Chief Finance and Customer Services Officer stated that the exact details were unclear.

The Portfolio Holder expressed his serious disappointment at the proposals due to their detrimental effect on the poorest people in society and the negative impact on the local economy.

Decision

That the potential changes and the proposed responses be noted.

28. Workforce Report 2009-10 – Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

To provide the Portfolio Holder with the workforce report 2009/10.

Issues for Consideration

The Annual Workforce Report 2009/10 sets out the workforce profile, including actions undertaken and planned to more closely reflect the local labour market. Details were also given of recruitment monitoring, workforce development and sickness performance. A copy of the report was appended for the Portfolio Holder's information.

The Portfolio Holder queried how recruitment could be monitored when certain questions could not be asked of staff due to equality laws. The Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer advised that questions relating to age, disability, gender and race could be asked for monitoring and statistical reasons and to ensure there was no discrimination. The Portfolio Holder noted that the report did not provide information on the gender pay gap and the proportion of the religion or belief or sexual orientation of employees. The Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer confirmed that work would be undertaken with regard to the gender pay gap. There were no plans to look at the proportion of the religion or belief or sexual orientation of employees. The Portfolio Holder expressed his support for this approach as he firmly believed that the gender pay gap was a vitally important area worthy of additional scrutiny, but the other issues mentioned should be of absolutely no relevance to any employer.

Decision

That the report be noted.

29. Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006

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Minute 30 – Approval for Compulsory Redundancy. This item contains exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006) namely (para 4) information relating to any consultations or negotiations in connection with any labour relations arising between the authority or a Minister of the Crown and employees of, or office holders under, the authority

Minute 31 – Irrecoverable Debts – Housing Benefit Overpayment. This item contains exempt information under Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006) namely (para 3) information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

30. Approval for Compulsory Redundancy – Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

To seek a decision regarding the future employment of an employee.

Issues for Consideration.

The report set out the process which had been followed and the impact on a specific post and post holder.

Decision

Details given in the exempt report.

31. Irrecoverable Debts – Housing Benefit Overpayment – *Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer*

Type of Decision

Non key.

Purpose of Report

To seek the Portfolio Holder's approval to write-out a number of housing benefit overpayments which are now considered to be irrecoverable

Issues for consideration

The report highlighted housing benefit overpayment accounts with outstanding debts and gave the reasons why each debt was deemed appropriate for write out.

Decision

That the write-out of debts in respect of irrecoverable housing benefit payments be approved.

The meeting concluded at 3:50 pm

P J DEVLIN

CHIEF SOLICITOR

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