

# **SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE**

## **MINUTES**

18 March 2011

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

### **Present:**

Councillor: James (In the Chair)

Officers: Joan Stevens, Scrutiny Manager  
Denise Wimpenny, Principal Democratic Services Officer

### **212. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Christopher Christopher Akers, Belcher, Stephen Akers-Belcher, Rob Cook, Kevin Cranney, Bob Flintoff, Sheila Griffin, Ann Marshall, Chris McKenna, Arthur Preece, Carl Richardson, Jane Shaw, Chris Simmons, Stephen Thomas and Ray Wells.

### **213. Adjournment of Meeting**

In view of unforeseen circumstances after the statutory notice for the meeting had been given, the Chairman had determined prior to the meeting that the meeting be adjourned and reconvened at 12.00 noon and as such Members had been advised accordingly.

The meeting stood adjourned at 10.01 am

**Upon being reconvened on Friday 18 March 2011  
at 12.00 noon in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool**

### **Present:**

Councillor: Marjorie James (in the Chair)

Councillors: Christopher Akers-Belcher, Stephen Akers-Belcher, Rob Cook, Sheila Griffin, Ann Marshall, Arthur Preece, Chris Simmons, Stephen Thomas and Ray Wells.

Also in attendance:

Councillor Jonathan Brash, Portfolio Holder for Performance  
Edwin Jeffries, Secretary of the Joint Trades Union

Officers: Joanne Machers, Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer  
Andrew Atkin, Assistant Chief Executive  
John Morton, Chief Financial and Customer Services Officer  
Joan Stevens, Scrutiny Manager  
Denise Wimpenny, Principal Democratic Services Officer

## **214. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Cranney, Flintoff, Richardson and Resident Representative Linda Shields.

A number of Members reported their intention to leave the meeting to attend another conflicting meeting. However, they intended to return to the meeting in order to finalise the recommendations. The Chair indicated that in the absence of a quorum, discussions could continue, however, no recommendations could be made until the Committee was quorate.

## **215. Declarations of Interest**

None

## **216. Minutes**

None

## **217. Responses from the Council, the Executive or Committees of the Council to Reports of the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee**

None

## **218. Consideration of request for scrutiny reviews from Council, Executive Members and Non Executive Members**

None

## **219. Forward Plan**

None

**220. Consideration of progress reports/budget and policy framework documents**

None.

**221. Consideration of financial monitoring/corporate reports**

None.

**222. Call-in Requests**

None.

**223. Cabinet Referral – Business Transformation Programme II – Proposals for the Revenues and Benefits Services – Evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Performance – Covering Report** (*Scrutiny Manager*)

Following approval of the timetable, terms of reference and potential areas of inquiry/sources of evidence on 25 February for this referral, the Scrutiny Manager informed Members that the Performance Portfolio Holder had been invited to today's meeting to provide input/evidence to this referral.

The Performance Portfolio Holder reported that Cabinet had considered this proposal in line with the future direction of business transformation around Revenues and Benefits and the potential options to provide the service in a different way to make savings and meet the current budget difficulties. Reference was made to the background to the referral and Cabinet's proposals in relation to the future provision of services and indicated that Scrutiny's views and contribution to the proposals would be welcomed.

With regard to the Department of Works and Pensions grant allocations, a Member queried whether the Revenues budget included any payments from Darlington Council and whether the Council provided any service to Redcar. Members were advised that a bailiff service had been piloted with Darlington and Scrutiny's views were sought in relation to the potential expansion of the bailiff service.

Further details of discussions were set out in Minute 224 below.

**Recommended**

That the information given be noted and discussions be utilised to assist with the Committee's consideration of this referral.

## **224. Cabinet Referral – Business Transformation Programme II – Proposals for the Revenues and Benefits Services – Covering Report** (*Scrutiny Manager*)

The report included background information to the referral together with a copy of the report considered by Cabinet and the relevant minute extract, attached at Appendices A and B respectively.

Following the views expressed by Scrutiny during the Revenues and Benefits Service Delivery Review, Cabinet received a further report on 7 February 2011 containing additional information in relation to the delivery of ICT and Revenues and Benefits Services including the potential benefits and risks of a number of options for delivery of the services, a copy of which was attached at Appendix C. Cabinet also considered again approval of a procurement exercise for ICT and Revenues and Benefits services using the OGC Buying Solutions Framework and were unable to make a decision at that time and agreed that proposals in relation to the provision of the Revenues and Benefits Service should be referred to scrutiny for consideration. A copy of the relevant minute was attached at Appendix D.

In relation to ICT proposals, it was noted that these savings would only materialise for the 2012/13 budget if work could commence immediately and that any delay would jeopardise the proposed savings for next year.

The report included the process for consideration of the referral, details of the proposals/options presented to Cabinet on 7 February and details of the core activities and functions of the service.

Scrutiny's views were sought in relation to the following proposed options (including the potential benefits and risks), as outlined in the report, for inclusion in the response back to Cabinet. Further details of these options were outlined within Appendix C of the report:-

- Retention of current arrangements;
- Creation of shared service model with another local authority;
- Creation of shared service approach via a Regional Business Centre model with a private sector partner; and
- Creation of a joint venture vehicle.

Views on the proposals had also been sought from relevant interested bodies and an invitation had been extended to the Trades Union representative to participate in today's meeting.

Details of the additional information requested by the Committee during the scoping of this referral were attached at Appendix E.

A discussion ensued which included the following issues:-

- (i) Concerns were expressed that all of the additional information requested by this Committee had not been provided and there were a number of inconsistencies between the structure of the unit and job descriptions.
- (ii) A query was raised as to why £110,000 of the Revenues and Benefits staffing budget had transferred to the Hartlepool Connect as this figure appeared to be high in terms of the number of staff transferred. Members were advised that the £110,000 included employer on costs and six members of staff had transferred across and taken on additional duties. In response to a Member's further concerns regarding other costs that had been met from the Revenues and Benefits budget and not from pooled budgets, the Chief Financial and Customer Services Officer went on to provide clarification in relation to the budget transfer arrangements and approach taken to the use of staff resources within the Contact Centre. Whilst Members recognised the value of this approach, concern was expressed regarding the level of revenues and benefits advice/information and processing work being provided by the transferred staff. Members noted that the funding of the two earlier posts had been transferred from the revenues and benefits budget and that their focus was on the provision of wide ranging / general customer advice. In relation to the other transferred staff, it was suggested that given the amalgamation of duties, there should be some form of contribution to costs from other departmental budgets.
- (iii) In terms of identifying alternative options for delivering the service more efficiently, a number of further queries were raised in relation to the Revenues and Benefits budget, budget transfer arrangements in respect of shared services, the staffing structure and roles and responsibilities of staff to which the Chief Financial and Customer Services Officer provided clarification.
- (iv) A Member queried whether the software maintenance costs could be reduced. The Committee was advised that it was good practice to have a maintenance agreement in place and to ensure the system operated correctly.
- (v) Members discussed national benchmarking data, as set out in Appendix E to the report, the speed of processing new Benefits claims and how the decision to withdraw mobile home visits may have impacted on processing times. Whilst the reasons for withdrawing the processing of claims from claimant's homes via mobile technology was acknowledged, Members were of the firm view that the home visits service should be reintroduced and available to everyone and commented on the benefits as a result. The benefits included improvements to the speed of processing claims, more effective service provision in that a decision would be provided on the day and would result in a reduction in the level

of processing queries. On a practical basis, it was suggested that the scripts previously used should be reintroduced, with the exclusion of wireless connectivity, and that staff utilise laptops and digital cameras/scanners to complete forms and verify documentation required to support applications.

- (vi) In relation to the provision of mobile outreach/home support services and the suggestion that this be reintroduced, Members were of the view that this should be delivered in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, as part of the roll out of Connected Care. In order to deliver the service on a collaborative basis, a protocol and service level agreement would need to be developed to facilitate the sharing of information with partners; and the mobile technology previously utilised by the mobile benefit team be reused, with the exclusion of the 3G connectivity elements of the package which had been the basis of problems in the past.
- (vii) Members were concerned that the current operational arrangements for processing benefits claims via the Contact Centre were not handled by front office staff and claimant's were not given a decision on the day regarding entitlement. The advantages of front office staff processing claims were outlined. The need to explore alternative methods of capturing information electronically was suggested as well as the need to review the operational arrangements for processing benefits claims via the Contact Centre to ensure claimant's were given a decision on the day.
- (viii) The Committee discussed at length the issue of benefit entitlement, the importance of ensuring that those entitled to benefits were identified, the most appropriate methods of communicating with residents in relation to benefits, the links between the Council Tax system and benefits take-up and the benefits of introducing a cross-check process between Council Tax and the Benefits system. Members were advised that checks were not carried out due to the resource implications involved.
- (ix) It was recommended that with effect from 1 April 2011, all Council Tax reminder letters should include reference to an individual's possible entitlement to benefits to assist with payment and should not be of a threatening nature.
- (x) In relation to current ICT arrangements and Council Tax collection payments, Members were of the view that the current ICT system should be able to immediately identify any defaults in payment to enable support to be provided. The benefits of the current ICT software being improved and adapted to identify such issues and to establish a customer profile were highlighted.

- (xi) In response to a request for clarification, the Committee was advised on the recovery process in relation to Council Tax collection and the subsequent benefits advice provided by the Recovery Advice Officer. Members felt that further work was needed in this regard to include developing the skills and knowledge of key stakeholders and partner organisations offering advice and guidance.
- (xii) Following a lengthy discussion in relation to financial inclusion arrangements, the various methods of addressing this issue and providing support to those in financial difficulties, Members commented on the need to introduce a system whereby individuals experiencing payment difficulties be automatically signposted to the relevant independent body for financial advice. It was noted that this issue would form part of Scrutiny's ongoing investigation into face to face financial advice.
- (xiii) **It was noted that the meeting was now inquorate** Further discussion ensued on the current ICT software systems and the various options of capturing information electronically from both the civic centre and outside venues in order to ensure Revenues and Benefits Services was accessible to all. Members felt that the current technology could be adapted to achieve this.
- (xiv) In response to concerns raised regarding the costs incurred in dealing with fraudulent claims, it was confirmed that clarification would be reported back to the Committee.
- (xv) A suggestion was made that in view of the forthcoming changes to the fraud arrangements from 2013 the current vacant Fraud Investigator post be deleted from the establishment. Members were advised that the final details of the proposed changes were awaited. A number of queries were raised in relation to the fraud arrangement to which the Chief Finance and Customer Services Officer provided clarification. Following further debate, it was suggested that a complete rationalisation of the budget/staffing structure for the provision of counter fraud services was needed to prepare for the forthcoming changes and mitigate the future requirement to shed or TUPE staff to the Department of Works and Pensions.
- (xvi) **It was noted that the meeting was now quorate.** Members expressed concern that a vacant Revenues Officer post remained in the structure when it had been agreed, as part of the budget process, that this post be deleted. Members were advised that the post had been deleted. However, the supervisory element of the post had transferred to another member of staff whose salary had increased as a result. Details of the background to this proposal were outlined to which Members highlighted their disappointment that this decision had not been shared with the

Committee. Further concerns were raised that the job description for this post was inaccurate and did not reflect the position outlined by officers. The Chief Customer and Workforce Services Officer advised that all job descriptions had not been yet been updated due to the speed of the changes implemented. Following a lengthy debate in relation to the implications of staff operating without accurate job descriptions, the Committee requested that all job descriptions and person specifications be updated by 30 June 2011.

Following a brief adjournment, the meeting reconvened and it was suggested that the meeting move into private session to discuss the confidential elements of the papers provided.

### **Recommended**

The recommendations were set out in the exempt section of the minutes.

## **225. Local Government (Access to Information) Variation Order 2006**

Under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public were excluded from the meeting during part of the discussions for the previous item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3, namely information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

The meeting concluded at 4.01 pm

CHAIR