

CORPORATE AND COMMUNITY PLANNING
STANDING SCRUTINY PANEL.

Minutes of meeting in County Buildings, Wellington Square, Ayr,
on 12th December 2013 at 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillors Brian Connolly (Chair), Andy Campbell, Douglas Campbell, Alec. Clark, Ann Galbraith, John Hampton, Mary Kilpatrick and Brian McGinley.

Attending: V. Andrews, Acting Executive Director – Resources, Governance and Organisation; K. O'Hagan, Head of Employee and Customer Services; K. Leinster, Head of Community Care and Housing; H. Carswell, Head of Children's Services; T. Baulk, Chief Accounting Officer; D. Burns, Housing Policy and Strategy Manager; M. Leonard, Auditor (Performance Appraisal and Audit); and E. Wyllie, Committee Services Officer.

Also Attending: Councillors Bill McIntosh, Robin Reid, Philip Saxton and Margaret Toner (Portfolio-holders); and Alan McKenzie, Auditor, Audit Scotland.

1. Declaration of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest by Members of the Panel in terms of Council Standing Order No. 17 and the Councillors' Code of Conduct.

2. Item for Call-in – Projected Budget Out-turn for Directorate of Care, Learning and Wellbeing for Financial Year 2013/14.

Reference was made to the Minutes of the Leadership Panel of 3rd December 2013 (Page 9, paragraph 16) when that Panel, having considered a report of 27th November 2013 by the Executive Director – Care, Learning and Wellbeing, had agreed, having recorded their appreciation of the work that had been undertaken by the Executive Director – Care, Learning and Wellbeing and his staff to address the projected overspend,

- (1) to note that Management within the Directorate of Care, Learning and Wellbeing was taking all action possible to minimise the current projected revenue budget overspend of £1.955m and to bring the budget in on-line at 31st March 2014;
- (2) to approve the further in-year budget savings identified in paragraph 4.3 of the report; and
- (3) to note, given the competing pressures arising from the increased demand for care and the reducing funding available to pay for this, that the Directorate would be reviewing many of its service areas with a view to looking at alternative methods of service delivery.

The Panel was advised that the report had been the subject of a call-in (issued) ([link attached](#)) details of which, together with the written responses circulated in advance of the meeting are outlined below.

Pre 5 Nursery Provision at Muirhead Primary:-

The report to Leadership Panel on 6th November 2012 states at paragraphs:-

- 3.3 *there is high quality evidence to show that spending on certain early intervention programmes can produce savings to society by reducing the need for future spending whilst delivering improved outcomes. (Financial Impact on Early Years); and*
- 4.1 *there is currently no local authority provision for vulnerable children under three years of age in the Prestwick and Troon areas. The proposal is to extend the nursery accommodation at Muirhead Primary School to create provision for children aged 0-3 and a family support hub would be included for proactive work with all parents and other agencies such as Health Visitors would be part of this initiative. The outdoor area will also be enhanced to improve the learning and play experiences of children.*

Question 1

To ask what consideration was given to utilising the unallocated budget reserve to ensure that necessary early intervention programmes for vulnerable children in the Troon area are available as anticipated by 31st March 2014?

Answer 1

There has been slippage regarding Capital investment, however, the commitment to the developments in Muirhead, Prestwick and Troon continues and will be met utilising the Scottish Government settlement for 600 hours through Capital and Revenue.

Scheme of Assistance 2013-14:-

On 9th February 2010, the Leadership Panel approved the Scheme of Assistance for South Ayrshire Council. It included the following paragraphs:-

- 3.5 *the Private Sector Housing Grant (PSHG) is currently ring-fenced funding. From 1st April 2010, PSHG funding will be allocated from the General Capital Grant but the PSHG element will continue to be separately identified until 2013/14;*
- 5.1 *the funding for the Private Sector Housing Grant is included within the overall funding in the Local Government Finance Settlement 2010/11. The funding is not ring fenced and will be considered by members as part of the 2010/11 budget process; and*
- 5.2 *the Scottish Government also intend to indicate what proportion of this funding should be capital funding and what proportion should be revenue funding. The Scottish Government are currently consulting with COSLA on a proposed split of 60% capital funding and 40% revenue funding.*

Question 2

To ask whether the information provided in the report still remains valid?

Answer 2

The information contained in the February 2010 report to Leadership Panel remains largely unchanged. The only difference is that Private Sector Housing Grant/Scheme of Assistance funding did not continue to be identified separately by the Scottish Government up to 2013/14.

Question 3

To ask the revenue contribution in the 2013/14 budget?

Answer 3

The revenue contribution to the 2013/14 budget is £755,000. This includes £502,000 of allocated funding and a £253,000 carry forward from 2012/13.

Question 4

To ask the value of commitments made to applicants?

Answer 4

Capital Commitments up to period 8 - £433,064.14.

Revenue Commitments up to period 8 - £351,323.

These figures include the full year commitment to Care and Repair and a contribution to Buildings Standards staffing costs.

Question 5

To ask the number of applications and their monetary value still to be assessed under the Scheme of Assistance?

Answer 5

There is currently one disabled adaptation application waiting to be processed by Building Standards. The value of this grant, if approved, is £2,848.00.

There are 190 outstanding OT assessment requests that may result in a need for an adaptation. Due to the time of year, these are unlikely to be funded until 2014/15 as owners are unlikely to progress work until the Spring-time.

The Scheme of Assistance has a number of features which includes the following priorities (see the following paragraphs):-

- 4.2 *it also identifies the circumstances in which people with disabilities will be able to access grant funding to assist them to remain in their own homes;*
- 4.3 *furthermore the Scheme identifies local priorities that may attract additional grant funding. These are:*
 - *properties which are in significant breach of the Tolerable Standard; and*
 - *properties with communal areas that could benefit from establishing a maintenance account.*

Council staff are currently seeking to engage with owners in multiple tenure blocks in the Wallacetown area to improve housing conditions and the Council has a priority to ensure that people can remain in their homes as long as possible.

Question 6

To ask the estimated cost of housing improvements for owners in the Wallacetown area?

Answer 6

Based on the work carried out so far, estimates suggest that each owner's share will amount to around £5,400.00. All owners will qualify for 50% grant assistance on this cost. This equates to £207,900 solely for Wallacetown area – how will the Council meet mixed tenure works in full across South Ayrshire with such financial implications. The Council is in the process of recruiting an owner engagement officer who will work specifically in this field. It is expected that a number of owners will not agree to improvement works to their communal facilities. In such circumstances, the Council will progress with works only to its own properties (where this is achievable).

Question 7

To ask whether owner occupied residents in Wallacetown are, on average, likely to qualify for funding under the Scheme of Assistance?

Answer 7

For housing improvements, all owners are entitled to a flat rate grant of 50% irrespective of income.

For disabled adaptations, all owners qualify for 80% grant for mandatory works with an option to increase this to 100% for low income households.

Question 8

To ask whether applicants who fall in to the criteria described above as Council priorities will be denied funding until the start of the financial year 2014/15.

Answer 8

It is not anticipated having to delay any funding awards until 2014/15.

Question 9

To ask for information on the SHQS achievement level in the Wallacetown area where it applies to communal facilities?

Answer 9

50 of the 71 blocks in Wallacetown are currently recorded as achieving SHQS where it applies to communal facilities. The 21 blocks that are currently recorded as fails included 77 privately owned properties.

Question 10

To ask what consideration was given to utilising the unallocated budget reserve to ensure that disabled residents, residents living in homes below the tolerable standard and low income residents living in multiple tenure blocks can have their living conditions maintained and improved.

Answer 10

Disabled residents can apply for Scheme of Assistance funding where it is for adaptation purposes. Those living below the tolerable standard can apply for a grant where property has been identified as BTS by Environmental Health. Support for low income residents would require an amendment to policy if specifically referring to Scheme of Assistance. Although this could help some families, this could lead to significant financial commitments for the Council in a relatively short period of time. Alongside this, the Council has been successful in securing Universal Home Insulation Scheme funds in each round of competitive funding from the Scottish Government. The Energy Agency, acting as the Council's agent, has been arranging for these measures to be installed to owners' homes free of charge.

The Chair invited Councillor Douglas Campbell to explain his reasons for the call-in.

With regard to Question and Answer No. 1 above, Councillor Douglas Campbell asked whether the programme was still online to meet the date of March 2014 as indicated within the report. The Head of Children's Services commented that there was slippage but there was a commitment for the programme to be in place for August 2014 in line with the Scottish Government's settlement of 600 hours provision. It was noted that a Briefing Note in this regard would be circulated to all Elected Members.

In terms of the Scheme of Assistance (Question and Answer No. 2 above), Councillor Douglas Campbell commented on the loss of ring-fencing and raised concerns that the lowest income groups would lose funding for communal repairs especially when staff were going out and encouraging take-up. He further added that the funding of £200,000 could be doubled-up and, therefore, access to funding of £400,000 was lost. The Head of Community Care and Housing responded in terms of the carry-forward as the budget for this financial year would not be fully spent due to timing issues and indicated that the Owner Engagement Officer's post was now filled with this Officer due to commence work in Mid-January 2014.

Comments were made in relation to the delay in the filling of the Owner Engagement Officer's post, the reasons for this and the impact of this delay in terms of encouraging up-take in the scheme of assistance programme for this financial year. It was noted that the under-spend in this year's funding was due to a lack of up-take. Following commencement of the newly appointed Officer, it was requested that quarterly updates on the progress being made be circulated to Members.

Councillor Douglas Campbell moved that that part of the report relating to the Scheme of Assistance be referred back to the Leadership Panel in order for that Panel to give consideration for alternative savings to be found.

Councillor Douglas Campbell failed to find a seconder and therefore his Motion fell.

Councillor Douglas Campbell requested that his dissent be recorded.

The Panel, having requested a quarterly update in relation to the progress being made with the Scheme of Assistance once the Owner Engagement Officer was in post and having noted that a Briefing Note relating to early intervention programmes would also be circulated

Decided: following review, by a majority, that the decision of the Leadership Panel in respect of this matter be confirmed and implemented.

3. Minutes of previous meeting.

Decided: to approve the Minutes of the previous meeting of 14th November 2013 (issued) ([link attached](#)).

WIDER SCRUTINY PANEL BUSINESS:-

Variation to order of business.

In terms of Council Standing Order No. 13.2, the Panel agreed to vary the order of business as hereinafter minuted.

4. Procurement Improvement Programme.

There was submitted a report (issued) ([link attached](#)) of 2nd December 2013 by the Acting Executive Director – Resources, Governance and Organisation providing an update in relation to the Council's procurement processes, approaches and outcomes across the Council.

A discussion took place in relation to the continuous improvements with regard to the Procurement Improvement Programme. Comments were made with regard to a focus on how this work would benefit local economies and communities. Also, it was noted that performance figures would keep Members updated on the general progress being made.

The Panel, having commended staff within the procurement section for the improvements made within this area of work

Decided:

- (1) to note the progress being made in relation to the Council's procurement improvement programme; and
- (2) to endorse the ongoing activity to further develop procurement capability across the Council.

5. Employee Absence Monitoring Report.

There was submitted a report (issued) ([link attached](#)) of 2nd December 2013 by the Head of Employee and Customer Services providing an update on the Council's sickness absence levels and the work that had been undertaken, as well as that planned, to help improve absence levels across Council services.

The Head of Employee and Customer Services referred to Section 7 of the report which provided an action update and commented on the Maximising Attendance Policy currently being redrafted with input from the Strategic Review of Absence Joint Group.

A full discussion took place and concerns were raised by Members of the Panel with regard to improving absence levels. Discussion also took place in respect of the comparisons between the private and public sector as well as other local authorities with regard to absence levels and sickness payments. It was noted that sickness absence leave and pay continued to be determined at national level and, in general, individual Councils had not introduced alternative arrangements at local level, although it was understood that one authority had deviated from the national position in particular circumstances. It was also noted that COSLA had recently undertaken a survey of current arrangements and was considering the wider issue of sickness provision as part of longer-term pay negotiations, with a view to reducing both the incidence of absence and the cost. The longer process of cultural change was also acknowledged.

A Member of the Panel asked if information was gathered to show the level of long term absence attributable to accidents at work and if support mechanisms were in place. The Head of Employee and Customer Services confirmed that although previous recording and reporting arrangements did not enable an assessment of absence due to accidents at work, this information was now maintained and would be analysed to identify any requirement for training and/or remedial actions.

In relation to the draft policy, it was recognised that responsibility for absence management lay with managers with various trigger points and actions forming part of the revised process. The role of HR Officers was also highlighted. It was suggested that high levels of absence placed additional pressure on employees who remained at work and that highlighting the operational and financial implications of poor attendance and the requirement for good attendance may also result in improvements through peer pressure and better awareness. The Head of Employee and Customer Services advised that trade unions had raised a similar point and that the strategic group were looking at various suggestions in this regard. It was noted that the draft policy, being submitted to a future meeting of the Leadership Panel for consideration, would provide the framework and the tools to enable managers to manage absence in a clear and unambiguous way.

Comments were made in relation to monitoring and scrutiny following the implementation of the redrafted policy and the Acting Executive Director – Resources, Governance and Organisation advised that the relevant improvement strand should provide the opportunity for such information as matters progressed.

The Panel

Decided: to note

- (1) the statistics outlined in the report and its appendices; and
- (2) the steps which had been taken and proposed to improve attendance levels.

6. Scrutiny Review – Budget Monitoring.

Reference was made to the Minutes of 28th February 2013 (Page 216, paragraph 13) when a scoping paper had been provided and a Sub-Group had been formed to undertake a review of Budget Monitoring.

The Chief Accounting Officer gave an update in relation to the progress being made by the Sub-Group and indicated that five areas had been identified and commented on the progress to date with some of these areas which also took cognisance of comments made by External Audit. In terms of the review of other Councils regarding budget monitoring, he provided a brief overview of the key areas being explored and commented on service performance information.

The Acting Executive Director – Resources, Governance and Organisation advised of service plan reporting going forward and how this linked to the Council Plan and financial reporting and commented on how the development of these various strands would be linked and reported to Elected Members.

Comments were made in relation to the importance of budget management information and the requirement for the most up to date information in this regard.

The Panel, having thanked the Sub-Group and the Chief Accounting Officer for the update

Decided: to note that a report with recommendations would be submitted to an early meeting of this Panel in 2014.

The meeting ended at 11.05 a.m.