

## **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

**3 November 2015**

### **Finance Portfolio Holder update**

#### Performance

1. What do the measures in the Service Plan tell you about the performance of the service at this point in the year?

The processing time for council tax correspondence has reduced from 41 days for quarter 1, to 26 days for quarter 2 (as measured by the oldest item of correspondence awaiting processing). Whilst this is a welcome improvement, actions are still being taken to reduce the time.

The average number of days from receipt of all information to determine changes to benefit/reduction claims has increased from 13 for Q1 to 23 for Q2. Reasons for this include staff working on getting the new "E-forms" module live (discussed below).

2. What actions do you intend to take based on the measures?

The move towards more generic working within Council Tax/Business Rates (discussed below) is intended to reduce processing times. New functionality within the Civica is being introduced which will allow us to automate certain admin procedures freeing up time to enable staff to focus on reducing processing times. In addition, the change to the call centre arrangements should enable closer working between staff and result in a better service to customers.

With E-Forms now being live for new claims, this should assist in reducing processing time as staff do not have to re-key data, scan documents and should not have to request items not submitted.

#### Risks

3. Highlight any significant changes to the risks in your Service Plan and any actions that you intend to take to address the revised risks.

The main new risks facing Finance relate to staffing issues.

The Strategic Finance Manager has been on long term sick since May. An interim Principal Accountant has been appointed to undertake some of the

work, with other duties being undertaken by other staff. Plans are being made for the Strategic Finance Manager's return to work in November.

The Procurement Team saw the resignation of the Procurement Officer earlier in the year. A new Procurement Officer started work with the Council in September. The Procurement Manager has secured alternative employment and is due to leave in November. A recruitment process is underway to find a replacement, with interviews scheduled to be held in November. To assist in "managing the gap", it is intended that an interim procurement will need to be sought through Comensura. With the change in the Procurement Officer appointment, it has not been possible to fill the 3 year Procurement Officer post agreed earlier in the year. Consideration is now being given to using agency staff to fill this role. In addition, there is the option of obtaining procurement advice from WCC lawyers and procurement team if necessary. Based on the foregoing, plans are in place to seek to ensure as smooth a transition as possible when the Procurement Manager leaves.

Finance has the continued responsibility for co-ordinating risk management across the Council. Within the Annual Risk Management report that is being presented to Finance & Audit Scrutiny, more details of work is included. The authority is increasingly recognising the importance of openly and transparently monitoring its risks, and making sure that members are informed of all potential risks, especially as part of the decision making process.

#### Workforce Planning

4. Highlight any significant changes to your Workforce Planning and any actions that you intend to take to address the revised plan

Over the last year, more "generic working" has been the aim within the Council Tax/Business Rates Section. Under this approach, newly appointed Revenues Officers are being trained so as to be able to process council tax, business rates and recovery correspondence, rather than each officer being ascribed to their own specialism. This work has so far concentrated on new appointments. With the recent vacancy for the council tax team leader, the generic working is being trialled across the whole Section. As part of this an additional temporary team leader has been appointed (with Revenues Officer seconded into the post). This trial is due to last a year, by which time it is hoped that it will be possible to streamline the overall workforce whilst improving service to customers.

An interim Principal Benefits Officer is being appointed to assist the Benefits & Fraud Manager with specific projects, most notably the Customer Service Centre re-integration, and the Review of the Council

Tax Reduction scheme, and to act as a deputy to the manager. The appointee will be seconded from an existing post within the Benefits Section. This post is intended to provide additional resilience and support for the specific projects, but also will be part of workforce planning. The appointment is due to be reviewed after a year.

The Finance Support Team, through extensive training, have become multi-skilled which has led to efficiencies and thereby reducing their processing times. In addition a temporary post has been made permanent thereby enabling them to take over direct debit admin for the Revenues team as well as purchasing card admin from Procurement.

### Budget

5. Highlight any significant changes to the budget pressures highlighted in the Service Plan and any actions required to address these changes

In the absence of the Strategic Finance Manager, there have been additional costs relating to the appointment of the interim Principal Accountant, for which funding is requested from the Executive as part of the Budget Review report.

One of Finance's main roles is the co-ordination of the Budget Review process across the Council. This includes monitoring the current year budget and also updating the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy. As part of this, and with the procurement role, Finance actively set out to seek to challenge expenditure and ensure value for money. The mobile phones are now managed by the FS Team within Finance, whereby much tighter processes are being put in place to ensure officers have appropriate phones for their business needs, making use of the existing stock of phones where possible.

As part of the overall savings plan agreed by Executive, Finance is actively working on the relevant project to help ensure those projected savings are achieved. Within the Savings project, Finance is seeking to make improved investment returns, and is looking at other investment instruments to assist with this. Proposals will be included within the 2016/17 Investment Strategy.

## Planned changes, work streams and projects

6. Highlight any work streams/projects that have been completed at this point in the year

### *E-Forms – Housing Benefit/Council Tax Reduction Claims*

Following on from Executive's agreement to the new "Risk Based Verification" approach to benefit claims in September 2015, work has been progressing on "E-Forms". From October, it has been possible for new housing benefit council tax reduction claimants to submit applications on line via the Council's website. This is to be supplemented by the ability to submit "change in circumstances" similarly shortly. So far there has been a "soft roll out" of the service, but more general promotion is planned.

It is intended that this service will provide a better service to customers. It will also be possible to make better use of staff resources, which have seen a reduction due to forthcoming introduction for Universal Credit for working age claimants.

### *Procurement Training*

Procurement training has been rolled out across the Council to all officers involved in the procurement process. This has entailed half day sessions provided by the Procurement Manager and a lawyer from WCC. A further session is being planned for those staff who were unable to attend.

Member Training – a similar procurement training sessions was provided in July. This session was very well received by those attending.

Contract Management Training – An external provider provided a full day training session for officers across the Council, which again was well attended. Further service specific contract management training remains the responsibility of the respective Service Areas.

7. Highlight any significant changes or new work streams/projects expected during the year.

The proposal to cease the joint Customer Service Centre (CSC) with WCC will impact significantly upon Finance, where Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates are the largest WDC element of the CSC. There is pressure for these calls to be returned to the department as soon as possible. As part of the overall CSC transfer project, a departmental project has been set up to form a service specific contact centre within Finance for these services. This has highlighted the complexity of transferring the calls back, having regard to staffing, technology, location, finance, and, as a priority, seeking to improve the service to customers. Whilst we are confident that we will in due course be able to provide an improved service in the

medium term, detailed consideration is being given to how the transfer can be made as smooth as possible.

#### Any changes required to Service Area Plan

8. This is an opportunity to flag up any changes to milestones on projects, or any actions required due to pressures occurring in the service area. The Service Area Plan Actions reported to members in September are attached to this paper. Specific attention is drawn to the following items.

#### *On-Line Returns*

The "On Line Returns" module to the Council's Income Management System is continuing to be subject to delays. Currently the supplier is seeking to fix various technical problems. This is leading delays to the anticipated rollout, but should still be within this financial year.

#### *Discretionary Rate Relief policy for new businesses*

This policy was originally proposed to consider how the Council may be able to consider granting rate relief to attract new businesses in the district, financed from the Business Rate Volatility Reserve. However, given the lack of growth in the overall business rate base, the high number of appeals, the Volatility Reserve does not hold sufficient resources to fund such a policy. Accordingly, it was agreed with the Deputy Chief Executive that consideration of this policy is not viable at this time.

<b>Change/Project</b>	<b>Sponsor/Lead Officer</b>	<b>Budget Impact</b>	<b>Impact on other Services</b>	<b>Milestones</b>	<b>Date</b>
Sundry Debtor training	Strategic Finance Manager		Relevant for all services raising sundry debts	Initial pilot course and subsequent course programme.	March 2016
Review of Concurrent Services and parish support	Strategic Finance Manager	Potential savings £100k.		Paper to PFH and Leader. Potential subsequent Executive report.	To be determined by November 2015
Review of Active H/Total interface and associated working practices	Head of Housing & Property Services.		Joint project with H&PS, requiring some support from ICT.	Meeting 3 August	March 2016
On-line Returns	Strategic Finance Manager		Culture, Neighbourhood	Rollouts for Spa Centre, Leisure Centres, followed by feasibility Car Parks	March 2016
Benefits – E-Forms	Benefits & Fraud Manager		DMC, CSC, Font Line	Initial rollout, active promotion working with CSC and Front Line	June 2015. March 2016
Review of potential changes to Council Tax Reduction Scheme	Benefits & Fraud Manager		CSC, Front line, ICT	2015/16 fact finding and analysis, and monitoring impact of UC.	Executive report Spring 2016
Discretionary Rate Relief Policy for new businesses	Exchequer Manager			Report for CMT consideration	Autumn 2015
Auto-matching feasibility for	Exchequer Manager		DMC, All Services	Feasibility by end of	December

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Creditor invoices				September	r 2015
Review usage being made of Procurement System with a view to its use being made across the Council in managing contracts and procuring services.	Procurement Manager		All Services	Feasibility, plan, roll-out	March 2016
Procurement Training for officers across the Council	Procurement Manager		All Services	Workshop 1 on-going, Support to contract management training	July 2015, December 2015
Prepare for 5 yearly review of Internal Audit during 2016/17	Audit & Risk Manager			Produce Plan of how to undertake it	March 2016
Promotion of Risk Management and RM initiatives.	Audit & Risk Manager		All Services	Risk Management Annual report to Finance & Audit Scrutiny Committee	September 2015