

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder's Meeting held on
Tuesday, 15 May 2012 at 6.00 p.m.

Portfolio Holder: Simon Edwards

Councillors in attendance:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee monitors: Roger Hall

Also in attendance: Lynda Harford

Officers:

Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
Philip Bird	Revenues Manager
Alex Colyer	Executive Director, Corporate Services
Susan Gardner Craig	Human Resources Manager
Dawn Graham	Benefit Manager
Gwynn Thomas	Principal Accountant (Housing)

88. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

89. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 20 March were agreed as a correct record.

90. TENDER FOR INSURANCE SERVICES

The Principal Accountant (Housing) presented this report, which recommended that the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder give delegated approval to the Executive Director, Corporate Services to go out tender for all the Council's insurance services and award the contract on the basis of offering best value to the Council.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder rejected the option of adopting self-insurance due to the unquantifiable risk of third party claims. He noted that there did not appear to be any realistic opportunity of setting up a consortium with other Councils. It was understood that this authority was low risk, which would restrict the opportunities for savings through a consortium with other Councils, which could be of a higher risk.

The Principal Accountant (Housing) explained that the existing contract would expire on 28 September 2012 and that a decision to go out tender needed to be made now to ensure that a contract could be awarded by the end of September. However, it was noted that the Council's current insurers had assured the authority that the current contract could be extended for a short period if necessary.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder

AGREED

- a) To the Executive Director, Corporate Services proceeding with the tender process for the provision of the Council's insurance.
- b) To give delegated powers to the Executive Director, Corporate Services to award a

contract in whole or part to the company/companies offering the perceived best value to the Council, not necessarily the one(s) quoting the lowest price.

91. REVENUE COLLECTION PERFORMANCE 2011/12 - Q4

The Revenues Manager and the Benefits Manager presented this report on the performance of the Revenues and Benefits section for the final quarter of 2011/12.

Council Tax collection rate

The Revenues Manager was pleased to report that the Council had achieved a Council Tax collection rate of 99.3% against a target of 99.1%. This was the same rate as achieved last year.

Business rates collection

The Revenues Manager stated that the Council had achieved a collection rate of 99.5% for Business Rates, exceeding the target of 99.2%. Last year's collection rate had been 99.6% and the Revenues Manager explained that the Council had to write off money owing when a business ceased trading. He agreed to liaise with the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder outside the meeting regarding unscrupulous organisations which had their debt written off by ceasing trade, and then started up a similar business under a different name.

Rent collection

The Revenues Manager was proud to report that the Council had collected 99.0% of rent for 2011/12, which was the highest ever end of year collection rate for this authority.

Sundry debts collection

The Revenues Manager was pleased to report that the percentage of sundry debtor invoices in arrears was 3.1%, compared to an end of year figure of 3.5% last year. He explained that the number of invoices paid in full this year was a misleading 70.6%, as three invoices totalling over £1,600,000 had been issued in March and were not due before the end of the financial year. Had these invoices been issued in April the end of year figure would have been 91.5%.

The Revenues Manager explained that officers had a holistic approach to debt collection, which reduced the need to contact debtors who had more than one type of debt, more than once.

Processing of new claims

The Benefits Manager explained that the Council had achieved an average time to process new claims of 29 days, missing the target that was 20 days. It was noted that there had been a 4% increase in claims and staff absence had contributed to reduced performance for the first four months of the year of over 30 days. Performance had improved since then, but not by enough to meet the annual target. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio stated that the target should remain at 20 days, as he supported the principle of having aspirational targets and he expressed the hope that allowing claimants to register online would improve performance. The Benefits Manager agreed to compile some benchmarking data comparing this Council's performance with our neighbours on the number of days to process new benefit claims.

Housing benefit overpayments recovery

The Benefits Manager explained that there had been an increase in the amount of overpayment created by about 66% and although the actual amount of recovery had increased from £861,734 to £948,405, this had been more than countered by the increase of overpayments from £589,063 to £981,407. The process had been complicated by the

changes decided by the Department of Work and Pensions. The Benefits Manager agreed to e-mail details of the arrears at the start of the current year to the Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder.

Fraud

It was noted that the Council's fraud team continued to perform well, with the target being met and exceeded.

Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP)

The Benefits Manager explained that the Council had applied to the DHP to transfer £9,268 of the outstanding grant for 2011/12 to be available for 2012/13. The DHP had intimated that it would allow outstanding grant funding to be rolled over this year, but that this was unlikely to be repeated.

Councillor Edwards praised the efforts of the Benefits and Revenues staff and asked for his thanks to be communicated to all officers in the department. He **NOTED** the report.

92. WELFARE REFORM (VERBAL REPORT)

The Benefits Manager gave a verbal report on the Government's Welfare reforms and its impact on service provision. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had stated that the Council could expect 33 recipients of relief to have their benefits capped, but it was unclear who these would be. The Council had previously been under the impression that only 8 recipients would have their benefits capped. The Council were liaising with Citizens Advice Bureaux to ensure that residents could get advice on debt management.

It was noted that the Council needed its new Benefits Scheme to be in place by 31 January 2013 and details of the Scheme would be required before the end of the year to allow the Council Tax base to be set in time for the agreeing of Council Tax by Council in February.

The Benefits Manager explained that the Council were still waiting for details of the secondary legislation from the DWP in order to move forward on this. The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder **NOTED** the report.

93. SICKNESS ABSENCE 2011/12 - Q4

The HR Manager introduced this report on the Council's sickness absence for the final quarter of 2011/12 and for the full year, by announcing that the Council had an annual figure of 11.58 days sickness per full time equivalent for 2011/12, meeting the target of 12 days.

Reasons for absence

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder welcomed the fact that instances of staff sickness due to stress had reduced.

The HR Manager stated that 229.2 days lost through sickness in the last quarter had been allocated the reason "other" and the challenge was to reduce this as it represented a significant percentage of sickness but gave no useful information to the Council to assist in achieving its goal of reducing staff sickness.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder recognised the impact on staff morale due to the job evaluation project and he welcomed the fact that the Council had achieved its annual target for days of sickness per full time equivalent. He **NOTED** the report.

94. LEAVERS REPORT 2011/12 - Q4

The HR Manager introduced this report on the number of staff leaving the Council for the final quarter of 2011/12 and for the full year, by announcing that the Council had an annual figure of 7.5% of leavers for 2011/12, meeting the target of 10%.

It was noted that exit interviews had been carried out in all cases, except two where it had been deemed inappropriate.

It was noted that the transfer of staff from the DLO to Mears would register in the number of leavers for the first quarter of 2012/13.

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio Holder welcomed the fact that the Council had achieved its target and he **NOTED** the report.

95. FORWARD PLAN

There was no Forward Plan.

96. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Finance and Staffing Portfolio announced that there was likely to be a reduction in the number of meetings of this Portfolio for the municipal year of 2012/13.

It was understood that the Leader would appoint his Cabinet at Annual Council on 24 May 2012 and a schedule of Portfolio Holder meetings would follow.

The Meeting ended at 7.10 p.m.
