LONDON BOROUGH OF WALTHAM FOREST
MINUTES OF THE FINANCE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY SUB-COMMITTEE

06 November 2013 at 7.40 p.m.

PRESENT:

Chair: Councillor Michael Lewis
Vice-Chair: Councillor Masood Ahmad
Committee Members: Karen Bellamy, Nick Buckmaster and Jenny Gray

Councillors in Attendance: Bob Sullivan

Officers in Attendance:
Terry Borkett Assistant Director, Financial Planning
Duncan Pike Assistant Director, Finance
Paul Rogers Head of Scrutiny
David Symonds Democratic Services Officer
John Turnbull Corporate Director, Finance & Procurement
Nalda Russell-Stowe Head of Revenues and Benefits
Mark Tailby Consultant, Environment and Regeneration
Robert Newlands Head of Safeguarding and Family Support

19. FILMING OF MEETINGS

There were no requests for filming.

20. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no apologies for absence.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

22. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2013 were agreed and signed by the Chair as an accurate record.
23. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There were no requests received for public participation.

24. ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN

The purpose of the report was to update the Sub-Committee on progress with the updating of the Council’s Property Asset Management Plan.

The report was introduced by Mark Tailby (Consultant) and he set out the approach and timescales of the AMP, which would be submitted to Cabinet in March 2014. This would be developed in two stages which would be better co-ordinated and formalised than at present. Stage 2 was intended to be completed by November-December 2014.

The property vision and objectives were: “Council property should contribute positively to the delivery of the community vision for the Borough, and the delivery of the highest quality services in right place and the right environment at a cost that provides value for money.”

JT added that in order to reach required budgetary savings and to make efficient use of the Council’s assets, a great deal of work had already been undertaken to identify surplus properties and that it made sense to combine the AMP with the Corporate Strategy Group.

The main points of the discussion on this report were summarised as follows:

Qu. JG What consultation will be taking place and have you considered those in the voluntary sector?

Ans. MT Consultation has to take place concerning disposals but we will look further at the consultation over the AMP and submit a draft update to this meeting in February 2014, before this is considered by Cabinet in March 2014.

Qu. RS Please explain about the term “community vision” and in what way are you consulting residents?

Ans. MT We will look at this, in order to reach out to stakeholders.

The Sub-Committee:
Noted progress with the development of the Council’s Asset Management Plan and the proposed programme for completion;
Provided comment on the future vision and objectives for Council property;
Noted changes to the governance for asset management within the Council, including widening the scope of the Capital Strategy Group to include Asset Management.

The Sub-Committee RESOLVED to Agree:
(1) To review and comment on the final Draft Asset Management Plan (AMP) at the Finance Scrutiny Sub-Committee meeting scheduled for 5th February 2014.
25. ASYLUM SEEKERS PROGRESS REPORT

Members of the Sub Committee have taken an overview of the budget position pertaining to asylum seekers services at three Sub-Committee meetings since 2011. At the Sub-Committee meeting on 8th May 2013, a representative from the United Kingdom Border Agency attended the meeting as an expert witness to discuss the Council’s fiscal position in supporting the asylum seekers service.

The report ‘No Recourse to Public Funds And Asylum Seekers Pressures’ and supporting appendices updated the Management Board at its meeting of 15th October 2013 as to the actions being taken and progress made in addressing the budget position for the asylum seekers service.

DP advised that increasing numbers of families subject to immigration controls had leave to remain in the UK but with no recourse to public funds, often they have young children and families.

The Chairman noted that the Sub-Committee had concentrated on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children previously, but that the issue of families with no recourse to public funds was an increasing problem across London. RN advised that in future the service would be using software that is linked to the Home Office database and that officers were working with colleagues in the London Borough of Islington to improve reporting and information.

The Chairman advised that the Sub-Committee had written to the Home Office Minister two years ago expressing concern about asylum seekers funding and the pressures on the Council and a reply was eventually received. That response referred to a report from the London Boroughs Association and Local Government Association which the Sub-Committee has not seen. RN stated that if families subject to immigration control were given leave to stay in the UK, but with no recourse to public funds, the Council has to pick up the bill if they presented as destitute. Those with no right to remain can appeal against any decision for them not to stay in the UK.

The Sub-Committee agreed that the Chairman would write on their behalf to the Immigration Minister Damian Green, MP requesting that the Government provide additional funds for the Council in dealing with families with no recourse to public funds.

The main points of the discussion on this report were summarised as follows:

**Qu. MA** Can you please clarify families with no recourse to public funds being moved to other areas?

**Ans. RN** Under Human Right legislation, these families would not be moved to areas where they have no links automatically, but in such cases, the Council remains financially responsible as the lead borough.

**Qu. ML** Are these families more attracted to Waltham Forest compared to other London Boroughs?

**Ans. RN** Not that I am aware, all Councils are implementing a robust approach.

**Qu. JG** I would like to see comparative figures compared with other London Boroughs.
Ans. MT We will get this information for you.

The Sub-Committee noted the report and appendices.

26. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2014/15-2016/17

This report set out the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2014/15 to 2016/17 which was agreed by Cabinet on 8 October 2013 and Council on 24 October 2013. New commitments were identified; along with reductions in future Government funding levels and risks that the Council may face in the future. Over the 2010 SR period, core Government funding was expected to reduce by 28% in real terms and the MTFS is constantly reviewed and refreshed.

Terry Borkett, Assistant Director, Financial Planning introduced the report and summed-up the key points.

The Sub-Committee:
Noted the revised assumptions contained in the MTFS (Appendix A).

27. BENEFITS SERVICE PERFORMANCE

The purpose of this report was to provide the Sub-Committee with an overview of the issues impacting on the performance of the Benefits Service in 2012/13. The report also provided an update for Scrutiny of the actions being taken to clear the backlog of outstanding work in the service and highlighted some of the progress made to date. NRS introduced the report.

Electronic claims should have speeded up the process and led to a reduction in the time taken to deal with the processing of benefit claims but because of the way it was implemented this did not occur; this has now been rectified. There were some staff performance issues however these were being addressed by individual performance targets. Action plans had been produced which had led to improvements in dealing with the backlog of benefits claims. These plans were to ensure that the team did not get back into the previous backlog position.

The main points of the discussion on this report were summarised as follows:

Qu. KB We are the 6th most deprived Borough in London. Is there an opportunity to learn from LB Newham?

Ans. JT LBWF uses “Academy” whereas LB Newham uses “Northgate” and these systems are not like for like.

Ans NRS We are more comparable with the London Boroughs of Hackney and Lambeth. We have a transient population and this has led to a greater number of changes to claims during the year however the caseload within benefits is declining with activity increasing.
Qu. JG  We have a similar situation at LB Tower Hamlets with a backlog where they have robust management and fixed targets for dealing with this. I am concerned that our ICT system does not allow homeworking in the benefits system as this is tailor made for homeworking.

Ans. JT  The current ICT infrastructure does not support this and CITRIX was not implemented. There were also problems with 2e2. We were working to get a solution to this. There are also difficulties in recruiting in this area.

Qu. JG  Does the team have sufficient resources?

Ans. JT  There are pressures from a number of different areas and the Government’s benefit changes have had an impact.

Ans. NRS  We seek to automate as much as possible with new IT systems and we have reduced the number of Managers in the service to create a flatter structure.

The Sub-Committee RESOLVED to Agree:

(1) Noted the combined circumstances giving rise to the service’s poor performance in 2012/13.
(2) Reviewed and noted the steps that have been taken to improve the situation and the progress made to date.
(3) Agreed to receive a short A4 sheet update at the next Sub-Committee meeting scheduled for 4th December 2013.

28. LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The Council implemented its Local Council Tax Support scheme from 1 April 2013. This report provided an update to the Sub-Committee on the progress of the scheme to date and appraised it on the impact on Council Tax collection. NRS introduced the report and explained the key points. It was noted that council tax collection rates were reaching their target for those with CT support.

It was clear that there were those on CT Support who are not paying Council Tax and recovery options needed to be determined. The Council ensured that they had special CT Support Courts which had sat in July and October 2013 involving 3,300 residents and the percentage of residents in arrears for this group were not as high as had been predicted. As a result of the special Courts, 21% had made arrangements to pay and 18% had now paid in full. This group were dealt with in a sensitive way and bailiffs are not utilised for them. In addition, if their CT was paid, the £120 court cost is waived.

The Sub-Committee:

Reviewed and considered the first 6 months Council Tax collection performance comparison between residents in receipt of Council Tax support and those that are not.
Noted that the interim transitional scheme currently in place will end on 31 March 2014 and the percentage of Council Tax working age residents will be expected to pay themselves will rise from a minimum of 8.5% to a minimum of 15% of their Council Tax liability from 1 April 2014.

29. WORK PROGRAMME

The Sub-Committee noted the report and made amendments to the Work Programme as follows:

Academies and Free Schools Trading Services- report moved from 4th December 2013 to the meeting on 19th March 2014.

Change of dates for the Sub-Committee in 2014

The Sub-Committee noted that one of the scheduled meetings occurred during the Purdah period and they agreed to re-schedule the two remaining meetings in the 2013/14 municipal year as follows:

Move 27 February to 5 February
Move 29 April to 19 March

The meeting closed at 9.50 p.m.

Chair’s Signature

Date