

## THREE RIVERS DISTRICT COUNCIL AND WATFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Three Rivers and Watford Shared Services Joint Committee** held in the Penn Chamber, Three Rivers District Council, on Monday 13 June 2011 7.30 pm to 9.25 pm

Present: Councillors Brian White (Chair), M Bedford, T Harris (substitute for Councillor R Sangster), G Derbyshire, A Khan and A Wylie (Vice-Chair)

Officers:	David Gardner	Director of Corporate Resources and Governance
	Tricia Taylor	Executive Director Resources
	Terry Baldwin	Head of HR
	Avni Patel	Head of ICT
	Phil Adlard	Head of Revenues and Benefits
	Sarah Haythorpe	Principal Committee Manager

### 1 **DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST**

None.

### 2 **MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meetings of the Joint Shared Services Committee held on 7 March 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

### 3 **NOTICE OF OTHER BUSINESS**

None.

### 4 **REVENUES AND BENEFITS - PROGRESS REPORT**

This report gave an update on the Revenues & Benefits service with an addendum provided amending the recommendations made in the report. Appendix 1 of the report showed the progress made on the Action plan following the review last August. 73 recommendations had been made of which 41 had been implemented and 29 were being progressed.

The Head of Revenue and Benefits acknowledged there was work to be completed to get the service performance back to the level prior to the Shared Service. He proposed some short term changes to the service as detailed in Paragraph 3.10 of the report. These proposals would enable staff to work without interruptions after 12 noon on Wednesday and staff would be allowed to amend their hours of work on this day. All calls received to the CSC on Wednesday would be forwarded to the team to call back the following day (Thursday).

Members asked the following questions and made the following comments.

The backlog was not solely due to benefits claims and it seemed there was a greater backlog of Council tax claims.

Of the £25,000 being requested how much would be directed towards Council Tax collection and how much for benefits?

Given that Council tax collection had fallen behind what were the factors that had led to this?

How long would the short term solution be in place for?

Instead of engaging with Serco why not employ a new member of staff?

Would Serco be able to provide the level of flexibility proposed?

The Head of Revenue and Benefits responded as follows:

The Council Tax figures shown in the report were individual items of work and it was a more accurate representation to show it as such. With a number of documents supporting a benefit claim, it was more accurate to show the work outstanding in terms of numbers of claims.

No decision had been made on the use of the budget although there would be a limit of £25k. Officers would be meeting with Serco to discuss how to manage the work.

Currently, staff had been doing overtime to reduce the Council tax backlog.

The short term solution was to engage with Serco, this would be for 4-6 weeks.

From December 2011 all customers would be promised that the Council would process their benefit claim or change in circumstances within 3-5 days after receiving all the necessary information. The long term goal would be no more than 2-3 days.

On 18 July 2011, the Department of Work and Pensions were due to visit the Council to undertake a light review on the processing of claims in comparison to processes used by other Authorities.

Staff had suggested the changes to the way of working on Wednesday afternoon and had been fully consulted.

Mobile working had been considered but consideration needed to be given to whether this was an efficient use of resources.

The Customer Service Centre would take any messages for the team to respond to the next day.

One person would not be able to reduce the backlog in the time period required.

Staff at Serco were based at Ashton Under Lyne and could be called on in a matter of days. There was no minimum contract or restrictions and in the longer term there maybe more flexibility on rates.

Officers would be setting up a link to the ICT software and allocating cases to Serco. The standard of work provided would be monitored regularly.

If a decision was appealed the legal process would be followed firstly by the Appeal Officer and then referred to the Appeals Tribunal.

Members requested that details be provided to the Committee on the levels of availability and access to Serco staff.

RESOLVED:-

- (1) that the report be noted.
- (2) that the total expenditure of up to £25,000 to engage Serco to assist with outstanding workload be approved but that this amount should not be exceeded;
- (3) from December 2011 all customers should be promised that the Council will process their benefit claim or change in circumstances within 3-5 days after receiving all necessary information.
- (4) that the new working arrangements for staff on Wednesdays (as detailed in Paragraph 3.10 of the report) for the next 4-6 weeks be noted but that if these arrangements need to be extended details to be reported back to the Committee.

that details be provided to the Committee on the levels of availability and access to Serco staff.

## 5 **REVENUES AND BENEFITS - HARMONISED WRITE-OFF PROCEDURES**

This report recommended that the harmonised write-off procedures be recommended to the two Councils.

It was noted that the harmonisation of the procedures would provide Officers at Three Rivers with increased delegated powers. The writing off of the debt would be a last resort with details included in a full report to the Head of Service (SI51 officer) or the appropriate Council Committee to make that decision and would include details on the attempts made to recover that debt.

**RECOMMENDED:-**

that the harmonised write-off policy and procedures attached at Appendix 1 of the report be approved by the two Councils.

**6 ICT PROJECTS**

This report outlined the projects that had been requested from ICT for the next financial year and the criteria that had been used to prioritise them.

The priorities for both Councils included:

Priority 1 - Invest to save/cost reduction projects

Priority 2 - Completion of shared service implementation projects

Priority 3 - ICT review recommendation projects

Priority 4 - Projects required to fulfil legislative requirements

A full list of the projects had been included in the report and the priorities categorised. ICT were working with both Councils to prioritise the project wish list and to assign resources to deliver the projects within current resources.

On the infrastructure recommendations from the audit review, a work plan would be created to deliver the projects and a report presented to the Audit Committee on 16 June. The outcome of the infrastructure review would be used to consolidate and review the outstanding audit recommendations. An update would be provided on Network topology (ref 33/10/04) to the Committee.

It was agreed that at the next meeting details be provided on the projects not to be taken forward. On the ICT Projects table it was agreed the column headed "priority" be amended to "category".

**RESOLVED:-**

- (1) that the prioritisation criteria for work being requested from ICT in addition to providing the business as usual service be noted and agreed; and
- (2) that it be noted that once priority of the projects had been agreed by both Councils, a work plan be created to implement these, the work required to meet the TRDC audit recommendations and the ICT review recommendations.

**7 ICT HARMONISATION**

This summary gave options and proposed timescales for the harmonisation of business system applications across Watford Borough and Three Rivers District Council.

Members noted that:

the harmonisation roadmap was still work in progress and ICT would liaise with suppliers to obtain further quotes for hosting and managing services;

the outcomes of the options appraisals and business cases for each system harmonisation would be reported to a future meeting;

work to harmonise the major systems detailed in the report would be progressed and prioritised in line with the other ICT projects including Lagan – CRM; and

ICT would develop an action plan to harmonise the remaining applications in line with the future shared services programme as it developed.

**RESOLVED:-**

- (1) that the recommendations made in the report on the approach to harmonisation of ICT systems be agreed;
- (2) that it be noted that the harmonisation roadmap was still a work in progress and ICT would liaise with suppliers to obtain further quotes for hosting and managing services;
- (3) that the outcomes of the options appraisals and business cases for each system harmonisation be reported to a future meeting;
- (4) that work to harmonise the major systems detailed in the report be progressed and prioritised in line with the other ICT projects including Lagan – CRM; and
- (5) that ICT develop an action plan to harmonise the remaining applications in line with the future shared services programme as it develops.

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## **UPDATE ON PROPOSALS FOR HARMONISATION OF TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT**

The Harmonisation (terms and conditions of employment) project was set up to deliver consistent terms and conditions of employment across Watford and Three Rivers on a cost neutral basis in order to be fair to all employees, remove inequalities and be better placed for the possible future expansion of the shared service approach.

A set of harmonisation proposals in line with the original project objectives and with a strong emphasis on fairness and equality among staff whilst being mindful of the current climate in terms of people, finance and public perception were reviewed by senior management teams in both Watford and Three Rivers. The proposals were agreed by Committee and put to employees in both Councils during a consultation period from December 2010 to March 2011. The proposals were also discussed with representatives from Unison in both Councils and with staff representatives in Three Rivers.

This report informed the Committee of the outcome of the consultation period and to sought approval to implement the proposals contained in the report.

Following the consultation on the harmonisation of annual leave at both Councils it was recommended that the annual leave arrangements remain at 28 days rising to 30 days after 5 years service at Three Rivers and at Watford annual leave starts at 28 days rising to 33 days after 5 years service. These proposals had been presented to Unison at Watford who would be balloting staff on 24 June.

Both management teams had approved the proposals put forward in the report.

RESOLVED:-

that Joint Committee Members note and approve the contents of this report.

## 9 **GRIEVANCE POLICY AND PROCEDURE**

As part of the process of harmonising terms and conditions of employment, a revised Grievance Policy and Procedure had been developed for staff in Watford Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council.

The purpose of this document was to ensure that all employees who had a grievance had access to a procedure which could help them to resolve the issue as quickly and as fairly as possible.

The policy, which complied with ACAS guidelines, had been agreed by Management Board at Three Rivers and the Leadership Team at Watford. It had also been reviewed through consultation with Unison in both Councils and staff representatives at Three Rivers.

RESOLVED:-

that the Joint Committee agrees the Harmonised Grievance Policy and Procedure for staff in Watford Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council.

## 10 **PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT 2010/11**

This report provided an update on the performance of the shared services.

Members noted that ICT had circulated the Shared Services web link where updated Performance Indicators and financial information was available and where both Council accounts would be provided.

RESOLVED:-

that the report be noted.

11 **EXCLUSIONS OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED:-

“that, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if the press or public were present during consideration of the item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined under Paragraph 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Act.”

12 **ICT REVIEW**

The executive summary outlined the findings of the ICT Review/Strategy conducted by external consultants Actica Consulting Limited.

A comprehensive review consisted of investigations into infrastructure as well as stakeholder meetings at both Councils. This resulted in a set of recommended actions to be taken by the service in order to improve the infrastructure and service provision and confirm the value of harmonisation of application systems.

It was the view of the management teams at both Councils, that rather than wait for up to 24 months to assess the effectiveness of the current ICT service provision, the outsourcing process commence immediately.

A number of points had been identified in the review and a number of recommendations had been made which included creating an IT steering group to include IT staff and representatives from both Councils.

It was agreed that the capital cost for the external support for the options appraisal and procurement process be agreed in principle and that the full value be reported at the July meeting.

RESOLVED:-

- (1) that the Committee agreed with the proposal to immediately commence work for the options appraisal to outsource the ICT service
- (2) that recommendations in the report be agreed; and
- (3) that the capital cost for the external support for the options appraisal and procurement process be agreed in principle and that the full value be reported at the July meeting.

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**DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on Monday 18 July 2011 at Three Rivers House.

The Chairman requested a report be made to the next meeting on progress with possible extensions to the present Shared Service arrangements on the understanding that the report would be for discussion only as it would be for the individual Councils to agree any further Shared Services.

RESOLVED:

that the date be noted.

**CHAIRMAN**