

North Yorkshire County Council**19 December 2012****Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee****Chairman's Statement****Localisation of council tax benefit scheme**

- 1 Support for Council Tax Benefit will be localised from 2013/14 and the level of government grant reduced by 10% nationally. The reasoning behind the change is that it will provide councils with the opportunity to reform the system of support for working age claimants. For North Yorkshire though the funding cut is much greater than 10% after, amongst other things, fully protecting those pensioners who are currently eligible to claim (about 55% of total claimants) and protecting vulnerable people.
- 2 The Committee discussed the challenges that the change will bring for both the district councils and the County Council if the local schemes are not cost neutral. District councils face extra costs in relation to collection costs and the cost of providing hardship funds. We noted that the shift away from a benefit to a discount is likely to encourage more people to claim. And the grant also does not take into account any perceived future increase in demand due to the economic downturn.

Year 3 and 4 savings for FCS

- 3 Overview and scrutiny committees are in the process of examining the savings proposals to be made in Years 3 and 4 for their service remit. This follows on from a review undertaken by this Committee last year on the ways that we could best input into the budget cycle.
- 4 For our Committee this involved initially savings relating to Finance & Central Services: Audit Services (reducing the number of days purchased from Veritau) and ICT (phase 2 review post Microsoft transition). The Committee received a progress update on both aspects including the rationale for why they had been chosen.
- 5 Various actions are being taken to mitigate the risk of reducing the number of audit days. Savings from the Microsoft transition will arise from no longer needing as many staff to maintain the ICT systems. Licence fees will also be cheaper.
- 6 We raised the point about the potential for further savings to be made in light of the amalgamation of the Finance & Central Services

Directorate and the Chief Executive's Group, such as removing duplication, sharing staff and other resources etc. These will be considered as part of the next stage of the One Council programme and as part of the extra savings that now need to be made in light of the further 2% cut in Government grants to local authorities in 2014/15. Accordingly at our next committee meeting we will be discussing how the Central Services Directorate can make additional savings.

One Council

- 7 Our One Council Members Task Group met last month to discuss the progress of a couple of the implementation plans within the Customer Access work stream ('I need Support to Live Independently' and 'My Child is Starting School'). We also discussed the draft Internet Strategy, the draft Management Framework and the programme highlight report for October.
- 8 It's clear that without making the website quicker to navigate for our customers, many of the actions around self-assessment and the online transactions that are planned in the Customer Access workstream won't reach their full potential. Getting the website right could also reduce the number of 'avoidable' telephone calls that the Council receives, freeing up time to respond to more complex requests.
- 9 We were pleased to hear therefore that the guiding principles for our website design in the future will be that the primary audience is the customer - and not shaped around departmental requirements. Related to this the Council has found that an increasing number of our customers are using mobile devices (tablets, smartphones etc.) to access the website. 'Stripped down' webpages are being developed for users accessing the website with mobile devices. They include signposting arrows for people to find the information they need. We suggested that the simple and easy to navigate design of these webpages should provide the way forward for redesigning the website more generally in order to benefit PC/laptop users as well.

County Councillor Liz Casling Chairman

Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee

County Hall
Northallerton
7 December 2012
Background Documents: Nil