

**COUNCIL RESOURCES COMMISSION
HELD ON 1 MARCH 2004
(FROM 5.30 PM TO 6.45 PM)**

PRESENT: Councillor Skidmore in the Chair. Councillors Mrs Atkinson, Broadbank, de Courcey-Bayley, Fox, Macare, Newby, Charlie Powell, Simister, Simms, Mrs Smith, J Smith, Trotter and Webber.

Late Arrivals: None.

Early Departures: None.

71/03 – **COUNCILLOR WENDY RICHARDS:** Prior to commencing any formal business the Chairman Councillor Skidmore advised Members of the Commission that Councillor Wendy Richards, ward member for New Park had died earlier that afternoon.

72/03 - **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES:** Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor R Marsh, Andrew Jones and the Co-opted Member Mr Mark Lancaster. Notification had also been received that Councillor Trotter was to act as a substitute for Councillor Theakston and that Councillor Mrs Atkinson was to act for Councillor Nash.

(5.30 pm)

73/03 - **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:** There were no declarations of interest.

(5.31 pm)

74/03 – **MINUTES:** Councillor Webber advised the Chairman that in relation to Council Resources Commission Minute 62/03 resolution (b) the Draft General Fund Revenue Budget, the Leader of the Council had yet to report back to the Commission on the possibility of the cost of £12,650 associated with community consultation, research of young people which was not supported by Cabinet as a growth item for 2004/05 being met from other stakeholders resources.

The Commission were advised that officers would address this issue accordingly.

The Minutes of the Commission meetings held on 12 and 22 January 2004 were then approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

(Thirteen Members voted for the motion and there was one abstention).

(5.37 pm)

75/03 - **EXEMPT INFORMATION:** There were no exempt information items.

(5.38 pm)

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76/03 - **PUBLIC ARRANGEMENTS – QUESTIONS:** There were no such questions to consider.

(5.39 pm)

77/03 - REQUEST FOR INCLUSION OF ITEMS IN FUTURE WORK

PROGRAMME: The Scrutiny Officer circulated a copy of the Commission's current work programme and advised that a request had been received from Councillor de Courcey Bayley to include an item in the Commission's future work programme in relation to risk management issues and which would be brought to a future meeting of the Commission for Members' consideration.

The Chairman asked Members to consider the work of the Communications Review Panel and it was agreed that Councillor Andrew Jones, the Chairman of the Panel would be invited to provide Members with a brief update in relation to the work of the Panel and its progress at the next meeting of the Commission.

(5.40 pm)

78/03 - **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS:** The Director of Administration submitted extracts from the Council's Forward Plan in relation to key decisions to be taken during the course of future months which fell within the remit of the Commission. The decisions related to a measured term contract for public buildings and the implementation of the Access to Services Strategy. Members tabled questions in relation to both of these key decisions and in relation to the more general practice of including extracts from the Forward Plan with agenda papers.

Members requested the Borough Administrator to consider whether the information provided by officers completing Forward Plan notices could be fuller and more easily understood. This was likely to be the subject of a recommendation in the review of overview and scrutiny which was expected to be reported to the Scrutiny Coordinating Board at the end of March. In the meantime, the Chief Solicitor said officers preparing notifications would be encouraged to draft them more fully.

(5.40 pm – 5.53 pm)

MATTERS FOR REPORT

79/03 – **2003/04 PERFORMANCE UPDATE:** The Policy Analyst submitted a written report in order to provide the Commission with a performance update for the first three quarters of 2003/04 on performance indicators for which the Commission was responsible.

The officer also referred to paragraph 3.2 of the written report in relation to the way in which the information had been collected in previous years and was now being collected and continued by referring to indicators relating to electronic service delivery (ESD) (BV157) and to the likelihood of a change to the current figures as a result of a new ESD tool kit to be used by Local Authorities in calculating this figure.

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The Chairman then invited Members' questions in relation to the report. Members were referred to BVPI 12 and 15 relating to the number of working days/shifts lost due to sickness absence and the percentage of employees retiring on ill health grounds as a percentage of the total workforce. It was considered that these performance indicators would be valuable to the work of the Recruitment and Retention Panel and it was also noted that the Council's Human Resources Section was now reviewing those Members of staff experiencing long term sickness absence and it was further agreed that these issues should also be considered by the Recruitment and Retention Panel.

Members were also referred to the information set out in the document in relation to L/G1, L/G2 and L/G3 relating to the percentage of new Council tax benefit claims processed within 14 days, the percentage of new claims for rent allowance processed within 14 days and the percentage of new claims for Local Authority tenants processed within 14 days respectively and, in particular, the general downward drift of the percentage figures which seemed to suggest a drop in performance in the Council's Revenues and Benefits Section.

The Chairman invited the Deputy Director of Finance Mr Pat Doherty to address those issues raised by the Commission Members and, in doing so, Mr Doherty referred to the on-going staffing problems experienced by the section during the last two years, in particular the high turnover of staff and the large number of regulation changes experienced by the Department in relation to their work. Mr Doherty also pointed out that the performance of Harrogate Borough Council's Revenues Division Collection of Council Tax was in the top 25% of achieving authorities within the Country and thanked both the current and past Administrations for their support. Mr Doherty advised that around 90% of his current Assessment Staff had less than 12 months' experience in their current roles and asked the Commission to note that it usually took 6-9 months to train staff in the undertaking of such a role. The performance figures set out in the document submitted by the Policy Analyst were cumulative and Mr Doherty advised that at this time performance had improved beyond that which could be demonstrated by the report. This improvement could not be reflected in the current year figures to any great extent because of the fact that the BVPIs were cumulative. If the improvement in performance was maintained it would be reflected in the first quarter's figures for 2004/05.

The Deputy Director also referred to the delays created as a result of incomplete claim forms which required greater staff time and effort to process within the allotted 14 day period.

It was noted that the Council would not be collecting the Performance Indicators L/G1, L/G2 and L/G3 from 2004/05 onwards and the Commission then considered the benefit or otherwise of recommending the continued reporting of them. It was noted that this would not affect service provision as the data would still be collected by the Department anyway. It was agreed that the Commission would recommend that these Performance Indicators would still be reported after 2004/05.

Although no vote was taken on this matter the report was received.

(5.53 pm – 6.25 pm)

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80/03 – BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATOR BVPI 8 – COUNCIL'S

PAYMENT OF INVOICES: Further to Council Resources Commission Minute 46/03 in relation to the Council's payment of invoices, the Borough Administrator submitted an extract of the Minutes of the Meeting of Cabinet held on 4 February 2004.

The Cabinet had acceded to the Commission's request to allow this particular performance indicator to be reported separately to the individual Overview and Scrutiny Commissions to allow them the opportunity to comment on their respective service areas.

Although no vote was taken on this matter the report was received.

(6.25 pm)

81/03 – BENEFITS AND LOCAL TAXATION BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT

PLAN: The Deputy Director of Finance, Mr Pat Doherty, submitted a copy of the Benefits and Local Taxation Best Value Service Review – Service Improvement Plan together with a copy of a briefing note prepared for Members of the Commission for the meeting which provided a background to the review process and the current status of the plan and its objectives. The Deputy Director advised of the preliminary stages of the service review which commenced officially in April 2002 but, in practice, had started a year earlier and which originally comprised three separate reviews which had been consolidated into just one service review. The Director referred to the differing approach taken during this review compared to others, the consultation exercise carried out in advance of the baseline assessment and the Steering Group which comprised mostly external stakeholders which had been invaluable in assessing the Council's performance. The Deputy Director referred to Appendix A the Service Improvement Plan which set out the issues that had arisen as a result of the Consultation Exercise and the discussions held with stakeholders and referred to progress made in relation to some of those areas. It was noted that in relation to the Revenues and Benefits website this would be online in the next week or so. In relation to the suggestion for the Section to work with Capita in providing an improved and more efficient customer service, the technical issues in relation to computer software had meant that such an undertaking was not feasible. However it could be reviewed in the future once existing software was due for replacement.

The Commission referred to the practice of Council Tax payment by credit card and expressed concern that allowing such a facility did nothing to dissuade individuals from accruing debt. Whilst the use of debit cards was not a problem for the Authority, credit cards were considered to be the last resort in terms of payment methods and as such would not be widely used. The possible introduction of a charge for allowing payment by credit card was mentioned briefly, however, such an issue would require greater discussion between the Council's Finance and Legal Officers and that was noted. The Deputy Director then referred to the suggestion that the Council supply pre-paid envelopes to assist people in paying Council tax,

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however this was considered to be too expensive and, therefore, not feasible. The Deputy Director was then questioned in relation to the progress made regarding provision of Community Offices which would allow an enhanced service in terms of Council tax payments.

In conclusion, Councillor de Courcey Bayley who had been an active Member of the Service Improvement Review wished to place on record the gratitude of elected Members and the Authority toward the External Steering Group Members such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, Help the Aged, Nat West Bank, District Valuers and the Landlord representatives who had undertaken an enormous amount of work to assist the Council in the creation of the Service Improvement Plan. It was hoped that these links would continue into the future through existing steering group arrangements.

It was agreed that the Chairman would write to those involved thanking them for their efforts and input over the last two years. It was also agreed that the Resources Commission would wish to review this document in six months time to gauge any progress made and service improvements as a result.

Finally, the Chairman wished to place on record the Commission's thanks to the Deputy Director of Finance Mr Pat Doherty and extended Members' warm wishes for a happy retirement.

(6.25 pm – 6.45 pm)