

MEETING OF THE RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP

THURSDAY, 29 MARCH 2012 2.30 PM



GROUP MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Bob Adams
Councillor Nick Craft (Chairman)
Councillor Bob Sandall

Councillor Trevor Scott (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Ian Selby
Councillor Jacky Smith

OFFICERS

Head of Finance (Richard Wyles)
Revenues and Benefits Service Manager (Craig Scott)
Principal Democracy Officer (Jo Toomey)

52. MEMBERSHIP

The PDG was notified that Councillor Selby was substituting for Councillor Dilks and Councillor Adams was substituting for Councillor Cook for this meeting only.

53. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Bevan.

54. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

55. ACTION NOTES FROM 19 JANUARY 2012

The action notes from the meeting held on 19 January 2012 were noted, subject to the amendment of "Lincolnshire Policy Authority" in minute number 47 (page 3), to "Lincolnshire Police Authority".

56. UPDATES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

Minute number 48: The Local Authority Mortgage Scheme, about which the

PDG had made a number of recommendations, was approved at Council on 1 March 2012.

Minute number 49: Any updates or additional items fed by the PDG into the draft Asset Management Plan would be included in the final version for approval.

57. FEES AND CHARGES UPDATE

At previous workshop meetings, the PDG had worked with Deloitte to begin reviewing the Council's fees and charges strategy. The work benchmarked South Kesteven District Council's fees and charges against other authorities in Lincolnshire and the East Midlands. Access was also provided to data about fees and charges nationally. Report number HOF195 included a list of considerations that could support councillors in formulating a policy on local charging.

One area on which the working group had requested further information was charging for pre-planning advice. A separate working group had been formed to produce a range of proposals on charging for the service. The group was working with officers to research and consider the practice within other authorities, its impact and lessons learned. Final recommendations would be produced by the end of April.

The Council's current fees and charges strategy, which was produced in 2008/9 was appended to the report for the information of members. Key objectives were identified and listed in the report; these needed considering in the development of the new Fees and Charges Strategy for 2013/14. Of particular note for the PDG was the principle that charging should not primarily concern raising revenue but identifying and influencing behaviours to help the Council achieve its priority outcomes.

To form the basis of the strategy, the PDG would need to consider the Council's main areas of income and an appropriate charging strategy. To support this, officers were tasked with providing a breakdown of the current charging structure, the current policy for fee setting, subsidised costs (broken down by town where available), payment methods available and the corporate priority to which the charge relates. This information would be considered at a working group meeting.

As an example, discussion ensued on the charging strategy around markets and their performance in different towns, opportunities for driving behaviour, local competition and opportunities to optimise stall occupancy.

Action Point:

Officers to organise a working group and provide PDG members with a breakdown of fees and charges information.

58. LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT

Report number HOF194, which was presented by the Revenues and Benefits Service Manager provided an update on the localised council tax support scheme from 2013/14. At its last meeting the PDG received a presentation from the Benefits Manager. Local authorities would need to design schemes for working age claimants, taking into account available funding for preserving current levels for pensioner claimants.

Officers were still waiting for information from government. Preliminary grant figures were due to be released in May/June 2012. The necessary software had been purchased to enable the modelling of different scenarios.

Countywide discussions were underway about a Lincolnshire scheme, which would allow authorities to share the level of risk. The grant funding would be split on a pro rata basis between the agencies that receive income from Council Tax. The feasibility of a countywide scheme was unclear because of widely varying demographics across the county. 32% of the City of Lincoln Council's Caseload were pensioners, while in South Holland, 58% were pensioners.

Concern was expressed that the Council would not be able to meet the required reduction in the scheme's first year. No in-year adjustment to the scheme could be made. 49.6% of the caseload were pensioners, so the 10% saving would need spreading across the remaining claimants (minus any further groups determined as vulnerable people).

Councillors suggested that benefit payments should be based on a sliding scale, rather than by bands. The suggestion was made that in order to qualify for council tax benefit, an individual had to receive a minimum level of other benefits. PDG members also expressed concern about the potential impact of changes to housing benefit on people who also faced a reduction in council tax benefit.

59. BUDGET MONITORING

The Head of Finance presented report number HOF193, which provided financial reports for 2011/12 – monitoring information to the end of January 2012. Work was underway to identify capital and revenue spending proposals that could be put in place in the 2011/12 financial year to support the delivery of priority projects and prevent the risk of an underspend.

The report highlighted key variances and provided a summary explanation for these.

General fund (Revenue)

Of particular note were savings on salary related budgets, which was budgeted

at 3% however a 6% saving was achieved through departmental vacancies, sharing senior officers with other authorities and reviewing working arrangements.

Housing Revenue Account

There was a forecast surplus against the HRA. Returns against dwelling rents were better than projected because of the improvement in the void rate. Salary related savings were also achieved. The re-profiling of projects and re-tendering led to savings on the repairs and maintenance programme.

General fund (Capital Programme)

The Head of Finance reported that there had been movement of £2m against budgeted levels. Spending had been incorporated in the capital programme for 2012/13.

HRA (Capital Programme)

An underspend was forecast against the HRA capital programme, with outstanding works being incorporated within the programme for 2012/13. Re-profiling of capital works to ensure financial efficiencies meant schemes of work were due to commence in February 2012 and would not be completed within the current financial year.

Councillors briefly discussed the report, particularly noting savings in the telephony contract, grants for disabled facilities adaptations, non-domestic rates and work force size.

60. ICT STRATEGY

The Head of Finance made a brief presentation on the draft ICT strategy. The Council's first ICT Strategy was approved in 2005 and required regular updates as a result of changes in the environment. The most recent version of the strategy was updated in 2008.

The revised ICT Strategy was scheduled for consideration by Cabinet in July 2012. The document promoted ICT as an enabler that helped support changes within the organisation, delivering better services to members of the public and using innovative solutions to support better service delivery. The draft strategy underpinned key Council strategies including the corporate plan, service plans, the culture change programme, corporate and business transformation projects, the People Strategy, corporate training plan, the customer access strategy (including web development) the Medium Term Financial Plan and the Procurement Strategy.

The strategy would cover a number of key themes:

- Supporting the delivery of priority themes
- Partnerships
- Governance and underpinning structures
- Supporting elected Members and officers fulfil their roles in delivering the council's priorities

61. WORK PROGRAMME

A working group meeting to discuss fees and charges was agreed for Thursday 26 April at 2:30pm in the Witham Room.

62. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting was closed at 16:10.