

## **MEMBER QUESTIONS TO PORTFOLIO HOLDER at Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee – 23 March 2017**

### **From Councillor Musgrave**

- (a) Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me, contrary to the sentiment in this report, continuing to restrict public participation at scrutiny is not going to encourage the public to attend meetings?
- (b) How does the administration intend to actively promote this new initiative and change the culture of poor public engagement? Can this be a future task and finish project?
- (c) Has any consideration been given to setting up ward councils, much like town or parish councils in other district councils? If not, why not?
- (d) Why has there been an under-spend of £533k on property maintenance?
- (e) Reference the £70k overspend on PR consultants, can the Portfolio Holder confirm now we have a new Communications Director in post, going forward such work will be completed in house, thereby negating the need for PR consultants?
- (f) Reference the overspend of over £66k on agency staff, can the Portfolio Holder explain why so much money has been spent on outside staff when we are making Council employees redundant and/or not replacing posts?
- (g) Can the Portfolio Holder provide a breakdown of how this budget has been spent?
- (h) Does the Portfolio Holder conceded, this £66k overspend is contrary to the Leader's stated position to the joint trade unions to reduce overall agency spend?
- (i) What has the reaction from the recognised trade unions been?
- (j) Does the Portfolio Holder agree with me, urgent steps need taken to reduce and negate agency spend?

### **Responses by Councillor Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Support Services**

- (a) Councillor Pearson explained that the report made no reference to restricting public participation at Scrutiny. What it did suggest was maximising the publicity surrounding all the council meetings so that more members of the public were aware of the meetings and the business to be transacted.
  - Councillor Musgrave asked about Leaders question time and having public to read questions.
  - Councillor Pearson responded by informing that members of the public can ask a question. The report in Item 7 refers to workable proposals and addressing ways of reporting at meetings.
- (b) Public engagement, creating and maintaining two way conversations, was a core part of the strategic direction and focus that was being brought in under the new Director of Communications and Marketing. For the first time the council was moving towards measured levels of public engagement, where our output can be monitored and refined

according to the needs and demands of our residents. A task and finish project would duplicate.

- (c) I'm not quite sure what is meant by this question. The consideration of what would be another tier of local government within the City goes beyond the remit of the report, and even if it was to be considered, would need extensive public consultation before anything could be taken further forward.

Response by Councillor Edwards, Leader and Councillor Pearson, Portfolio Holder for Support Services

- (d) Due to prioritisation of emerging in year demand it has not been possible to complete all planned works given the limited officer resource available. A proportion of the Property Maintenance fund is an allocation for reactive repairs, the nature of this spend requirement prevents accurate spend forecasting. In this financial year a reduced demand has resulted in reduced spend; in future years this demand may increase or exceed allocation.

The following schemes, which were still in design stage at the point of reporting to committee, would be committed by year end: Civic Centre heating alterations to enable stagecoach occupation; RAMM Lightning Conductor improvements; Verney House damp mitigation works; Alphington Community Centre roof repairs; Mary Arches MSCP lift shaft repairs; Customer 1st entrance door safety improvements; Civic Centre Fire Door Repairs; General LPS faults; Multi-storey car park fire risk assessment works; Retention payment for historic asset decorations contract.

Within the reported £533,000 underspend, the current envisaged requirement for roll forward to fund the schemes detailed above was in the region of £283,000; with a resultant underspend in line with previously reported predictions in the region of £250,000.

- Councillor Musgrave enquired about what happened to the ring fenced money and was it spent on other projects.
  - Councillor Edwards informed that where money was spent, was a decision of the authority.
- (e) All corporate communications, referred to in this budget heading, would be undertaken in house by a team led by the Communications and Marketing Director. There would also be a comprehensive review of communications, PR and marketing activity by other departments across the council.
- Councillor Musgrave commented that the figure of £70,000 was a large sum in the public eye, would there be more spent externally?
  - Councillor Edwards stated that money would be spent on in-house and was very proud of the Council's record.
- (f) The over-spend relates to Procurement. As Members were aware, we had tried to recruit to the post twice and failed to attract a suitable candidate at the salary budgeted. We had therefore decided to undertake a review of our requirements and put in place a suitably qualified Agency worker to undertake the review, support the one existing member of staff in post and support services in procurement requirements. There were no suitably qualified internal staff available to undertake this work.

- Councillor Musgrave enquired if the £66,000 was spent on the procurement vacancies?
  - Councillor Pearson referred to Councillor Musgrave's next question which the response to answer this question.
- (g) Over the year there have been up to two agency staff working on procurement.
- (h) The situation was unusual in the Council and results from the limited market of suitably qualified staff. To rectify this we were developing a more attractive offer, but it does take time to deliver this via the organisational development approach agreed with the trade unions.
- Councillor Musgrave asked if there had been a reaction from the trade union.
  - Councillor Edwards informed that he had spoken with unions and the agency staff, who don't work for the council. Unions were happy with the recruitment but he would always look at vacant posts and make necessary checks. He noted that there were five new jobs, which three had been through agency recruitment, but had now become full time posts. It was more expensive to employ agency workers.
- (i) The trade unions were fully involved in the organisational development process for the new team.
- Councillor Musgrave asked whether agency staff were being offered roles?
  - Councillor Edwards explained he would like to offer agency staff more roles and was working to find a way to hire them. There was an issue of recruitment with not being able to pay staff enough for the roles and be unable to keep them in post. This was being looked at.
- (j) As stated above, this situation had developed to support the implementation of a new team of staff employed by the Council.