PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT TO SCRUTINY RESOURCES

Transformation Programme

Local authorities are under attack from many in the Coalition government, including local government ministers. Our response as a Labour Council is to transform the organisation, to ensure that it is ready to respond to the contemporary demands placed on us by our residents and customers. Some councils have outsourced services, where the imperative is to slash budgets rather than provide quality services. We believe a service mainly staffed by our own workforce is the model most efficient and responsive to demand.

This process started with the Senior Management Review which was concluded at the start of this year and I am pleased to say that we now have all of the Strategic Directors, Assistant Directors and Corporate managers in post.

We committed to introducing Systems Thinking to the council, to facilitate us in taking an outside-in view of the way we currently work. This has helped us to focus on what is important for our residents and customers and how we might reconfigure our services to deliver what matters to the customer in the most efficient way, stripping out unnecessary waste and duplication.

As a result of information and analysis since last summer, three reviews have been established:

- "Help Me With My Financial/Housing Problem" (with a view to broadening this out in the future to "Help me Back to Financial Independence")

- "Maintain the City's Physical Assets", which is focuses on the maintenance of our Housing stock and Commercial Buildings.

- "Enable Good Development", which focuses on Planning and Development.

As referred to earlier, these three reviews put a clear emphasis on refocusing our services around the needs of our customers and residents and stripping out unnecessary waste, duplication and bureaucracy. It is also about how we measure and continually review and improve performance. It is vital for the success of this work that councillors understand what we are trying to achieve and that we are also beginning to look at the way we review performance, make decisions and ensure that we are leading the focus on the best outcomes for our customers.

We remain committed to extending our opening hours. We are therefore looking as part of the review which relates to helping people with financial or housing problems, whether there is value in offering that service one evening in the week rather than on a Saturday morning.

Welfare Reform

April 2013 will see more changes for residents currently receiving Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, and poses significant challenges for the Council in providing ongoing support. Council Tax Benefit is being abolished at the end of the financial year, to be replaced by a local Council Tax support scheme. Funded by a fixed grant, based on indicative figures released recently, for Exeter this amounts to a cut in Council Tax Benefit expenditure of 14%. The Council has a very tight timescale within which to establish a local scheme which protects the most vulnerable in society while supporting the work incentives being introduced through Universal Credit. Options for the scheme will be discussed shortly followed by a period of consultation. The final scheme must be agreed by 31st January 2013 to avoid a default scheme being imposed by the Government.

Although details have not yet been confirmed in regulations, based on information announced so far, residents will also be affected by other aspects of welfare reform, mainly the Benefit Cap and Social Sector Size Restrictions.

Benefit Cap – a limit on overall benefit income for individuals and households out of work. The restriction will be administered by reducing Housing Benefit payments putting responsibility for any resulting hardship on the Council. Exemptions apply for households in receipt of qualifying disability benefits, and the cap does not affect pension age claims. Around 50 households in Exeter could be affected.

Social Sector Size Restrictions – affecting Council and Housing Association tenants, a deduction will be made from Housing Benefit payments in cases where the claimant is considered to have spare bedroom/s. The reduction could be 14% of gross rent for 1 spare bedroom and 25% for 2 or more bedrooms. Approximately 329 Council and 730 Housing Association tenancies could be affected.

IT

It is easy to take our IT resources for granted but like many organisations we are dependent on robust IT systems and expertise to support the delivery of our services as well as our internal communication.

In order to ensure that we are ensuring that our systems are fit for purpose, we will be delivering key projects:

Network Upgrade – The infrastructure that operates at the heart of the council's network is now 10 years old. This key piece of equipment links together the file servers, PCs and printers and provides the communication hub for the entire network. The upgrade will provide resilience and will have an immediate benefit on performance, whilst ensuring greater capacity for the council's future ICT requirements, such as the Desktop Virtualisation project.

Desktop Updates - For a number of years, the council has operated a strategy where PCs are replaced if they are over 4 years old. However, as we strive to manage long term costs and provide a flexible working environment, we are developing a new approach towards how we manage the council's PC estate.

We will introduce 'virtual desktops' which means that we can increase our return on investment by extending the life of PCs. Virtualised desktops create a special environment on PCs where applications such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint etc), including corporate systems are 'published'. This allows older equipment to be used. Users will benefit from improved performance and flexibility. For example, it will be easier to provide access to vital business applications via mobile devices.

Another benefit of the virtual desktop is that they are managed centrally, which means ICT Services can better respond to user demands. Applications available in the virtual environment will no longer require a physical installation and in the event of any problems, PCs can be rebuilt in a matter of minutes. Users can quickly and easily work at any virtual desktop PC and if any applications are missing, they can be published almost immediately.

Members IT Provision – Members currently have the option of using either their own PC or a PC/Laptop supplied by ECC to access their council email remotely via a secure portal and Citrix technology. The majority of the ECC laptops used by members are now between 4 and 5 years old and are in need of replacement. It is proposed to review the current IT provision by working with

the Member Development Steering Group to consider the needs of Members and assess available technologies.

Website review – We are working to ensure that that continually improve our website and intranet so that it can be effectively used as a way of communicating with our residents, councillors and staff. In order to achieve this, we are working to ensure that we have processes in place that allows information to be updated on the website as quickly as possible.

Intranet review – Following the staff survey, the role of the Intranet as a communications tool is being investigated as part of the staff focus groups. This will help us understand whether what we currently have is fit for purpose and what changes we may need to make so that staff see it as a key communication tool, alongside other methods such as City News.

Health and Safety

- We continue to strive to be an exemplar for health and safety by managing work- related sickness absence and encouraging sensible risk management.

- We maintain our commitment to safe working practices by ensuring that we are implementing the health and safety action plan that was approved by Employee Liaison Forum.

- We will aim to reduce the incidence of accidents and incidents through ongoing risk assessment and safety management commitment.

HR

We are currently working to reframe the way that HR works with the rest of the organisation. In particular, we are moving towards a Business Partnering model where there is a specific adviser identified for each directorate in order that they might build more understanding of the service and issues they face.

Other key initiatives within HR include:
- Supporting the development of opportunities for youth employment, in particular the introduction of an Apprenticeship Scheme. The HR unit are currently discussing options with Exeter College, Bicton College and Plymouth College of Art to look at possible options for opportunities for young people with the Council. It is anticipated that a scheme can be introduced from September and dependent upon outcomes rolled out across the Council.
- A fit for purpose Council in respect of Council Structure, Systems Review work and service delivery; and employment policy and practice which underpins this
- Supporting Employees through an immense period of change whilst maintaining and improving services to the public

Civic Centre

- In order to continue to maximize the use of the council's assets, we shall continue to find suitable tenants for the remainder of Phase 3. Part of it is already being taken by the Children's Service of DCC. We continue to ensure that the offices are maintained to a high standard and are suitable to face the changes that will be brought about as a consequence of the various reviews across the organisation.
- The Devon Registration Service has been based within the Customer Service Centre from early June with the ability for marriages to take place here on a Saturday morning.

Democratic Services

- We will be running the Police and Crime Commissioners elections in November of this year (on behalf of Cornwall Council which is the Returning Authority) which has led to us realigning other work to an earlier than normal date (the annual electoral canvas will start two months earlier than normal) (leading to an additional cost as originally this election was to be combined with the May ECC elections and had been budgeted accordingly);