



**ANNUAL REPORT
CORPORATE POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD
APRIL 2012 – MARCH 2013**

'I would like to thank my Vice Chair Joe Roberts and all of the Members of the Board for the contribution which they have made during the past year. The Board has faced a challenging Agenda, and has been involved in scrutinising the localisation of Council Tax Support, technical reform of Council Tax, and the abolition of the Discretionary Social Fund. It has also had the opportunity to play a part in the formulation of a Single Equality Scheme.

I would also like to thank the Council's staff for their hard work in delivering its objectives against the background of reducing resources and considerable change'

Councillor Bob Gilligan – Chairman of Corporate Policy & Performance Board.

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During 2012/2013, The Board comprised of eleven Councillors – R. Gilligan (Chairman) J. Roberts (Vice Chair) E. Cargill, M. Dennett, S. Hill, C. Loftus, A. Lowe, A. McInerney, N. Plumpton Walsh, G. Stockton and K. Wainwright.

The Board is responsible for scrutinising performance and formulating policy in relation to Resources, HR and Training, ICT, Property, Democratic Services, Legal Services, Communications and Marketing, Stadium, Civic Catering, Procurement, Corporate Complaints and Area Forums. The Board also has responsibility for monitoring the performance of the Reporting Departments which during the last year were Legal and Democratic Services including Communications and Marketing, Human Resources, Financial Services, ICT and Support Services, and the Policy and Performance Divisions.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The full Board met seven times during the year. Set out below are some of the main initiatives upon which it has worked during that time.

LOCALISATION OF COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT

The July meeting received a Report dealing with the detailed implications of the Welfare Format 2012, and submitting a localisation of Council Tax scheme for consideration and public consultation.

The Government had announced as part of a 2010 spending review that it would localise support for Council Tax from 2013/14 and reduce expenditure on the benefit by 10%. The provisions for the localisation of Council Tax support were included in the Local Government Finance Bill which was then before Parliament. Each Council would have to draw up its own scheme but the Government had said that there would be a 10% overall reduction in the amount of expenditure of the scheme. For Halton, this meant that there would be approximately £1.4 million less paid out to help towards Council Tax. The Report considered the costs and implications and presented funding alternatives to Members. Although the scheme would have to be in place by April 2013, arrangements would have to be completed by October 2012 to enable the setting of Council Tax and Billing process to be carried out.

The Board agreed with the proposals in the Report and recommended that the draft scheme be submitted to Executive Board for consideration and approval for public consultation. The full scheme would then be provided to all Members.

The results of the public consultation exercise were brought back to the Board in October.

Since the publication of the Report, Government had announced a grant of £100,000,000 to be divided between Councils across the country to assist with the shortfalls they would be experiencing in 2013/14. This would mean that £266,000,00 would be allocated to Halton subject to a number of criteria being met. Having debated the matter fully, the Board agreed that they would not recommend using the allocation of £266,000,00 based upon the information they had available to them at the meeting. The Executive Board subsequently accepted that recommendation.

TECHNICAL REFORM OF COUNCIL TAX

Also at the October meeting, the Board considered a Report which detailed a number of technical changes to Council Tax billing. Proposals gave billing authorities greater discretion over the relief strong Council Tax available in respect of second homes and some empty properties. The

proposed changes would:-

Give Billing Authorities the power to levy up to full Council Tax on properties designated as second homes;

Replace exemption classes A and C with discounts, the amounts of which would be for the Billing Authorities to determine;

Allow Billing Authorities to levy an empty properties premium in respect of dwellings liable for Council Tax;

Allow Authorities to publish on line the information to be supplied with demand Notices;

And reduce the discount on long term empty properties to 0%.

Following debate, the Board resolved that Executive Board be recommended to approve the proposed changes to Council Tax discounts and Billing as outlined in the Report. That recommendation was subsequently approved by Executive Board.

ABOLITION OF DISCRETIONARY SOCIAL FUND

A special meeting of the Board was convened in December to consider a Report which sought views in relation to the abolition of the Discretionary Social Fund and asked Members to make recommendations to the Executive Board. Members were reminded that Government had abolished Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants and suggested that local schemes be developed by each local authority. Grant would be provided by Government to do this.

Members and Officers had worked together and consulted the Department for Work and Pensions and had liaised with other local authorities about the approach to the issue. All local authorities appeared to be developing their own schemes. As a result the Board was presented with a Draft Scheme for both Crisis Loans and Community Care Grants for consideration and comment. It was the consensus of the Board that grant rather than loan schemes should be adopted and it was also recommended that the Council should avoid cash payments wherever possible and develop voucher and pre- paid card systems which would help with the prevention of abuse of the process. It was also agreed that the maximum number of claims per claimant per year would be set at two.

Members felt that as the scheme would be introduced for the first time in

April 2013, it would be beneficial to set up a working group until such time as the scheme was fully developed. This was agreed and invitations to participate would be sent to all Members of the Corporate Policy and Performance Board. The Executive Board accepted the recommendations of the PPB.

DRAFT SINGLE EQUALITY SCHEME 2013/15

A Report submitted in January informed Members of the draft Revised Single Equality Scheme which would last from 2013/15. Whilst the Equality Act 2010 did not impose a duty to produce an equality scheme, it was considered good practice nationally to have such a scheme in place.

The Scheme which was proposed conveyed the Council's commitment to all of the protected characteristics as set out in the Act, and all legislative changes had been incorporated into the new draft. It was intended that the Scheme be a living document as the sections illustrating Halton's demographic information, the Workforce Profile and information about equality directives could be updated annually and therefore contained in one document. Ideally, the Scheme would also contain a section to be updated annually which would describe other examples of the Council's Equality and Diversity activities and achievements during a given year. This together would ensure that the Council would always have an up to date scheme on the Intranet and Internet.

The Document was welcomed by the Board and submitted to Executive Board for final approval which was duly given.

PERFORMANCE ISSUES

During the course of year the Board considered in detail the performance of the reporting departments. Issues which were overseen by the Board during the year included:-

Accidents statistics
Sickness Absences
School Catering and the operation of the Stobart Stadium.

Significant improvements were noted, as was the substantial take-up of school meals in the Borough

WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

The Board received reports during the year on all of the topics which it had

identified for examination during 2012/13, mainly:-

Locality working
Halton's Strategic Partnership
Markets.

Thanks were due to the Chairs of those groups, Councillors A. Lowe, Roberts and Wainwright respectively.

Moving into 2013/14, it was envisaged that topic work would focus on a review of the Council's Complaints system, and a consideration of issues surrounding the Discretionary Social Fund.