



CORPORATE PPB ANNUAL REPORT

'The council continues to face a difficult task in dealing with a reduction in government funding of £45million with a further reduction of £33 million to follow I appreciate the endeavours of Council officers and staff in maintaining the quality services we provide to our residents under such difficult circumstances. I am grateful for the help and support I receive from lead officer Mark Reaney and the members support team and the officers who supply the reports to the board so we can be more effective in our scrutiny of the councils operations.

The board will continue to monitor the progress of its topic group recommendations on Corporate complaints and the Discretionary Support scheme and acknowledges the good work done by the staff who implement these schemes.

I would like to thank my Vice Chair Alan Lowe for the support he has given me, and to all of the Members of the Board for the contributions which they have made to the Topic Groups during the past year.'

– Councillor Bob Gilligan, Chair of Corporate Policy & Performance Board

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During 2014/2015, the Board comprised of eleven councillors – R. Gilligan (Chairman), A Lowe (Vice Chairman), E Cargill, M Dennett, S Hill, C Loftus, A McInerney, N Plumpton Walsh, J Roberts, C Rowe 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 have been 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 five times during the year. Set out below are some of the main initiatives upon which it has worked during that time.

CORPORATE COMPLAINTS

At its first meeting of the year in June, the Board was presented with

the findings of a review of the Council's existing Corporate Complaints Handling Procedures which was undertaken as part of its 2013/14 work programme. It was considered appropriate to undertake a review of existing arrangements to ensure that the system remained fit for purpose, was consistent with recognised good practice and reflected best value principles in terms of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

A thorough review had been undertaken by the Corporate Complaints Topic Group which included a review of existing good practice literature, a bench marking exercise with a number of authorities and a small number of other organisations, and in depth discussions between elected members and officers.

As a result of this work, it was concluded that the existing arrangements had a number of strengths, although there was considered to be some scope to further improve arrangements.

The recommendations from the reivew were intended to ensure that the collection of information was more consistent and complete, but the procedure was simplified to reduce potential/actual operating costs and avoid matters becoming protracted from a complainant's perspective, and staff dealing with complaints were provided with sufficient support, resources and skills to allow them to deal with complaints effectively.

Members of the Board supported the recommendations and agreed that the Topic Group report be submitted to the Executive Board for consideration.

Executive Board subsequently considered and approved the revised policy.

DISCRETIONARY SUPPORT SCHEME

Also at the June meeting, the Board received a report on the delivery of the Council's Discretionary Support Scheme following its first twelve months of operation and was requested to consider the findings of the Topic Group which had maintained oversight of the scheme over the past twelve months.

The scheme had previously been administered by the Department for Work and Pensions until it was abolished by the Welfare Reform Act 2012. In April 2013 crisis loans for living expenses and community care grants were replaced by a new grants scheme administered by the Council. The Board played a key role in developing the scheme and were asked by the Executive Board to keep the scheme under review. The Board's Topic group had met twice during the previous municipal year.

It had been noted that the Council was keen to develop a scheme which was affordable and sustainable given the significant budget reductions which had and would continue to take place. There was a strong desire from the Council to establish a scheme that supported individuals in crisis situations and those who required support establishing a place to live.

The full Board considered the findings and recommendations of the Topic Group and agreed that the scheme should continue.

A further report was brought to the Board at its meeting in January. This took the form of an update regarding the operation of the scheme. The Topic Group had met again on 24 November 2014 to review progress. The Board noted the progress with the operation of the scheme, and recommended that amendments be made to it to take account of the introduction of universal credit, to clarify the position regarding the number of awards permitted each year and to enable the scheme to assist customers who were in full time education and where they had no alternative support. A further report on the options for the future of the scheme in Halton would be brought forward to a future meeting.

FEES AND CHARGES

In September, Members of the Board received a report proposing the establishment of a Cross Policy and Performance Board Topic Group to examine the potential the Council had to increase income from Fees and Charges, given the current pressures on its budget and its ability to continue to deliver essential services.

The report referred to a piece of work which had already been initiated which benchmarked the Council with similar authorities in relation to the income it was currently generating from Fees and Charges. Given the results of this research and the Council's current financial position, the issue was deemed to be worthy of more detailed examination. The Chairs Group therefore suggested that a Topic Group be set up under the auspices of the Board with cross PPB representation. It was also recommended that Chairs of the Development Control and Regulatory Committees be invited to attend. The findings of the group would be reported back to the Corporate Policy and Performance Board with a view to forming final recommendations to the Executive Board.

MARKETS

A report was submitted in June updating the Board on the management and operation of the borough's markets and setting out future priorities and actions. A summary of progress was provided on the following areas

- Refurbishment work to the public toilets
- Wifi access
- Traders Committee
- Effective competition

Members wished these priorities to be focussed upon in future.

In October, the Board considered a report providing an update on the adoption of a Markets Charging Policy. Changes and improvements had been made during the previous twelve months. Members made a number of suggestions and observations relating to future priorities and actions. It was noted that a review of the market hall rents had been carried out and it was acknowledged that a payment system was required that accurately reflected an equitable distribution of expenditure/costs across the market and distinguished between popular or conversely difficult to let stalls. A review of the way in which the Council charged traders had been undertaken to ensure that rents were consistent, competitive and viable. Also, a Charging Policy had been implemented to ensure that there was a consistent starting point for any future rent reviews.

CODE OF PRACTICE – DATA TRANSPARENCY

In January, the Board was reminded that in September 2011 the Government had published a Code of Recommended Practice for local authorities on Data Transparency. In Autumn 2012, the Government undertook a consultation exercise in which it was suggested that the original code would be substantially revised with its basic requirements becoming mandatory and its scope extended. Following the publication of the Government's response to the consultation the DCLG finalised and published the Local Government Transparency Code. This set out specific data sets that were both required to be published and recommended for publication on a quarterly and annual basis.

After this publication, the Code was further revised by DCLG in October 2014, and it was specified that authorities were required to publish quarterly data by 31 December 2014 and annual data by 2 February 2015. The Code also stated that the requirements had been made mandatory. Although compliance with the Code would not be monitored by the Information Commissioner's Office, the ICO would react to complaints being received from interested parties under existing frameworks. Members were advised on a number of data sets that must be published and were recommended for publication, and specific officer resource implications.

PERFORMANCE ISSUES

During the course of the year, the Board considered in detail the performance of the reporting departments. Issues which were

overseen by the Board during the year included:

- Accident statistics
- Sickness absence
- School catering and the operation of the Select Stadium

WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15

The Board had received reports during the year on the topics which it had identified for examination, namely the final report on the Complaints Topic Group, The Discretionary Support Scheme, and the establishment of a Fees and Charges Topic Group. For the year 2015/16 Members indicated they wished to develop the work of the Discretionary Support Scheme Topic Group, and to focus attention on the Fees and Charges Topic, which was a major piece of work and still in its infancy. It would require significant Member involvement during the year.