

Review Committee – 9 January 2018

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **9 January 2018** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr J C Burton
Vice-Chairman: Cllr R Milne

Cllr N L Cooper
Cllr B T Hazlewood
Cllr N J Hookway
Cllr M Hoy
Cllr Mrs J R Lumley

Cllr Mrs C M Mason
Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr J E Newport
Cllr A L Williams

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs R R Dray, Mrs L Shaw and C M Stanley.

SUBSTITUTES

Cllr J D Griffin for Cllr Mrs L Shaw

NON-MEMBERS ATTENDING

Cllrs Mrs D Hoy and D J Sperring

OFFICERS PRESENT

S Scrutton	-	Managing Director
M Harwood-White	-	Assistant Director, Commercial Services
J Stacey	-	Emergency Planning Officer
V Conroy	-	Senior Communications Officer
P Gowers	-	Overview and Scrutiny Officer
M Power	-	Democratic Services Officer

1 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2017 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. A statement from the Section 151 Officer, in response to a query raised by the Review Committee on 5 December 2017, was read by the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, as follows:-

‘In response to the query raised at Review Committee on Tuesday 5 December under Item 7 (the Treasury Management 2017/18 Mid-Year Review) regarding the security of inter-authority lending, officers agreed to check if there were any specific Central Government guarantees in place for inter-authority lending.

Having consulted our Treasury Management Advisors (Link Asset Services), whilst there is no specific guarantee from Central Government to underwrite Local Authority lending in the Local Government Act 2003, no Local Authority has become insolvent to date and it is unlikely that Central Government would

allow an individual Local Authority to default against its creditors. It is therefore judged that lending to another UK Local Authority is unlikely to be riskier than investing in a bank or building society that falls under a similar national sovereign credit rating.

The 2017/18 Rochford District Council (RDC) Treasury Management Strategy agreed by the Review Committee prior to Full Council in February 2017 sets out the criteria for the counterparties the Council will lend to. This states that the Council will only invest with institutions within countries that have a sovereign credit rating of AA+ or above (with the exception granted by Full Council of the UK which has an AA rating) and in financial instruments that fall under a number of defined headings, which include "Term deposits, call deposits and bonds with other UK Local Authorities". The risk is further mitigated by the limits on lending to other Local Authorities set out in the 2017/18 Strategy, which states that a maximum of £3m may be lent for a maximum duration of 1 year.

Under the criteria of the current strategy the Council could therefore choose to invest with other UK Local Authorities, although to date it has not done so. Officers will continue not to lend to other Local Authorities for the remainder of this financial year, pending agreement of the 2018/19 Strategy, which will be presented at Review Committee in February 2018. It should be noted that, were RDC to remove other local authorities from its agreed counterparty list, this would further limit the pool of counterparties available for the Council to invest in, and would not allow it to benefit from potentially higher investment returns.'

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs J E Newport, Mrs C M Mason and J R F Mason each declared an interest in Item 8 of the Agenda, the Council's Petition Process, by virtue of being acquainted with the petition organiser.

3 SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE COUNCIL'S COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Members considered the report of the Managing Director, in response to a submission from a local resident, with information about the way the Council uses social media to provide information and advice on policies, proposals, initiatives, activities, etc. Also included in the report were arrangements for the preparation and issue of press releases.

Members felt that the Council used social media to disseminate information but not to engage with residents or to ask for response or feedback.

In response to questions, the following was noted:

- The local resident who had requested the review of the Council's use of social media could be contacted to ask if he wished to meet with the Council's Senior Communications Officer to discuss the response in the report and whether he thought there were opportunities for improvement.

- Residents and non-residents alike could subscribe to the 'Tell Me More' (TMM) platform on the Council's website to receive information to be sent direct to them. Each email sent provided the facility of unsubscribing to the service.
- The average engagement rate on TMM of 79% was an 'open rate'. There was no monitoring of subscribers who had not opened emails received for a prescribed period.
- The Council would look into how a picture description facility could be incorporated into its social media posts.
- Information was put out by the Council via social media to try to engage residents and to boost interaction with Council surveys, including the current Planning Policy Issues and Options document. A younger audience could be targeted by tailoring the questions appropriately.
- Currently there is a prompt to subscribe to TMM every time a user visits the Rochford District Council website: this would be amended to occur only when a user had not used the site for a specified time.
- All of the IT processes the Council uses conformed to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which would come into force in May 2018.
- The Communications Team were currently looking into a platform called Muster Point to improve social media management. The software is bespoke for local authorities and is considerably cheaper than the alternative Hootsuite package, of which the Council is currently using the free, very basic package.
- In an effort to increase engagement with a younger audience, the Council's Communications team had reactivated the Council's Instagram account and were working to promote the use of other social media platforms, such as Snapchat. The importance of maintaining quality and accuracy of information was a priority.
- Quality control of communicating information was with the Communications team and extending this to involve other officers would have to be appropriately managed.
- The Council did not have a Social Media Policy that covered its employees, although all officers had to comply with their contractual obligations and the Employee Code of Conduct. Information on a Social Media policy to cover Council employees, including the appropriate use of social media in their private capacity, would be reported back to the Committee.

- The use of social media by the Council tied in with the Council's priorities of 'early intervention', 'maximising our assets' and 'enabling communities'. The opportunity of involving local secondary school children in Local Government via social media would be looked into.
- The Facebook page received very few responses from residents and the Twitter account had not many re-tweets. Retweeting was dependent on the subject matter and a press release put out recently on an open day at London Southend Airport had had many re-tweets. It was noted that the impact on officer resource was a barrier to using social media more proactively.
- The main subjects of interest on the Council's social media platforms were waste collection and planning and some on benefit claiming (where officers responded to residents directly).
- The annual cost of the TMM software would be provided to Members after the meeting.
- One of the questions on the Council's live budget survey was trialled using a Twitter poll to gauge the response that could be achieved if this were to be used as an engagement tool in the future. The test question related to the importance of the services that the Council provides and was sent out as seven separate Twitter polls and resulted in a doubling of the responses received, 175 in total. The responses received would not be included as part of the survey results in this case.

Resolved

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That contact be made with the resident who had requested the review of the Council's use of social media to invite him to meet with the Council's Senior Communications Officer to discuss the response in the report and whether he thought there were opportunities for improvement.
- (3) That a further report be made to the Committee in six months' time, to cover the following:-
 - The possibility of introducing a social media policy that governs the use of social media by the Council's employees specifically.
 - How the main issues being raised with the Council via social media can be ascertained.
 - How picture descriptions and audio messages in social media platforms can be used by the Council.

- Further statistics with regard to the audiences the Council reaches via its use of social media.
- A record of the tweets the Council receives.
- Whether control of communicating information by social media and providing responses can be extended beyond the Council's Communications Team to other officers within the Council.
- How the Council can extend its use of social media to encourage increased engagement and response by residents. (MD)

4 EMERGENCY PLANNING AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY REVIEW

Members considered the report of the Assistant Director, Commercial Services with information regarding Emergency Planning and Business Continuity and how the Council would respond to an emergency and how the work taking place would prepare the Council to meet future risks.

The following was noted:-

- The Council's emergency plan did not rely solely on the use of email to communicate information during an emergency but used other methods, including social media. Currently, phone contact would be made with the Leader, Deputy Leader and Group Leaders for dissemination to other Members. More general information could be sent by email or be put on the Council's website. The use of WhatsApp and other ways of sharing information could be explored.
- Members felt that there should be a defined route of communication to Members in the event of an emergency. It made sense to communicate with Ward Councillors as soon as an incident occurred as they had local knowledge and would often be the first point of contact for residents when an emergency occurred.
- Parish/Town Council Emergency Plans were co-ordinated with the District Council Plan and contained District Council emergency contact numbers as well as their own.
- If traditional communications systems were to break down, access to the emergency services' systems could be used.
- The Council's rest centres were for people displaced after an emergency with no alternative accommodation. There were procedures to make people as comfortable as possible. The Council would work with people to find longer term accommodation and to focus on those who did not have access to somewhere to stay. The Council had its own limited supply of emergency bedding. The same process and equipment were used by all

authorities within Essex. The role of emergency volunteers was to run and operate the rest centres and all currently trained volunteers were members of staff. Members felt that Councillors should be offered the opportunity to be trained as rest centre volunteers.

- The biggest risks to the District were pandemic flu, east coast flooding and proximity to London Southend airport. The recent exercise relating to a fire in a block of flats, following the Grenfell Tower disaster, was useful in providing a general lesson around communication issues, rather than in the specific risks relating to a fire in a block of flats. A number of exercises around flooding and loss of office accommodation had also been undertaken.
- Officers were working with the new provider of the out of hours service to provide a better service than the previous contractor.
- It was important for the chain of command for decision-making in the event of an emergency to be clear in the Plan. The Plan was written to be flexible and resilient: if an incident occurred when the Managing Director was not available, other members of the Leadership Team could take control.
- A major incident that could not be dealt with locally could be escalated to county level, then cross border and finally to Central Government if necessary.
- Rather than having special arrangements for emergencies, the public would phone the usual Rochford District Council number and from there be put through to those dealing with the response, which would make best use of the resources available. The Council could put additional resources into Customer Services to be able to deal with increased enquiries in an emergency situation. The out-of-hours service provider would be advised of any arrangements established.
- It would be useful to have information on categorisation of emergencies depending on severity, including an explanation of Gold, Silver and Bronze command. This could also include information on the chain of command and responsibilities, contact details and communications protocol.
- Members felt that a political risk protocol should be included in the Emergency Plan, which would set out when political intervention/comment during an incident is appropriate and how it should be managed. All Members would have to subscribe to such a protocol, which could initially prohibit all political comment unless a Member had been briefed specifically and would ensure that political comment was made at the appropriate time. Member training on this element of emergency planning could be provided.

- The Council had four-wheel drive vehicles, but none that were fitted with snorkel exhausts for flooding emergencies. However, the Council had contact through the county voluntary sector group, Rover Rescue, to rescue vehicles. A Member suggested that clubs and groups in the District might have access to suitable vehicles in the case of an emergency.
- There was no arrangement for the Council to make a cash contribution to people in an out of hours emergency situation but the Council would look at the circumstances at the time, assess where there was a need and direct to the benefits available. The Rest Centre focus was on getting people into accommodation according to their needs, which may involve funding and contribution from the Council and other bodies.
- The Council could have a media campaign reminding residents how best to plan for an emergency; for example, to have to hand insurance contact details. As part of the work being undertaken at county level around rest centres, a county wide pre-evacuation advice document was being produced, which would be put on the Council's website and disseminated via the media. Work around community response and spontaneous volunteers was being undertaken at county level to ensure a consistent response and assistance at the time of an emergency.

Resolved

- (1) That the report be noted.
- (2) That a follow-up report be made to the Committee in June 2018 to include information on: extending the opportunity to be trained as rest centre volunteers to Members; establishing a defined route of communication to Members in the event of an emergency; the introduction of a political risk protocol; categorisation of an emergency event depending on severity, to include information on the chain of command and responsibilities, contact details and communications protocol. (AD-CS)

5 COUNCIL'S PETITION PROCESS

The petition organiser had sent an email just prior to the meeting detailing the points he wished the Committee to consider. It was felt that this information should be made available to all Committee Members to enable an informed decision to be made. It was moved by Cllr J R F Mason and seconded by Cllr J E Newport that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee.

Resolved

That the matter be deferred to the meeting of the Review Committee on 6 February 2018.

6 KEY DECISIONS DOCUMENT

The Committee considered the Key Decisions Document and noted its contents.

18/17 Voluntary Sector Grant Allocations 2018/19

The decision on grant allocations would be made in mid-February in line with the budget process.

7 WORK PLAN

The Committee considered its Work Plan.

6 February 2018 meeting:

- (1) Treasury Management - the Section 151 Officer report to include information on Inter-authority Loans and how the Council would undertake credit analysis of another council's finances prior to lending to them.
- (2) Council's Petitions Process (item deferred from 9 January 2018 meeting).

Project Teams

Review of the Constitution - the Review Committee Chairman had contacted the Assistant Director, Legal Services for an update and a proposed date for the next meeting of the Project Team.

ICT Review - it was requested that an interim report be made to the Committee with recommendations, in particular around whether the review should continue, either in its current form or going in a different direction.

The meeting closed at 9.47 pm.

Chairman

Date

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