

Corporate Services – Financial Review of the Year 2007-8

The Chief Executive reports that Corporate Services provides support services to both the Community Services and Learning and Care directorates. In addition, it provides a number of forward facing services to the public. The directly managed cost original budget was £14.091m and after minor agreed variations during the year the approved budget was reduced to £13.965m. At 31 March 2008 the actual spend was £13.473m; a net under spending on the approved budget of £492k.

On the public side, there were a number of corporate events during 2007/08 supported by the Royal Borough and attended by the Chief Executive.

The Customer Services Centre continued its support to the public and acted as a focal point for the public during the flooding during the year. The Royal Borough was awarded a small grant that went a small way to cover our costs during this time.

In respect of the support services:

Democratic Services have developed the new ten year Visitor Management Strategy together with its launch on the council web site. A review of polling place, polling districts and access arrangement was completed to improve the process for those placing their votes. ‘Around the Royal Borough’ has also seen improvements with copies now available via the internet. Elected members now benefit from a comprehensive training, induction and development programme, a newly established leader’s office (together with cross party group assistants) and further development and improvement of the Member portal access.

Human Resource continue to develop our major resource through its ‘Focusing on the Future’ programme to develop the Royal Borough’s managers. The implementation of the new staff and management competencies framework in conjunction with a new appraisal system and the establishment of HR Master Classes, to aid performance management, will all help ensure that the Royal Borough follows best practices. The team have also been the focus of savings initiatives in respect of managing vacancies, control of agency staff appointment and recruitment advertising that are expected to generated savings of some £390k, £100k and £80k respectively, all helping to keep Council tax levels low. Initiatives on supervisor tool kits to help address management issues, supplying HR services to non Borough schools, the pilot of succession planning processes and establishing staff consultation forum will help the Royal Borough, members and the newly appointed Chief Executive. The HR continue their success with CRB checks, receiving commendations during the year, and implementation of the Equal Opportunities Impact Assessment methodology for all projects, new Health and Safety policy and a new staff Code of Conduct. Successful redeployment of staff has saved over £120k in severance payments. The success of HR is also reflected low staff sickness levels (6.4 days) and lower than national average turnover of staff (14.5%).

Legal Services have worked successfully to increase their income above target by £30k in 2007/08 and have reduced Ombudsman turn around times from 38 days to just over 17 days, a significant improvement. The introduction of Home Information Pack Schemes and the “credit crunch” had significant impact on land charges income (down by £98k). However, despite 100% turnover in staff the searches are completed the same or next day. Improvements here are also anticipated as the team move towards a new “Uniform” based system.

Meanwhile, Corporate Performance have been busy updating the Borough Strategy in line with the new administrations manifesto commitments; implemented a Comprehensive Equality Policy with our partners; improved the Youth Offending Team to the highest achievable level (5) and prepared the Royal Borough for the new Local Area Agreement, which comes into force on 01 April 2008.

Business Improvement Unit was restructured at the beginning of 2007/08 giving rise to savings of over £70k. In addition phase 1 of the telephony project was complete and the new decriminalised parking system was installed and working in time for the switch from the police authority to the Royal Borough. In support of flexible working policy over 450 staff now have remote access via the Council's web portal.

There has also been significant change within Financial Services: The Council Tax team of Revenues and Benefits have reviewed the application of the single person discount which has helped increase the base upon which the Council Tax is calculated, thereby helping to minimise the Council Tax increase. Changes in Housing Allowance, the biggest single change to this benefit in 15 years was successfully introduced to start on 1 April 2008. A more efficient debt tracing and recovery process was also introduced in respect of tax and general debtors. A new interface between the Rent Office and the Benefits team has helped improve the speed in dealing with housing rent benefit claims referrals. The pilot of a revised benefit reclamation process has been so successful that a full implementation is proposed for 2008/09. Council tax collection rates were improved for the third year running (up by 0.6%) and the benefit service performance showed 7 out of 9 being scored "Excellent".

Accountancy, with the valuable input from service directorates, saw a complete revamp of the Budget Monitoring process with 360 degree reporting of performance now appearing as a regular and developing feature of the reports. In line with best practice, reports on balance sheet status also features in quarterly reports. The unit successfully completed the first of three major statutory changes to the annual statement of accounts, which was commended by our external auditors. The Exchequer team continue to meet their performance targets with a continued move away from cheque payments. With a reduced team working on bank reconciliation sickness has brought its problems during the year, however, the Corporate accountancy team rallied to ensure cash was correctly posted and there was only small delays on overall reconciliation. Full documentation of the bank reconciliation process will alleviate future staff shortages in this area.

Meanwhile, the Pensions team have successfully risen to the major overhaul of the pensions system that also comes into effect from 01 April 2008, managing an investment portfolio of just under £1.4bn whilst juggling with the day to day control of the Royal Borough's bank accounts.

The Procurement Team work to implement a pan-Berkshire procurement process, where member authorities anticipate significant savings. During the year the team implemented new domiciliary care contracts giving anticipated savings of £700k with more in later years. The temporary staff contract is achieving forecast savings and the supplier and Royal Borough staffs are jointly addressing minor operational problems. The Energy contract also gives substantial savings whilst initial problems with the automated direct debit processes, are being addressed with the supplier.