

**CORPORATE RESOURCES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

30 November 2015

PRESENT: Councillor J Eagle (Chair)

Councillors P Foy, T Graham, M Hall, J Hamilton,
M Brain, P Dillon, J Green, S Green, M Hood and M Ord.

CR22. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Beadle, Caffrey and Thompson.

CR23. MINUTES

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 October 2015 be approved as a correct record.

CR24. CORPORATE ASSET MANAGEMENT – ANNUAL REPORT ON DELIVERY AND PERFORMANCE

The Committee received an update report on the progress made against the Council's Corporate Asset Management Strategy and Management Plan (CASMP) and the year on year performance of the property portfolio.

The CASMP sets the strategic direction for the use of the Council's land and buildings in support of its policy priorities. It provides the focus for efficient use of property assets to support service delivery and the strategic management of, and investment in, the Council's property portfolio.

The CASMP 2015-2020 has been aligned with the Council Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy, all of which were approved by the Council at its meeting in July.

The establishment of the role of Corporate Property Officer, along with the subsequent creation of the Corporate Asset Strategy Team continues to work well; and the ability to take a more strategic approach to the way the portfolio is managed overall has enabled the Council to deliver budgetary savings through the reduction of its operational portfolio by way of rationalisation and consolidation.

The report contained performance data in relation to asset and property management, including trends showing how Council property has performed between 2011 and 2015.

It was queried to what extent the occupancy of the Civic Centre can be increased. The Committee was informed that there is potential for the occupancy to increase, particularly as the number of employee posts reduces.

This approach can facilitate the closure of other buildings, or provide chargeable spaces for partner organisations to occupy.

In relation to queries concerning the former Marley Hill School site, the Committee was advised that the Council seeks to market and dispose of surplus property and land quickly but (in the case of Schools) the requirement to obtain approval from the Secretary of State delays the process.

It was said that the Dryden Centre occupies a large and valuable site and its usage was queried. It was noted that officers are looking to identify alternative accommodation for the current users, which at present, include the School Improvement Team and course providers.

It was requested that comparative information be provided showing the Council's Property Portfolio before 2010 and as it is now.

It was queried why the Council has funded The Sage Gateshead to operate from Gateshead Old Town Hall (GOTH) rather than declare the building surplus and sell it. The Committee was advised that occupation of GOTH by the North Music Trust was a 'meanwhile' use and that long-term plans for the building and its surroundings are under development.

More detail was sought on the successful awarding of £922,000 to the Friends of Chase Park by the Heritage Lottery Fund, in particular, the commitments made as part of the funding application (in respect of grounds maintenance).

RESOLVED - i) That the information be noted.
 ii) The Committee was satisfied with the level of progress made to date.

CR25. CASE STUDY – IMPLEMENTATION OF UNIVERSAL CREDIT IN GATESHEAD

The Committee received a presentation on the implementation of Universal Credit (UC). The presentation covered the main findings of the pilots in the North West and the progress made towards implementation in Gateshead.

Information was provided on the impact of UC on people and rent arrears along with details of action taken to mitigate the impact. The Committee then considered three separate case studies on individuals who are in receipt of UC.

Concerns were raised about sanctions, in particular the sanctioning of claimants who are on DWP training courses and the 55% success rate of appeals against decisions to sanction claimants, suggesting that sanctions are unfairly imposed.

The Committee also considered it difficult for claimants to improve their situation after having been sanctioned.

It was queried whether free school meals will be included in UC. It was reported that, at the present time, anyone entitled to UC will be entitled to free school meals but that no decision has yet been taken on the eligibility criteria once UC rolls out.

As the amount of UC paid to claimants will be based on whether they have dependents living with them (at the time of application), it was queried whether its rollout will make it more difficult to return children (who are in the care of the Council) to families.

It was agreed that a list of gateway conditions be circulated to the Committee for information.

There were concerns about the demand on Council resources to help those affected by UC, it was subsequently requested that the cost to the Council be measured.

It was noted that the Council's Partnership arrangement with the DWP secures a small amount of funding but this may cease in April 2016.

The cost of the 4 posts created by The Gateshead Housing Company to support the 87 claimants is approximately £100,000 p.a. It was noted that this measure also sought to reduce the impact of UC on the Housing Revenue Account. However, the Committee understood that when UC is fully implemented the projected number of claimants (26,000) will mean the use of the Council's resources to support those affected by UC will be unsustainable.

The Committee raised concerns about the likelihood of further administrative errors when UC is fully implemented.

After considering the information presented, the Committee had serious concerns about the rollout of UC and asked that this be recorded.

- RESOLVED -
- i) That the Minister for Work and Pensions be invited to attend the February 2016 meeting of the Committee, to consider the Council's experience of UC to date and the very serious issues that must be considered before the full rollout of the benefit.

Chair.....