

**Report of Executive Member for Corporate Services to Council**  
**April 2008**

Reflecting on the past year in the Resources Department, it can be seen that it has been a year of general success for the department with some notable achievements. The CPA Use of Resources score has improved from a 2 last year to a 3 this year with some notable improvements acknowledged within that assessment. Measures to address sickness levels within the department appear to be taking effect with a reduction in short term sickness amongst Resources staff. Finance staff have made a significant contribution towards the production of the 2008/09 budget and a financial strategy taking the authority up to 2010/11 has been agreed. A significant contribution by the directorate, in particular payroll, has been made to the job evaluation process currently being undertaken. Council Tax and Business Rates collection continues to improve.

**Audit and Risk Management**

One of the significant changes within Audit and Risk Management over the last year and in the future is the establishment of a shared service for the Audit and Fraud section with North Yorkshire County Council. Agreement was made in principle in the middle of 2007 to enter into an informal management arrangement with the County. At the March Corporate Services EMAP, it was recommended that work be carried out to develop the outline business case. The aim is to fully implement the chosen solution in April 2009- less than two years after the initial steps were taken. The end result should mean that both local authorities have a more robust and sustainable Audit and Fraud function with significant opportunity for business expansion and for staff development.

Good progress has also been made within the Procurement team. A Procurement Strategy was agreed in May 2007 together with a policy framework. A practitioner's guidebook has been prepared and circulated for use by Council officers. This work is essential in providing good value for money in the services and goods that the Council buys in as well as helping to ensure that the relevant financial regulations are adhered to. Plans are in place to build upon these improvements, but much has also already been achieved since starting from a low base a few years ago.

Other notable achievements in this section of the directorate include continued improvement within the Insurance team who have managed to deliver £300,000 of savings to the Council. Further work has been carried out to build on the success of the fraud team, with the fraud work of the council being held up as 'notable practice' by the District Auditor in the CPA Use of Resources assessment. Further measures have been taken to strengthen Risk Management practices across the council, with an increased number of users and training carried out on the Magique database. New corporate contracts for Legal services, planning consultancies and agency staffing have led to significant corporate savings, with the savings on arrangements for agency staffing amounting to around £125,000 a year.

Finally, the consistent improvement within the Audit and Risk Management section was demonstrated in the CPA Use of Resources assessment this year, when all except one of the relevant division scores were up from 1s and 2s in 2004/05 to 4s this year.

### **Public Services**

As this report was being written the latest information for the turnaround time to process new benefits claims was awaited. The Benefits section has achieved one of the most impressive improvements in performance within the Council- being praised in the District Auditor's letter presented to Executive in March 2008. Processing times are expected to beat the targets for both new claims and changes of circumstances this year, representing the best ever performance of the authority benefiting many claimants.

Representation to the Government regarding the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance continues to be made. The significant changes to the way that many private tenants will receive their benefits are regrettable. The impact of setting a median of rent levels across York, Selby and Ryedale was shown in the recent EMAP report and it is clear that some York residents will lose out. Work is being carried out to ensure that the council can mitigate the impact for those affected as much as possible. The Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) scheme does allow some additional payments to be made locally, however this is limited to £28,500 for 2008/09. Requests have been made to the Department for Work and Pensions for York to increase this figure as many authorities do not make use of the DHP scheme.

Since it was established in 2006 performance in the York Contact Centre has improved significantly. An example of just how much the Contact Centre has contributed to the improvement in service provided to York residents in the service areas it has incorporated, is provided by looking at the difference in data for the same days in March 2007 and March 2008 for the Council Tax service:

- Calls offered has reduced by 65% (from 7650 to 4650) – this is showing the dramatic reduction in failure demand – as calls are serviced at the first contact and the customer doesn't have to call back or chase services, we have achieved this reduction in excess of predicted targets;
- Calls abandoned have reduced from 2961 to 28 (this is calls not answered before the customer rang off or the call was terminated by the caller for some reason);
- This translates as abandoned calls % reduced from 38.7% to 0.6%;
- Average speed of answer reduced from 2.46 minutes to 0.08 seconds;
- % of calls answered within 20 seconds has increased by 38.1% (from 61.3 to 99.4%).

I have no doubt that this improvement would not have been achieved without a major review into the way services are provided.

## **Easy@york Project**

The easy@york project is now moving from Phase 1 into Phase 2 following member approval for the services to be included. The first phase of the easy@york project has transformed the way some of the services the council provides, such as the Council Tax service as detailed previously in this report. Some indication of success is also seen in the following statistics:

- 18% increase in service requests over the first twelve months;
- 40,000 electronic payments in the first year – saving £64k in processing costs;
- Over 5,000 requests received since the self-serve e-forms were made available – last month self-service requests accounted for 16% of all of the requests received for the services for which such e-forms exist;
- 250,000 visits to the Planning Portal;
- Over 500 online planning applications;
- 70% of all Council Tax Service requests are fully automated with no work undertaken in the back Office;
- 90% of all jobs undertaken within SLA;
- 96% of all jobs done within 1 day of the SLA.

The second phase of easy@york is essential in the move to new council offices in Hungate, and will include the following services:

- Housing Management & Housing Repairs;
- Adult Social Services, Advice, Information & Referral;
- Corporate Recruitment and HR Processes;
- Improvement of Neighbourhood Services – Phase 1 services;
- Licensing ;
- Mobile Working for easy processes;
- Parking.

The easy@york team has now been restructured to provide three Project Streams and a revamped Project Office structure. This will help deliver the project on a timely basis ensuring that all the services coming into scope are well prepared. Since Simon Wiles is leaving the authority, Terry Collins has now been appointed as chair of the easy@york project board to ensure continuity within phase 2.

## **ITT**

A large number of projects have been completed by the ITT section over the past year. A few highlights include:

- Playing a significant role within the first phase of a project to replace computer related services in the cities Libraries in order to turn them into customer focused facilities fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This included the transformation of Room 18 in the Central Library into a Lifelong Learning Centre;
- Successfully awarding the contract for the replacement Corporate Financial Management System following a protracted procurement process;
- Implementation of a long awaited new system for the Archaeology Service;

- Successful implementation of a system for LCCS that allows parents to make on-line requests for School Allocation;

As well as numerous other projects, the department has successfully delivered a number of behind the scenes infrastructure projects that underpin current and future Council wide service delivery.

### **Property Services**

Numerous major projects have been undertaken by Property Services over the last year contributing to significant improvements in council services and setting the agenda on environmental sustainability in the Council. These include:

- The £1 million Yearsley Pool Refurbishment scheme. Completed on time, and well received by the public as well as delivering carbon and financial savings in terms of energy usage.
- Acomb Library project. The re-branded customer-friendly library-learning centre 'Explore' completed within budget and ahead of time. The centre has the first 'Changing Place' contributing to a fully accessible building and service as well as a biomass boiler.
- Danesgate school complex at Fulford Cross completed. Like the Acomb Library project it has embraced new environmental technology with the inclusion of a Biomass boiler running on Wood Pellet fuel.
- York High on site and the design for the Oaklands Sports Centre (including pool) well advanced. Temporary school extensions in place at Lowfields. York High and the Oaklands sports Centre scheme are also embracing environmental technologies.
- The new corporate property data-base has gone live.
- Major property disposals include Lidget Grove, the Bonding Warehouse, Hebden Rise and Osbaldwick Lane.
- And finally, Hungate, the designs for which were made public in March.

### **Staffing**

It would, of course, be remiss not to mention the changes in senior staffing that have already taken place or are imminent within the department. Sian Hansom has now started in her position as Head of Finance, replacing Peter Steed. Temporary arrangements are in place for the position previously held by James Drury as Assistant Director for Public Services and these arrangements have ensured that these services continue to be run efficiently whilst a wider review of structures is carried out.

Recruitment is currently underway for the positions of Director of Resources and Assistant Director for Audit and Risk Management- the deadline for applications is tomorrow (April 11<sup>th</sup>). Although there will be considerable changes in personnel, I am confident that the effective performance of the Directorate will ensure that the posts are attractive to potential applicants. The fact that those who are leaving are making significant career moves, demonstrates that York has a track record of attracting high quality personnel.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank both Liz Ackroyd and Simon Wiles for their contribution to the work of the directorate and the authority and to wish them well in the future.