

**RESOURCE AND PERFORMANCE  
SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

**Agenda  
Item No.**

**DATE:** 22 JUNE, 2005

**6**

**REVIEW OF THE PANEL'S WORK PROGRAMME 2004/5**

**Ward(s)** All

**Portfolios:** Cllr O'Hare Deputy Leader of the Council and Finance  
Cllr Longhi – Environment and Transport (including: Performance)

**Summary of report:**

The report details the progress of Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel in achieving the agreed work programme for 2004/5. During the Municipal year, the Panel completed the agreed work plan and was, therefore, able to look at other specific issues, most notably performance indicators and the CPA Improvement Plan. Also the Panel instigated a performance board procedure, which enabled Councillors to scrutinise the performance of specific service areas. The 2 working groups established during the year also completed their respective remits.

**Background papers:**

Minutes of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel, 23 September 2004.

**Reason for scrutiny:**

To provide Councillors with a summary of achievements to date and background information to help them formulate a work programme for the municipal year 2005/6.

**Signed:** .....

**Executive Director:** Carole Evans

**Date:** .....

**Resource and legal considerations:**

Scrutiny and performance panels may carry out its' functions in accordance with Article 6, sub-section 4, of the constitution.

**Citizen impact:**

All Citizens with a relevant interest in a matter will have the ability to contribute to the deliberations of a Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

**Environmental impact:**

Successful scrutiny can assist in shaping policy to make environmental improvements.

**Performance management:**

Scrutiny is an important and integral part of the council's performance management framework and can challenge, review and advise on service delivery, council activity and policy in order to improve performance.

**Equality Implications:**

All Citizens with a relevant interest in a matter will have the ability to contribute to the deliberations of a Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

**Consultation:**

Based on previous discussions of the Panel.

**Vision 2008:**

The work to be undertaken by the panel will aim to achieve the Council's vision.

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## **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Councillors with an update of the progress of the panel and to inform a forward plan of scrutiny activities for the year 2005/6.

## **2. REVIEW OF THE PANELS WORK PROGRAMME 2004/5**

- 2.1 At a meeting of the Panel on 23 September 2004, Councillors agreed a work programme focusing on Best Value Reviews, Welfare Benefits, Beacon Index, Budget consultation and the Budget.

- 2.2 Of these, Best Value Reviews was delegated to a dedicated work group.

- 2.3 At a meeting on 7 October 2004, the Panel received a report entitled "Independent Review of the Council's Welfare Benefits". Councillors examined the background of the benefits and anti-poverty services, and the recommendations of an independent consultant's report commissioned by Cabinet, following a request of Social Care & Supported Housing Scrutiny Panel (year 2003/4). The Panel resolved that it supported the need for an anti-poverty strategy as this links into the Council's vision for 2008 and that it supported the continuation of the placement of the anti-poverty unit within the Council's welfare benefits structure beyond 31 March 2005. Further, they requested that the Cabinet approve on-going mainstream funding for 7 permanent staff within the anti-poverty unit, to which the Cabinet indicated that the panel's request would be an integral part of the medium term revenue budget. Funding was allocated in the 2005/6 base budget.

- 2.4 At a meeting on 4 November 2004, the Panel received a report on the Beacon Index 2003/04 – Outturn Performance Report and the Beacon Index – First Quarter Performance 2004/05. Following a detailed discussion of the report and the indicators shown, Councillors thought that the following measures would assist their consideration of future beacon index reports.

(1) That information be included in a year roll over format, so that a run of four quarters is shown and that for those services where only yearly statistics are available, these be grouped together and that a statement be included in the report that only yearly statistics are available;

(2) That, in future, all beacon index reports have page numbers for ease of reference;

The Panel received the Third Quarter Beacon Index at a meeting on the 24 March 2005. Councillor Turner stated that the quality of the performance information throughout the year had moved on tremendously. Councillor Sanders agreed that the progression of scrutiny with performance information had been excellent.

- 2.5 At a meeting on 23 September 2004, the Panel received a report on the proposed budget consultation process to be undertaken with residents and stakeholders as part of the setting of the Council's 2005/06 budget. The Panel resolved that:

- (1) That Councillor Sanders be nominated to represent the scrutiny panel on meetings of the reflector group;
  - (2) That an informal decision conference event involving all members of the scrutiny panel be held in late November/early December 2004 to consider the Council's budget for 2005/2006 and that this event be held on 2 evenings, each commencing at 4.30 p.m.
- 2.6 At two special meetings on 6 and 9 December 2004 and at the meeting of the 16 December, the Panel undertook a Budget Decision Conference on the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Draft Outlook 2005/6-2009/10. The panel was advised on the purpose of the medium term financial strategy and use of this as a framework for delivering the council's budget. Councillors were given information on the national and local environmental background to the medium term financial strategy/outlook 2005/6-2009/10. From a lively discussion, the panel recommended a council tax increase of no more than 4.94% for 2005/6 and that investment bids, categorised as priority A, were recommended for approval by Cabinet subject to certain changes. These recommendations were noted at the Cabinet meetings of 19 January and 9 February, following further consultation with all Scrutiny panels.
- 2.7 At a meeting on 3 February 2005, the Panel was presented with the draft budget for the Council. Following queries and clarifications the Panel resolved that the Resources Scrutiny and Performance Panel endorse the overall draft budget proposals of the Cabinet as presented.
- 2.8 Along with the work streams outlined above, the panel also looked at other issues. Most notably:
- (1) Best Value Performance Indicators: The Panel was informed that performance indicators were an important factor in a number of key areas helping the Council to measure its progress on national and local priorities/targets and helping to demonstrate service improvements to citizens and stakeholders; and enabling comparisons with similar organisations. The panel was advised that a number of performance indicators were used to track performance within the Council.
- And
- (2) Corporate Assessment Report - CPA Improvement Plan: The Panel received quarterly updates on the implementation and delivery of the plan.
- 2.9 A significant innovation for the year was the introduction of Performance Boards to the Panel. These items were an opportunity for the Panel to take a closer look at how a service was performing. To date, the Panel has received presentations from Benefits, Education and Health & Social Care Adult Services.

### 3. REVIEW OF THE PANELS WORK GROUPS 2004/5

- 3.1 The **Best Value Working Group** was re-established, 2 August 2004, with the remit to consider and advise the panel on the following matters so that any appropriate recommendations to Cabinet could be made:-
- The overall framework within which best value reviews are undertaken, completed and taken forward.
  - The annual programme of planned best value reviews, how they are selected and prioritised within the plan.
  - The summary of outcomes of best value reviews, recommendations, conclusions and whether these are subsequently implemented.
  - The effectiveness of the best value review process and whether it makes a difference.
  - Improvements in the whole approach to best value reviews.
  - Identify any learning points from specific best value reviews which may or could be used to improve the process so that the Council's services improve continuously.
  - Question officers and other stakeholders on the rationale and allied aspects of the report and the underlying process and that this activity be undertaken with a view to ensuring the Council's approach to best value reviews is efficient and robust in making any recommendations for changes as required.
- 3.2 The work group met twice during the municipal year. At their first meeting they requested that a feasibility study be submitted, to its next meeting, on cross directorate performance reviews, and that officers be requested to seek the advice of the executive directorate as to whether the possible introduction of an information technology system, which could accurately record all Council performance related information, fell within the remit of the best value working group, or whether it was a matter which should be considered by the full panel.
- 3.3 At a meeting of the Resources and Performance Panel, 23 September 2004, the remit of the group was amended to consider the performance management system.
- 3.4 At the group's second meeting, following discussions arising from an officer's report, the group resolved not to seek detailed comparison with other councils regarding cross cutting reviews.
- 3.5 The working group has, to date, recommended that the executive:
- Reassesses the current best value review programme and confirm those areas that remain critical to the improvement plan of the council.
  - Revise the corporate criteria for deciding on best value reviews before the publication of the next best value performance plan.
  - Evaluate the crime & disorder best value cross cutting review to extract any learning for Walsall MBC.
- The recommendations were endorsed by Cabinet and a further report requested.
- 3.6 The **Benefits Service Working Group** was established to:

- Conclude the work conducted in relation to the benefit claim form with a view to recommending an improved form.
- Optimise customer access to the benefits service so that the public receive advice in as prompt and appropriate manner as possible.
- Make recommendations to ensure that customer waiting times are within acceptable limits.
- Consider the referral from the Children's Service and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel so as to increase the number of people registered for free school meals and the possible introduction of a single claim form for housing benefit and free school meals.

3.8 The group have met once and have concentrated on the referral from the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel on the take-up of free school meals. The group resolved:

- That, as part of the targeted campaign already underway on the take-up of free school meals, the planned reminder letter to potential claimants includes an explanation in other languages of the purpose of the letter and the importance of registering and claiming for free school meals.
- The reminder letter to include a question to people who do not want to claim, why they do not take-up a free school meal.
- That officers be requested to explore the possibility of involving local neighbourhood partnerships in the campaign to increase the take-up of free school meals.
- That Cabinet be requested to note that the panel supports the remaining findings of the working group in respect of the take-up of free school meals. These will be considered as part of the Council's review of the catering service.

3.9 The working group also noted and supported the introduction of the Department of Work and Pensions model claim form for housing and council tax benefit and requested that questions and information about free school meals be incorporated into this form.

3.10 The group also received a report on the Verification Framework home visits arrangements.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

4.1 The main work of the Panel focused on the budget consultation process. Councillors felt that they were able to make a real contribution to the process through the decision conferencing framework.

4.2 The Panel, having completed the agreed work plan, was able to look at other specific issues, most notably performance indicators and the CPA Improvement Plan. The instigation of a performance board procedure, which enabled Councillors to scrutinise the performance of specific service areas in much more depth, was seen as a great stride forward for the scrutiny process.

4.3 The Best Value Working Group was able to fulfil its remit early on in the year with its recommendation to Cabinet endorsed.

- 4.4 The Benefits Services Working Group acted upon the referral from Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny and Performance Panel regarding the up-take of free school meals and reported its' findings to Cabinet. The working group also noted and supported the introduction of the Department of Work and Pensions model claim form for housing and council tax benefit and received a report on the Verification Framework.