

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

THURSDAY 9 DECEMBER 2010 AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE, WALSALL

Panel Members Present

Councillor M. Longhi (Chair)
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor M. Flower
Councillor B. Sanders
Councillor R. Jeavons
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor I. Shires
Councillor D. Turner

Portfolio Holders Present

Councillor M. Bird – Leader
Councillor M. Arif – Business Support Services
Councillor C. Towe – Finance and Personnel

Officers Present

Rory Borealis – Executive Director (Resources)
Vicky Buckley – Head of Corporate Finance
Lynn Hall – Head of Benefits
Karl Dipple – Acting Head of Revenues
Stuart Portman – Head of Law (Non-Contentious)
Darren Caveney – Head of Communications
Steph Simcox – Service Accounting and Financial
Training Manager
Craig Goodall – Scrutiny Officer

32/10 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor M. Nazir.

33/10 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

34/10 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declaration of interest or party whip.

35/10 MINUTES

The Chair requested that a meeting of the 'Delivering, Right, Fast and Simple Working Group' be called to enable the development of terms of reference.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2010, copies having previously circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

36/10 DRAFT CORPORATE REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2011/12 FOR CONSULTATION

The Chair explained that the complete Corporate revenue budget options had been included in the agenda papers for information only and would be scrutinised in detail at the Panels meeting on 10 December 2010.

37/10 DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET PROPOSALS 2011/12 FOR CONSULTATION

The Panel considered the draft revenue budget proposals for 2011/12 from the Business Support Services and Finance and Personnel Cabinet Portfolios.

Business Support Services

The Portfolio Holder provided the meeting with an overview of the cost pressures and operational savings proposed in his portfolio. He highlighted activity was taking place to reduce the overall cost of the portfolio, the 'Delivering. Right, Fast and Simple' project and the recent talks that had taken place with neighbouring local authorities regarding the possibility of shared services.

Finance and Personnel

The Portfolio Holder provided the meeting with an assessment of the overall financial position and explained that it would be necessary for the Council to save £68m over the next four years. He highlighted the cost pressures and operational savings proposed for his portfolio.

Saving 64 – Home Working in Benefits Team

The Head of Benefits explained that research at other local authorities had indicated that savings could be made from increasing home working for staff. Increased home working was expected to increase productivity by 10%. This would mean the service requiring three less staff. Home working was also expected to reduce levels of sickness and increase staff morale.

The Panel were supportive of the proposal so long as staff productivity was monitored to ensure benefits were being delivered. It was noted that large scale home working could substantially reduce the Council's building requirements. Members were keen to review the effectiveness of the scheme after it had become operational.

Saving 67A – Finance restructure in response to 'Finance Direct'

The Executive Director (Resources) explained that the 'Finance Direct' was essentially the introduction of new financial management software that allowed managers to view all essential service finances, in real time, on demand as well as speed up payments. Currently many financial processes were paper based resulting in lots of staff completing low level duties. By

automating processes fewer staff would be required.

Saving 67D – Restructure within human resources

Following enquiries from Members the Executive Director (Resources) explained that the current human resources (HR) service was too big, not sufficiently customer focussed and still used some old fashioned paper based systems. Therefore it was proposed to modernise working practices and become more customer focussed. In response to comments about the current Interim Head of HR he explained that it was expected that she would remain in post until a permanent appointment was made. The Leader added that the interim appointment had been a success.

General

Redundancies

Following a question from a Member of the Panel the Executive Director (Resources) explained that of the 110 posts potentially being lost in the Resources budget proposals 71 would potentially be deleted in 2011/12. Of these 71, 53.5 posts were occupied with the remaining 17.5 vacant. Attempts were being made to mitigate compulsory redundancies by seeking volunteers in the first instance. Managers were not allowed to consider the potential cost of employees seeking voluntary redundancies if service delivery requirements enabled a voluntary redundancy to be agreed. Financing would be put together corporately to meet the costs of redundancy payments this included the possibility of capitalisation. Additional redundancies were likely to be required in future years.

Working Smarter

The Leader explained that only those savings that could be guaranteed had been included in the budget proposals but he was optimistic that the savings figures included in the papers for future years would increase.

He explained that it was the Council's aim to be 'best in class' for value for money for as many services as possible within four years with a milestone target of being at the median level in 18 months time.

Shared Services

The Panel supported the concept of providing joint services with other neighbouring local authorities and local partners.

Information Technology

It was noted the substantial investment in information technology (IT) was required to deliver a number of the savings identified in the two budget portfolios. The Executive Director (Resources) acknowledged this and explained that the Cabinet would, at its meeting on 15 December 2010,

propose a £1m+ a year investment in IT infrastructure for the next three years and an additional £1m over the same period to invest in key systems that would generate substantial revenue savings. He reassured Members that IT procurement would be driven by strategic aims.

Members of the Panel noted that the Council's website was difficult to navigate and complete business on. This was acknowledged by the Executive Director (Resources) who reported that investment was required into the website and background IT to allow more services to be delivered online. It was reported that there was a 'Web Improvement Group' that was investigating potential improvements to web based business.

RESOLVED

THAT:

1. the Head of Corporate Finance advise the Panel on the amount of revenue the Council receives from local businesses;

and;

2. a item on the 'Web Improvement Plan' be added to the Panel's work programme.

37/10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as 10 December 2010.

The meeting closed at 6.58 p.m.

Signed:

Date: