

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Friday, 9 December, 2011 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Panel Members Present

Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair)
Councillor M. Flower (Vice-Chair)
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor M. Longhi
Councillor J. Murray
Councillor M. Nazir
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor D. Shires

Portfolio holders present

Councillor Mohammed Arif - Business Support Services
Councillor Chris Towe - Finance and personnel

Officers Present

Paul Sheehan - Chief Executive
Rory Borealis - Executive Director (Resources)
Steph Simcox - Service Accounting & Financial Training Manager
Peter Allsop - Electoral Services Manager
Paul Milmore - Head of Business Solutions
Neil Picken - Senior Constitutional Services Officer

98/12 APOLOGY

There were no apologies.

99/12 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

100/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

101/12 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 October, 2011, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

102/12 BUDGET CONSULTATION FEEDBACK 2012/13

Members received a report, as submitted to Cabinet on 9 November, 2011, detailing the findings of the budget consultation feedback 2012/13.

Members were advised that each year the Council consulted residents and stakeholders as part of its budget process. Consultation during 2011 gathered the views of local residents, the community and voluntary sector, children and young people, older people, representatives from the business community and others. The findings from such consultation would inform the Council's spending priorities for 2012/13.

There then followed a discussion by the Panel in relation to the budget simulation tool which only received 250 responses, despite the deadline being extended and promotion being carried out. Ideas were put forward such as amending the budget simulation tool and having more of a blog as a more engaging use of social media. It was further suggested that the budget simulation tool could be marketed better by including a flyer within the Council Tax demand letter. In response, the Chief Executive stated that it may not be possible as there were stringent regulations controlling what was permissible for inclusion with the Council Tax demand. Officers agreed to investigate options for circulating information to households. It could be possible to include information within the annual survey distributed by Walsall Partnership. The Elections Manager suggested that it could be distributed when people carried out the election canvas.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

103/12 SECOND DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET PROPOSALS 2012/13 FOR CONSULTATION

Members received a report as submitted to Cabinet on 9 November, 2011 in relation to the second draft revenue and capital budget proposals 2012/13 for consultation which outlined:-

- Changes to the first draft budget as reported to Cabinet on 14 September, 2011, including the effect of the recently announced Council Tax freeze grant for 2012/13;
- Details on those savings proposals which required an executive decision to implement.

Members were advised that there were no policy changes under the remit of the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

There then followed a period of questioning by Members.

Clarity was sought on the changes proposed for revenue savings options 2012/13 in relation to the transport and environment portfolio. Specifically with regard to the saving identified relating to increased income from public sector partners and parking provision and introduction of local enforcement vehicle for bus lanes. Officers advised that legislation allowed an Authority to enforce moving traffic offences. A mobile enforcement vehicle had been procured and would use number plate recognition software to capture evidence. The budget included an estimated £30,000 which would be generated through fines from this service.

Discussion followed on the issuing of fines and it was asked if it was usual to budget for fines, how this was quantified and what risks were attached with such financial practices? In response the Finance Manager stated that it was a standard practice and the figure for the first year was based on other Local Authorities. In relation to the new system, moving traffic could be fined, for example, if a car was travelling in a bus lane. Additional income generation from new schemes such as this was relatively short lived as income would fall as people adjusted to the new restrictions. In order to account for such programmes, a figure needed to be attached, in this instance £30,000. This would be monitored and should the actual figure change then future revenue predictions would be amended and reported to Cabinet.

In relation to a question regarding the purchase of new vehicles to enforce the restrictions, it was reported that there was a bid in the Capital Programme for equipment and all enforcement staff were already in place. The figure was net of any additional administration costs.

There then followed a period of questioning in relation to the regeneration portfolio and proposed savings within planning services. It was projected that this would be achieved by increasing fees and charges for services from the development team. It was asked how this decision had been reached and assurance was sought that increasing the cost would not affect demand. In response, it was stated that the number of people utilising this service was very small, however, a full response would be sought and distributed to Members.

A question was asked in relation to the saving under the leisure and culture portfolio in relation to catering services and the working smarter service redesign. In response, it was stated that the Council were now committed to providing a service until 2013. There were ongoing discussions as to how the process would be taken forward from 2013 and it was hoped that the service would continue using a social enterprise model. Negotiations would continue to be undertaken.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

104/12 2ND QUARTER FINANCE MONITORING

Members received a report summarising the predicted revenue and capital outcome position for 2011/12 based on the performance up to the end of Quarter 2 (April to September, 2011) for services within the remit of the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

The Executive Director (Resources) reported that an underspend of £133,000 was being forecast which, in relation to the overall budget, was 0.5%.

Resolved

That it be noted that the 2011/12 forecast year end revenue position for services under the remit of the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel was an underspend of £133,000 after the use of approved reserves and carry forwards and that the capital forecast is on budget.

105/12 ELECTORAL SERVICES

Members received a report detailing several areas of the Electoral Service. Members were advised that the Electoral Service was responsible for the management of all elections and referenda within the Borough and also electoral registration.

It was asked whether the rise of electors (just over 7,000 since 2003) was in line with head count of population or whether it was additional people voting. In response, it was stated that the Authority had the 2001 census so this was information was unavailable. The Chief Executive stated that there had been an increase in activity encouraging people to vote. The Elections Services Manager stated that there had also been a record canvas this year which would have also helped.

Discussion took place on the data matching exercise against the Council Tax database (on empty properties and those with the same names) carried out before forms were printed for the door knocking phase. It was noted that this was very successful and resulted in a saving as roughly 13,000 less forms were required to be printed. Financially, this saved approximately £10,000.

In relation to the electoral register, it was asked whether the information could be used in a more positive way and shared with Partners. In response it was reported that the full register was subject to very strict rules. The Council could use it for detection and prevention of crime. Access was also available to representatives of the Blue Badge Scheme to ascertain if a person was carrying out fraud. Trading standards would also be given access for prosecution.

The commercial or edited version of the register which 14% of the population opted out of had no restriction but needed to be purchased from the independent Electoral Registration Officer. This version was also available for public inspection but not in electronic form.

A discussion ensued in relation to postal votes. Members heard that there had been a steady incline over the eight years since the option was introduced. 13% -14% of voters used this method. The reliability of the post service was occasionally an issue but were very small in relation to the system as a whole. Arrangements were in place with Royal Mail who could carry out sweeps of their depots to ensure that all postal votes were securely delivered.

In relation to polling stations, it was asked whether an increasing number of schools becoming Academies would impact on the availability of space to use as polling stations. In response it was stated that it was a legal requirement that schools provide adequate space for election purposes. Whilst a requirement the Council approached schools and adopted a co operative approach and sought agreement with Schools. The use of portakabins was a further option and a number of polling stations were already operating this way.

Discussion moved on to the election of police commissions which was due to take place in November, 2012. Officers advised that they could not foresee any difficulties with the process and reminded Members that Walsall would not be declaring the outcome. This function would be carried out by Birmingham City Council. The Government had not yet stated whether they would fund future elections so it was possible that future costs may fall on the Local Authority.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

106/12 WORKING SMARTER

Members received a verbal update on the progress of the working smarter programme. Members were informed that a number of changes had been undertaken with regards to the Vanguard Method interventions and leadership arrangements. There were now two new areas, 'Getting People into Work' and 'Public Health Transition'.

Members were encouraged to visit the third floor to have a look at the new model office.

Resolved

That the update be noted.

107/12 WORK PROGRAMME 2011/12 AND FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

That the work programme and forward plan be noted.

108/12 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as 31 January, 2012.

The meeting terminated at 7.10 p.m.

Signed:

Date:

