

## **CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

Thursday, 12 September, 2013 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

### **Members in attendance**

Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair)  
Councillor J. Rochelle (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul  
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker  
Councillor M. Longhi  
Councillor D. Shires  
Councillor R. Worrall

### **Officers Present**

Rory Borealis – Executive Director – (Resources)  
Michael Titchford – Assistant Director – (Regeneration)  
Paul Gordon - Head of Business Change  
Ross Hutchinson - Lead Accountant  
Stephen Davis – Senior Systems Thinking Lead  
Sue Dunn – Quality Performance and Projects Officer  
Craig Goodall - Committee Business and Governance Manager

### **223/13 APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

### **224/13 SUBSTITUTIONS**

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

### **225/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

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

### **226/13 MINUTES**

#### **Resolved**

**That the minutes of the meeting which took place on 15 July, 2013, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.**

### **227/13 WORKING SMARTER PROGRAMME**

Members considered progress with Working Smarter theme 1 “Supporting Business to Thrive and Supporting Local People to Work”. The Panel took a focus on progress towards the achievement of the theme objective to “Reduce the number of people dependent upon out of work benefits”.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) reported the key work and activity that had taken place. He highlighted the five themes for the priority, barriers to employment, work to support young people, how businesses were understood, the local supply chain and addressing barriers. He discussed a map of the “journey to work” and explained that the end of Working Neighbourhoods Fund was seeing a shift in the focus of the Regeneration Directorate.

Members felt that whilst it was worthwhile assisting 16 – 24 year olds into work it would also be valuable to support those aged over 25. This was acknowledged as an important area particularly around developing and maintaining skills but the government priority, and hence funding, was aimed completely at the 16-24 year old bracket. The Panel felt that high level lobbying should take place to influence decision makers and change this policy.

The Chair commented on the squeeze that was taking place against residents across the piece. There was a lack of jobs and benefits were reducing for those unable to work. This was creating a decline.

Members felt that the government assumption of 3% growth with business rate receipts was unrealistic. The Chair noted that the potential business rates generated from the Phoenix 10 site, following the initial discounted period, were important for the boroughs future income levels. The Executive Director (Resources) acknowledged this and explained that for financial planning purposes lower growth had been anticipated. The Assistant Director (Regeneration) added that this was the government’s way of motivating local authorities to invest in and encourage the local economy.

A Member reflected on the important role that property developments and transactions played on driving the economy and reflected on feedback that the local authority planning consents were becoming increasingly difficult to secure due to increases in bureaucracy. He explained that improvements could be made with Walsall’s performance based on the informal feedback he had received. The Chair expressed the view that planning should be used as a tool to deliver a coherent regeneration strategy.

The Chair explained that the Council as a land owner could drive development and improvements for local communities. He noted that the sale of Council assets and land would probably be required as funding reduced but it was important that the land was used to create opportunities for local people. Members felt that the lack of well paid jobs was an additional barrier to employment not included in the reports.

Further information was requested regarding the learning that had been gained through the “Town and District Centre” theme. A discussion took place which noted that individual district centres did not have a dedicated officer resource. Members felt that the sharing of resources limited the impact of the service.

## **Resolved**

### **That:**

- 1. discussions take place with the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership to develop a business case to lobby the government through the Local Government Association to attract funding to support those residents aged over 25 in the workplace;**

2. **further information on the learning that has been gained about the demands of town and district centres and how the Council can deliver better be provided to Members;**

**and;**

3. **the “Journey to Work” document be sent to Members.**

#### **228/13 Walsall Crisis Support Scheme – A review of implementation in quarter 1 – 2013/14**

The Panel were informed of the implementation of the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme (WCSS) The WCSS was a new scheme that replaced community care grants and crisis loans previously administered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This was part of the government’s welfare reforms.

The Executive Director (Resources) explained the context of the transfer. In particular he focused on the point that the WCSS funding was being used in a flexible and pioneering way rather than requiring customers to meet a range of fixed criteria to receive assistance as previously required by the DWP. The WCSS was also focused on addressing the root cause of customers’ problems rather than just providing short term financial assistance.

The Quality, Performance and Projects Officer explained how the WCSS was seeking to provide more holistic support to their customers with a priority of tackling the underlying need. She gave examples of the WCSS securing early benefits payments, negotiating with landlords or helping customers find work.

The WCSS have spent £89,959 as at 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2013 based on an annual budget of £1,098,510. Members were pleased that the budget was being well managed. In terms of the number of applicants and refusals it was important to note that those customers who had had their applications refused were assisted in other ways. For those applicants that had been refused there had been approximately six appeals of which two had seen the original decision reversed. There are about twelve repeat customers who had been assisted with a range of deep problems from a range of sources.

The Panel sought assurances on how the under spend would be used with the Executive Director (Resources) explaining that it was desirable to use the funding to help prevent customers coming into crisis. In the long term he was concerned that government funding for this area would be reduced.

A Member queried why it appeared that the WCSS was receiving substantially lower applications than the DWP did. The Panel were informed that this related to the way in which customers were being assisted as very often customers were seeking financial assistance but their needs could be met in other ways. It was also explained that on switch over the DWP had been slow to signpost customers to the WCSS but this had now been resolved.

A breakdown of white goods supplied was requested by Members. The Panel was assured that the white goods supplied were rated grade A for energy efficiency.

The Chair closed the item by requesting a further progress report in February 2014. He asked that the report contained case studies which demonstrated how the new service is

working, in particular for those customers who were not assisted with crisis or community care awards.

## **Resolved**

### **That:**

- 1. a further progress report on the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme be considered at the 11<sup>th</sup> February 2014 meeting. This report should include case studies on those accepted and refused awards; and;**
- 2. a breakdown on the type and number of white goods awarded to customers by the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme be provided to Members.**

## **229/13 Quarter 1 Financial Monitoring Position 2013/14**

Members were informed of the projected revenue and capital outturn position for 2013/14 based on the performance of quarter 1 (April to June 2013) for the services within the remit of the Panel.

The Executive Director (Resources) explained that the Resources Directorate had two parts. One public facing part under “Money, Home, Job” and another, internal part, delivered through support services. “Money, Home, Job” was currently projecting an over spend but this was small compared to the overall budget (around 0.7%). This was as a result of significantly increased, complex demand arising from welfare reform and interim staffing arrangements whilst the transition took place to more customer focussed service delivery. Action plans were in place to mitigate this and achieve a satisfactory position for year-end. Support services were projecting a small under spend. Support services had typically contributed a substantial under spend over the last few years but it was mostly of note that this year was much more likely as efficiencies had been maximised. He commented that in order to create more savings in support services more radical and innovative ways of working would need to be designed.

The Lead Accountant reported that a revenue over spend of £176,000 (net use of earmarked reserves) was currently predicted. A capital under spend of £205,000 was anticipated and it would be requested to carry forward this amount into 2014/15. He highlighted the reasons for the variances and the financial risks being monitored in the revenue budget. Following a question he explained that the financial risks were likely to decline as the year moved forward.

Further information was requested by Members on the following areas:

- use of reserves in Housing and Legal;
- why only 10% of the aid and adaptations capital budget had been spent to date;
- the income and expenditure of “refurbishment and improvement of remaining housing projects” budget.

**Resolved**

**That:**

1. further information be provided to Members on:
  - a) use of reserves in Housing and Legal;
  - b) why only 10% of the aid and adaptations capital budget had been spent to date;
  - c) the income and expenditure of refurbishment and improvement of remaining housing projects budget;
- and;
2. the report be noted

#### **230/13 WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14 AND FORWARD PLAN**

**Resolved**

**That:**

1. the Work Programme 2013/14 be noted;
- and;
2. the Forward Plan be noted.

#### **231/13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the date of next meeting was 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2013.

*The meeting closed at 7.17 p.m.*

Chair:.....

Date:.....