

CORPORATE & PUBLIC SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26 NOVEMBER 2015 AT 6.00 P.M. AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Panel Members Present

Councillor M. Nazir (Chair)
Councillor I. Shires (Vice-Chair)
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor C. Creaney
Councillor S. Craddock
Councillor K. Ferguson
Councillor A. Nawaz
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor G. Sohal

Portfolio Holders

Councillor M. Bird – Leader
Councillor M. Arif – Shared Services & Procurement
Councillor O. Bennett – Personnel & Business Support
Councillor L. Harrison – Clean and Green

Officers Present

Rory Borealis – Executive Director (Change and Governance)
Simon Neilson – Executive Director, Economy & Environment
Keith Stone – Assistant Director (Neighbourhood Services)
Steve Pretty – Head of Engineering and Transport
John Roseblade – Group Manager (Highways & Environment)
Chris Knowles – Services Finance Manager
Craig Goodall – Committee Business and Governance Manager

47/15 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor S. Cooper.

48/15 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

49/15 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

50/15 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)

There were no agenda items that required the exclusion of the public.

51/15 **RESOURCE ALLOCATION 2016/17 TO 2019/20: DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET FOR CONSULTATION**

The Committee considered the proposed revenue budget savings for the following portfolios:

- Clean and Green
- Economy, Infrastructure and Development
- Leader
- Personnel and Business Support
- Shared Services and Procurement

Details the proposed savings in each portfolio were presented to Members. The below is a summary of comments on those savings where questions and concerns were raised:

Clean and Green

50 Reduction in IT and systems support within Clean and Green

Following questions Members were reassured that this saving did not impact on the clean and green contact centre.

55 Reduction in compliance management

58 Reduction in infrastructure maintenance service

Members were informed that these savings related to council vehicles. The savings would not affect safety.

59 Reduction in resources deployed in countryside areas

This meant there would be one less Environmental Officer. It was likely that repairs to countryside sites would be slower.

60 Reduction in resources deployed at Walsall Arboretum

This saving would have a small impact on maintenance. The Heritage Lottery Fund had been consulted and agreed to the changes. There were no job losses related to this saving.

62 Reduction in public health transformation fund

This would further reduce resources for public health. Members were concerned that the service was under pressure from in year budget reductions and future savings.

63 Reduction of the frequency of grass cutting on highway verges

66 Reduction in street cleansing service (policy)

A Member suggested that long grass in highway verges could cause litter to accumulate and the areas would be better if they were replaced with tarmac.

A Member expressed a fear that reduced levels of street cleansing and grass cutting could lead to the creation of grot spots and create a negative image of Walsall. Members were reassured that the cleanliness of strategic gateways would be prioritised.

Ideas such as working with local businesses to raise a levy to help with street cleansing were discussed.

64 Reduction in the levels of parks maintenance

This was also a reduction in one Environmental Officer. Tasks would be reallocated across the wider team.

65 Reduced herbicide treatments on green spaces

This saving did not affect herbicide treatment for highways.

67 Increase in the income from bulky collection as a result of increased demand

This would be achieved by altering the income generation target. The service was well used by residents.

Economy, Infrastructure and development portfolio

100 Integrate the environmental health, trading standards, licensing and community safety teams

A Member expressed the view that he understood the logic of integrating the environmental health, trading standards and licensing teams but felt that the community safety team should be separate. It was explained that the officers in the new team would all have enhanced enforcement and regulatory roles.

103 Use of bus lane enforcement cameras

Members called for bus lane enforcement at Junction 10 of the M6 to be relaxed during the upcoming improvement works.

109 Consider reducing the maintenance of council car parks

The Committee queried if this was a good idea in the long term and were provided with reassurance that many of the council's car parking spaces were empty so it was anticipated the reduction in funding could be tolerated.

Members expressed concern about the reduction in cleansing. Particularly in autumn when there was increased leaf fall.

119 Increase the charge for district markets by £5 a stall

A Member recalled a recommendation of the former Markets Working Group which stated that market stalls needed replacement. He felt it was unlikely that traders would pay increased fees without better facilities.

120 Capitalise the remaining revenue elements of the salary costs of 4 employees in the highways maintenance team (policy)

Following questions the Committee were informed that this was the Council using capital, rather than revenue, funding to pay for staff. This was allowed with some capital projects.

124 Increase in the cost of parking permits

Members queried if this increase was for the general public but were informed it was for staff and councillors who purchased council parking permits.

Leader of the Council

138 Increased income from schools for financial advice and support

Members queried if this new income was achievable given that academy schools often purchased similar services from their sponsors. The Leader felt the income was achievable as the council provided a tried and tested service which schools could have confidence in.

Personnel and business support

171 Operational changes across Human Resources

Members expressed concern that there could be changes to the services purchased by academy schools that affected the viability of some Human Resources services. This was acknowledged as a potential risk but every effort would be made to maintain current customer levels.

172 Reduction in trade union facility time

Members questioned whether the reduction in trade union facility time would create a situation where the workforce did not have sufficient trade union representatives available. The Portfolio Holder explained that if the budget was implemented the council would have approximately 3750 staff of which half were known to be trade union members. Therefore he felt the level of trade union facility time was appropriate.

Shared Services and Procurement

184 Establish a charitable body to deliver welfare advice and support and withdraw grant to the Walsall Citizens Advice Bureau for welfare advice.

It was explained to Members that the charitable body was designed to be a way of creating an improved welfare advice service to local residents with reduced cost. The current system of welfare advice was too expensive and could not be maintained in the long term. Radical change was required if it was desired to maintain current levels of support and potentially improve them.

The Committee expressed concern about this proposal. Members felt that the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) was a well established and respected source of

welfare advice and queried why a separate body was being established rather than simply supporting the CAB to improve. Members also questioned whether the proposed charitable body would be operational before funding was withdrawn from the CAB. Taking these factors into consideration the Committee made a recommendation to Cabinet asking for funding to the CAB to be maintained at existing levels.

185 Review of council tax reduction scheme (council decision)

The Committee were informed that the saving would be made by reducing the level of support received by residents who received help with paying their council tax by 25%. This would mean those residents would pay 50% of their council tax from 2017/18.

Members expressed concern that this budget saving would disproportionately affect disadvantaged people.

186 Outsource internal audit and risk contract

A Member felt that the relatively small saving proposed may not be worth the loss of corporate knowledge from the existing team. This point was acknowledged and the Committee informed that an assessment of this point would be made during the development of the business case for the proposal.

187 Restructuring of teams across ICT

A Member suggested that the Council should increase its use of Open Source computer programmes to make savings on expensive licence fees.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the Committee asks the Cabinet to recognise the importance of Walsall Citizens Advice Bureau to the people of Walsall at this time of increased austerity and urges the Cabinet to maintain the current level of funding to Walsall Citizens Advice Bureau;**
- 2. The following information be provided to Members:**
 - a. Information on recycling rates by ward across the borough;**
 - b. How much funding the Council receives for public health.**

52/15 CONSULTATION ON A LOCAL STRATEGY FOR FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT IN THE BLACK COUNTRY

The Committee considered the consultation on the local strategy for flood risk management (LSFRM) in the Black Country. A copy of the strategy had been sent separately to Members (annexed).

The Group Manager (Highways and Environment) explained that the LSFRM had been prepared on a regional basis with the remaining Black Country Local

Authorities. A draft strategy had been prepared and was currently out for consultation.

Following a series of questions the Committee were informed that the greatest flood risks in the borough were the collapse of the Door End Canal or if the water culverts that ran under the town centre became overwhelmed. Both of these areas were monitored and maintained to avoid such problems occurring. Members noted that localised flooding was often caused by blocked gullies and asked for feedback on what impact the gully maintenance programme had had on flood risks across the borough? The Group Manager reported that the gully maintenance programme had provided a significant amount of intelligence that allowed the Council to target gully cleaning in areas that were prone to flooding.

The Committee asked about what requirements housing developers were under to prevent flooding? Members were informed that developments over a prescribed size had to have plans in place to manage water. This included sustainable drainage systems.

A Member noted that Darlaston Road had been identified as a flood risk in the strategy and asked what had been done, or was planned, to prevent further flooding in this area? The Group Manager agreed to provide further detail on this outside of the meeting.

Resolved:

That Members be advised on what had been done, or was planned, to prevent further flooding in Darlaston Road.

53/15 UPDATE ON THE COMBINED AUTHORITY FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS AND THE DEVOLUTION DEAL

The Committee were informed of the latest developments for the proposal to form a Combined Authority (CA) and the negotiations to agree a Devolution Deal (DD).

The Leader reported that since Council had agreed to form a CA for the West Midlands negotiations for the proposed DD had concluded. The DD secured approximately £40m per year for 30 years for the West Midlands to support a wide range of areas including skills development and strategic transport. The DD also proposed creating an elected Mayor for the West Midlands. The elected Mayor would subsume the existing West Midlands Integrated Transport Authority (WMITA) and the role of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC). He added that he hoped Walsall would be able to access additional funding for land reclamation and new railway and metro stations.

Members asked a series of questions about the elected Mayor. The Leader explained that there would be a separate scrutiny function established as detailed in the Devolution Agreement that was tabled at the meeting (annexed). The election for the Mayor would be in 2017; potentially on the same day as the proposed European Referendum. He added that the Mayor was a critical part to securing the DD. Without a Mayor the Government would not commit the promised financial resources.

A Member noted that the PCC appointed a Deputy and asked if the elected Mayor would have a Deputy? The Leader stated that currently the Mayor would not have an official deputy but it was possible that the Leaders of the seven constituent councils could all be Deputy Mayors.

It was asked what the costs of the CA would be to the Council? The Leader reported that so far costs had been split equally between the seven constituent local authorities. Once the CA was established its funding streams would need to be agreed. The CA would subsume the WMITA levy. The CA could also ask the Local Enterprise Partnership to introduce a supplemental business rate.

In his closing remarks the Leader thanked Jo Nugent and Stuart Portman for their work in the development of the CA.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

54/15 FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE – FORECAST REVENUE AND CAPITAL OUTTURN FOR 2015-16

Members considered the forecast revenue and capital financial position for 2015/16, based on the performance of the five months to August 2015, for services within the remit of the Committee.

The Services Finance Manager reported that as of August there was a £406,000 under spend forecasted subject to the management of specific pressure and risks. He also highlighted a forecast capital under spend of £865,000.

A Member stated that he was aware that the construction of the new leisure centre at Oak Park had overspent and expressed his disappointment that the figures were not included in this report. It was explained that a number of budgets were being realigned to manage additional costs with the development. These additional costs included Japanese Knot Weed and asbestos. This information would be included in the next financial performance report presented to the Committee.

A Member queried why the Money, Home, Job Service had used £1m of reserves. It was explained that this was earmarked reserves which deliberately been saved to be spent this year.

A Member queried why the Council was buying licences for Microsoft 2003 as an obsolete operating system. The Executive Director (Resources) said he thought this was an error and agreed to investigate and report back to Members.

A Member noted that the Council was spending £423,000 on solar panels and asked where they were being installed? Members were informed they would be installed on the Civic Centre and other Council buildings.

A request was made for Members to be informed what level of reserves the Council held.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. Committee Members receive further information on the following areas:**
 - a. Confirmation on what Microsoft operating systems were being purchased;**
 - b. What the level of reserves the Council holds;**
- 2. The report be noted.**

55/15 AREAS OF FOCUS 2015/16 AND FORWARD PLANS

The Committee considered its areas of focus and the forward plans for Walsall Council and Black Country Joint Committee (BCJC).

Following a question the Executive Director (Economy and Environment) explained that bids for Local Growth Funding on the BCJC Forward Plan were private agenda items as information contained within them revealed information about the financial affairs of private businesses.

Resolved:

That a further report on libraries be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.

56/15 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee would be 21 January 2016.

The meeting terminated at 9.07 p.m.

Chair:

Date:.....