

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday, 12 April, 2012 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Panel Members Present

Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair)
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor M. Longhi
Councillor J. Murray
Councillor M. Nazir
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor I. Shires (substitute for Councillor D. Shires)

Portfolio holders present

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

Officers Present

Pauline Pilkington - Executive Director, Children's Services
James Walsh - Assistant Director, Finance
Paul Gordon - Head of Business Change
Sharon Tait - Head of Revenues
Anna Samson - Corporate Consultation Customer Feedback Officer
Andrea Holmes - Family Support Officer
Kerry Edwards - Family Support Co-ordinator
Neil Picken - Senior Democratic Services Officer

127/12 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were received on behalf of Councillors M. Flower, K. Hussain and D. Shires.

128/12 SUBSTITUTIONS

Resolved

That it be noted that Councillor I. Shires was substituting for Councillor D. Shires.

129/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

None received.

130/12 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 February, 2012, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

131/12 BUDGET CONSULTATION

Members received a report detailing the public consultation undertaken by the Council in preparation for the budget setting process:-

(see annexed)

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Panel of the legal framework relating to budget consultation. He touched upon the guidelines issued by the Office for the Deputy Prime Minister in relation to Council Tax and information contained within the Constitution, in relation to Budget and Policy Framework procedure rules.

The Councils Corporate Consultation Customer Feedback Officer then advised that in previous years, a number of research methods had been used. These included:-

- Qualitative research - interviews, observations and workshops;
- Quantitative data collection - online surveys & face to face household interviews;
- Budget Simulator;
- Social Media/emails/telephone calls.

The Council had not adopted a random sampling approach for two years. As a result, inferences could not be made about the data such as significance and generalisations about the whole population. Without random sampling, consultation provided a snapshot of opinion. The cost of undertaking consultation in this format was under £2,000.

Discussion followed on the use of the on-line budget simulator as a method of consultation. A number of Members suggested that the simulator was not as engaging as it could be and intimated that those who considered completing it could have felt disconnected with the process, leading to a relatively poor uptake. It was put forward that the budget simulator should be used in a more public, engaging way in future.

A discussion was held in relation to increasing the response rate to the 'Your place, your well being survey' from the most deprived areas. It was reported that there were a number of reasons why surveys were less likely to be completed from deprived areas. To try to improve the response rate, a higher number of surveys were sent to deprived areas in the hope that it would generate sufficient responses to make it a representative sample from that area. Members suggested that the Authority should do more to provide feedback to those who had given their input during the consultation process to make them feel more engaged.

Overall, Members agreed that the use of the 'Your place, your well being survey' was important and should be continued. It was stated that opportunities should also be undertaken to gather information throughout the year using locations where customer interface was greatest. This could include the One Stop Shop and Councillors' surgeries.

The Assistant Director (Finance) explained that there was a further option in that the public could be advised of the Councils intention to increase Council tax together with an explanation of the reasons for doing so. This could be put to a referendum as to whether this should be undertaken or not. With this in mind, he stated that it would cost circa £360,000 to undertake this option.

The Chair suggested that the issue of budget consultation should be considered by a Working Group in the new Municipal Year. He subsequently requested that an item be added to the draft Work Programme for consideration by the Panel when it is re-established in 2012/13.

In closing, the Panels view was that-

- the budget simulation should be taken to the public and used differently to improve take up;
- the 'Your place, your well being survey' survey should continue to be used;
- more work should be undertaken to reach deprived areas;
- alternative means should be used to capture intelligence via the One Stop Shop and Councillor surgeries.

Resolved

- 1. That 'budget working group' be added to the draft work programme for 2012/13;**
- 2. That the Panels discussion on budget consultation, as detailed above, be taken into consideration when agreeing the process in future years;**
- 3. That the report be noted.**

132/12 WORKING SMARTER UPDATE

Two additional documents were circulated at the meeting, one of which was a case study from the Area Family Support Team and the other a briefing which detailed Area Family Support Teams and the work they undertake [Annexed].

The Executive Director (Children's Services) explained that due to the council's Working Smarter Programme, a new operating model had been developed which included multi agency, Area Family Support Teams (AFST). This approach built on the good practice which had been undertaken with the social work service and the Integrated Young People's Support Service to provide intensive support is offered to the most vulnerable children and their families, using a whole systems approach to drive down costs and improve service delivery. A dedicated officer from Finance was working with the AFST and they were confident that savings would result from this new way of working.

Members received a presentation from two officers from the AFST. Both officers reported that the new operating model was successful and empowered them to assist families in ways which the previous model had prevented.

The Executive Director (Children's Services) advised Members that the new operating model had to be sustainable long term. It was estimated that some children needed to be kept out of care for at least three years for the new model to be cost effective. This was achievable.

The Head of Revenues then provided a presentation on changes made within the revenue system as part of the Working Smarter Programme. The new process adopted a more customer friendly approach with the Council offering debt management advice and helping them through difficult times as opposed to sending threatening letters and adding to their debt. Processes had been adapted to deliver a more efficient service and take out failure demand.

Resolved

That the report and presentations be noted.

133/12 PRINT AND DESIGN SERVICE

Members received an update on the services offered by the internal Print and Design service together with the opportunities and options being considered for the short term and medium term.

The Head of Business Change reported that Print and Design services had overspent in previous years and afforded a budget reduction in the expected income target for 2012/13. Given this, the service had to become effective and grow external income to cover its operating costs. A number of options were being pursued such as proving the Print and Design service in the competitive market. Tenders had been submitted, however, they had not been successful to date. Members were advised that submitting tenders was a learning process and they would continue to pursue this area of work. The possibility of undertaking printing services for Sandwell was being explored as Walsall already provided a printing service for Lichfield Council. The service was also investing in staff with colleagues being trained to provide web design services.

There then followed a period of questioning by Members in relation to the 10 % increase in salary costs and also the 28% rise in the cost of materials. In response, it was advised that three members of staff, previously in Business Support, had joined Print and Design and so it was a re-alignment of cost. With regard to materials, it was stated that there had been an increase and a full breakdown would be provided to Members.

Concern was raised that the Print and Design service provided its services at cost to internal departments. It was suggested that as the service still had a £300k overspend which needed to be funded from the budget, this was a false economy. It was suggested that the private sector could provide the service at a fraction of the cost and that this should be tested.

The Head of Business Change advised that every effort was being made to improve the service and strategically it was often a good move to pick up in a declining industry. A printing strategy would be produced as there were opportunities to better the service. An external review of the service was being undertaken by the British Printing Industries Federation and the results would be reported to Corporate in the new municipal year.

Resolved

1. That the Head of Business Change provide Members with a breakdown of the 10% increase in materials;
2. That the external report be added to the draft work programme for 2012/13
3. That the report be noted.

134/12 WORK PROGRAMME 2011/12 AND FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

That the work programme and forward plan be noted.

135/12 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Panel would be agreed at Annual Council on 21 May, 2012.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.50 p.m.

Signed:

Date: