

# **SPECIAL RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**

**Thursday 7 October 2004 at 6.00 p.m.**

**at the Council House, Walsall**

## **Present**

Councillor Sanders (Chairman)  
Councillor Sarohi (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor Anson  
Councillor Griffiths  
Councillor Rochelle  
Councillor Underhill

Councillor J.G. O'Hare (Portfolio holder for Resources)

## **30/04 Apologies**

Apologies for non-attendance at the meeting were submitted from Councillors Martin, Mrs. D.A. Shires and Turner.

## **31/04 Receipt of declarations of interest and party whip**

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

## **32/04 Independent review of welfare benefits**

The report of the Executive Director was submitted:-

(see annexed)

A presentation was given to the Panel by Mr. Andy Burns, assistant director of finance and Miss Elizabeth Kennedy, head of revenues and benefits.

Members were advised that the presentation would cover the following areas:

- background, recent history, reasons for scrutiny
- overall aims of welfare benefits service
- independent consultant's brief, scope and output
- independent consultant's findings
- proposed structure/process changes and anticipated outcomes
- financial implications and strategic choices

- points for scrutiny panel consideration
- opportunities for questions and comments

The Panel was advised that in 2003 there was a merger of the five services into the Finance, Legal and Performance directorate, the relevant services being benefits, anti-poverty unit, local taxation, fairer charging and free school meals. Members were provided with a background and recent history of both the benefits service and the anti-poverty unit. The Panel were advised that the overall aims of welfare benefits were to:

- maximise customers income
- maximise customer service
- deliver value for money
- embed performance management throughout the service and its systems

Members were informed that the independent consultant's brief as approved by Cabinet following the request of Social Care and Supported Housing Scrutiny Panel involved considering all benefits administration which included the following:

- housing and council tax benefits
- social services welfare benefits
- social services financial assessments
- residential fairer charging
- anti-poverty unit
- new government plans for pension service

Members were informed that the overall aims of the independent consultant's review were to:

- support delivery of a cost cutting cross organisation strategy for welfare benefits and anti-poverty
- provide a seamless integrated welfare benefits and assessment function which delivers the Council's aims and objectives
- provide value for money and cost effective efficiency in delivering these aims

Members were advised that the independent consultants findings were as follows:-

### **Benefits**

- high level of claims re-working due to poor business process, because of:
  - poor response times
  - costly processing
  - backlog and poor customer satisfaction
  - 25-30% potential for improvement
- lack of effective performance management arrangements

## **Anti Poverty Unit**

- no policy framework or overall strategy for anti-poverty within the Council
- no effective performance management arrangements
- uncertainty about long term funding
- new IT systems give potential to “mine” databases and target “take-up” campaigners more effectively

## **Joint Working**

- need more effective co-ordination of work within the Council and with external agencies
- internal – Council Tax benefits, housing benefits, social care, anti poverty unit, fairer charging
- external – Department of Work and Pensions, Citizens Advice Bureau, Walsall PCT, Age Concern

The Panel was advised that the review had informed the re-organisation of the revenue and benefit service which was being discussed with staff through a series of briefing sessions and further detailed consultation with staff and their trade union representatives both directly and through the standing joint negotiating and consultative committee. The re-organisation proposed included:

- free school meals be incorporated as a integral part of the benefit assessment and be included within the benefit claim form
- a move away from a geographical assessment work split to a one borough approach with specific focus on claim types
- introduction of a coach/senior officer role to reduce the span of control in order to support improved learning and measure and monitor quality
- creation of a business improvement team with key responsibilities of performance improvement, quality control, policy interpretation, formulation of development procedures, knowledge management, coaching an accreditation (all visiting officers including fairer charging) be brought together into one team to support joint working
- housing overpayment and recovery of local tax collection be combined into one team to enable a joined up approach to customer contacts and payment arrangements
- in common with the approach taken in many other local authorities reflecting best practice, more generic working with formal job descriptions will add value to the new systems joint data base so reducing the need for dual input and potential error
- consideration of options to mainstream funding, the inclusion of the anti-poverty unit within revenues and benefits and merge with the current welfare rights service to ensure a borough-wide consistent proactive approach to benefit maximisation
- anti-poverty unit – subject to a anti-poverty strategy being defined, there should be consideration of the potential to commit a greater proportion of mainstream funding to maintain some permanent infrastructure within the Council.

There then followed detailed discussion and a series of questions from members on both the report on the independent review of welfare benefits and the presentation given by officers on this matter.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the scrutiny panel indicate its support for an anti-poverty strategy as this links into the following priorities of the Council's Vision for 2008:
  - [7] Make it easier to access local services
  - [8] Strengthen the local economy
  - [10] Transform Walsall into an excellent Council
- (2) That the scrutiny panel indicate its support for the continuation of the anti-poverty unit within the Council's welfare benefits structure beyond 31 March 2005;
- (3) That further consideration of the detailed report on the independent review of welfare benefits take place at the scrutiny panel's next meeting on 4 November 2004;
- (4) That the report referred to at (3) above, include options for the appropriate level of mainstream funding for the anti-poverty unit in 2005/2006 and beyond.

The meeting terminated at 8.20 p.m.

Chairman:

Date: