

REGENERATION SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Monday, 5 December 2011 at 6.00 p.m. at the Council House

Panel Members Present: Councillor I. Shires (Chair)
Councillor I. Azam (Vice-Chair)
Councillor D. Anson
Councillor R. Carpenter
Councillor S. Fitzpatrick
Councillor D. James
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor M. Munir

Portfolio Holders Present Councillor A. Andrew - Regeneration
Councillor C. Towe - Finance and Personnel

Officers Present: Tim Johnson - Executive Director (Regeneration)
Mark Lavender - Head of Strategic Regeneration
David Parkes - Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager
Neil Hollyhead - Senior Housing Strategy Officer
Julie Jones - Homelessness and Housing Service Manager
Karl Dipple - Interim Head of Revenues
Andrew Rumble - Partnership of Walsall, Economic
Regeneration Manager
Jane Kaur Gill - Economic Regeneration Team Leader
Zoe Slattery - Interim Think Walsall Team Leader
Chris Knowles - Lead Accountant
Craig Goodall - Scrutiny Officer

124/11 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor Douglas-Maul.

125/11 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

126/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

127/11 MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 November, 2011, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

128/11 BUDGET CONSULTATION FEEDBACK 2012/13

The Panel considered the responses to the consultation that had taken place on what local people's priorities were and how they thought this should be reflected in the budget.

The Lead Accountant highlighted the consultation findings to Members.

The Panel noted that there was a disappointing response to the budget simulator consultation. The Portfolio Holder (Finance and Personnel) acknowledged this and explained he had asked for the consultation deadline to be extended to enable further responses to be made.

RESOLVED:

That the budget consultation feedback 2012/13 be noted.

129/11 SECOND DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET PROPOSALS 2012/13 FOR CONSULTATION

Members considered the draft second budget report that outlined changes to the first draft budget reported to Cabinet on 14 September, 2011. This included the effect of the recently announced Council Tax freeze grant for 2012/13. The report also contained details of savings proposals which require an executive decision to implement.

The Portfolio Holder (Regeneration) introduced the changes and savings proposals to the Panel.

With regard to the "*Housing Services - Service Redesign*" the Panel questioned whether or not the creation of generic advice teams would reduce the specialist knowledge and advice available to local residents in the most need. Following this question it was explained that the changes were designed to improve the customer experience by targeting resources at those customers in the most need and by providing self help tools for those customers who wished to self serve.

The Portfolio Holder also responded to questions from the Panel regarding the performance of markets in the Borough. It was explained that Walsall market was at capacity, Bloxwich market was returning a small surplus and Willenhall market was recording a small loss but the Wednesday market had a waiting list for stalls. Overall, the Markets Service was £65,000 over its income generation targets.

RESOLVED:

That the draft revenue and capital budget proposals for 2012/13 be noted.

130/11 QUARTER 2 FINANCIAL MONITORING POSITION FOR 2011/12

The Panel was informed of the predicted revenue and capital outturn position for 2011/12 based on performance of Quarter 2 (to 30 September, 2011) for services within the remit of the Panel.

Members were informed that currently, an overall revenue overspend of £34,000 was predicted and that capital expenditure was anticipated to be on budget after slippage. Further details on revenue spending and the capital programme were reported.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

131/11 HOUSING STRATEGY

The Panel considered the draft priorities in the housing strategy and the proposed actions on how these priorities will be achieved. This item had been referred to the Panel following consideration of the draft housing strategy at Council on 7 November, 2011.

The Housing Strategy and Partnerships Manager gave a presentation to the Panel (annexed).

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- It was noted that there were problems with the availability of social housing. There were approximately 15,000 residents on the waiting list for a Walsall Housing Group (WHG) property. However, only 1,500 properties were re-let each year. This small number of re-lets meant that only those in the greatest need were successful in gaining social housing. Considering all these issues, Members felt that increasing the availability of social housing needed to feature more prominently in the housing strategy;
- Only a small number of immigrant families were allocated social housing each year;
- In addition to an increased focus on social housing, the revised housing strategy should include:-
 - A focus on creating more sustainable homes, particularly in terms of more efficient construction methods and energy efficiency;
 - The need to invest in land remediation in order to instigate future housing developments;
 - Plans on how void properties can be brought back into use;
 - Each priority and action area should have allocated performance measures to enable the strategy to be effectively monitored.

Members requested that the housing strategy document be updated to reflect their recommendations and be circulated to them for comments. The Panel reserved the right to recall the report if they were not satisfied with its content.

RESOLVED:

- (1) that the following areas be included in the revised housing strategy:-**
 - (a) increasing the availability of social housing;**
 - (b) a focus on creating more sustainable homes, particularly in terms of more efficient construction methods and energy efficiency;**
 - (c) the need to invest in land remediation in order to instigate future housing developments;**
 - (d) plans on how void properties can be brought back into use;**
 - (e) each priority and action area should have an action plan at the end of each chapter detailing how the strategic priorities will be delivered and effectively monitored;**
 - (2) the Panel be consulted on the revised draft housing strategy;**
 - (3) that Panel reconsider the draft housing strategy if any Panel Member is dissatisfied with the revisions;**
 - (4) should all Panel Members be satisfied with the revised housing strategy, then it be recommended to Council for adoption.**
- and;**
- (5) Members be provided with information on the Community Energy Saving Programme and Carbon Emissions Reduction Target.**

132/11 ENERGY EFFICIENCY IN THE HOME

The Panel considered energy efficiency in the home, including new builds and retro fit opportunities for older properties.

The Portfolio Holder (Regeneration) gave an introduction before the Senior Housing Strategy Officer delivered a presentation (annexed) on energy efficiency in the home.

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- Members were disappointed that WHG wished to establish their own Energy Saving Company rather than participate in a regional organisation;
- Members expressed further concerns about the diminishing level of Member representation on WHG Board and difficulties experienced when trying to resolve ward work for WHG tenants;
- A modern pre-fabricated home had approximately the same life span as a modern brick house. They were also mortgageable and fire retardant. It was suggested that the Panel visit the new housing factory where pre-fabricated homes were being manufactured;

- Energy supply companies were keen for Local Authorities to lead on the delivery of retro fit programmes as they were trusted by local people;
- It was important that fuel poverty was tackled by improving energy efficiency in the home;
- The Council's Energy Efficiency Team should work with the Welfare Rights Service to improve living conditions for vulnerable residents;
- Energy tariffs were confusing and should be simplified;
- The Council should discuss green energy policy with experts by organising a "green expo".

RESOLVED:

That:-

- (1) Tim Johnson write to the Chief Executive of Walsall Housing Group regarding the Panel's concerns about Walsall Housing Group wishing to work alone rather than join a Black Country energy supply company. The response from Walsall Housing Group should be reported to the Panel;**
- (2) the Panel visit the Accord housing factory where energy efficient pre-fabricated homes are being constructed;**
- (3) the Energy Efficiency Team and Welfare Rights Service work in partnership to assist vulnerable residents and reduce fuel poverty;**

and
- (4) the Council organise a "green expo" to develop green energy policies.**

133/11 DELIVERING QUALITY FIRST

The Panel considered the proposed re-organisation at the BBC following publication of the consultation paper "Delivering Quality First". One of the implications of the proposals was the relocation of some staff from Birmingham to Bristol and Cardiff.

The Chair reported that representatives of the BBC had been invited to the meeting but had declined the Panel's invitation to attend. He explained that it was important that Local Authorities across the West Midlands worked together to attract major organisations to the region. He also added that it was likely that a number of BBC staff being made redundant would go on to form their own media companies. It was important that Walsall took the opportunity to attract as many of these new companies as possible to the Borough.

The Portfolio Holder (Regeneration) agreed to take forward the issue of West Midlands Local Authorities working together to attract large companies to the area.

RESOLVED:

That the Portfolio Holder (Regeneration) take forward the issue of West Midlands Local Authorities working together to attract large companies to the area.

134/11 TECHNICAL REFORMS OF COUNCIL TAX - CONSULTATION

The Panel considered proposals with the Department of Communities and Local Government to give Local Authorities greater discretion over the setting of Council Tax available in respect of second homes and some empty properties; and other potential reforms of the Council Tax system.

The Interim Head of Revenues highlighted the proposals to Members. He explained that the proposals were already a part of a two stage process. Firstly, did Local Authorities want the powers? The second, later stage, would be more complex as the best ways of using them would need to be designed.

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:-

- Members were in favour of having additional control over local taxes, particularly if this power could be used to bring empty homes back into use. However, it was noted that careful consideration would need to be given to develop an effective local policy that delivered tangible benefits;
- It was noted that some empty properties were a blight on the Borough but others were more genuine cases such as a vacant home following the death of a family member when the remaining family cannot agree a way forward. It was important that any local rules were able to exercise discretion for unusual and sensitive circumstances;
- Members supported the principle that solar panels attached to domestic properties should not attract business rates or council tax charges;
- A second home was defined as a furnished property owned by a person who already owns a property;
- Members learned that the number of registered empty homes decreased when the Council reduced second home discount in 2007. However, it was noted that claims for a single person discount increased after this change. A single person discount attracts a 25% discount on Council Tax. This demonstrated the need to monitor properties and discount claims.

RESOLVED:

That the Interim Head of Revenues take into account the Panel's views on responding to the consultation on technical reforms to Council Tax, in particular:-

- (a) that the additional powers of the Council Tax setting be welcomed;**
- (b) the need to be flexible with the implementation of the new powers to take into account cases with exceptional circumstances;**
- (c) the need to have appropriate checks and balances in place to**

ensure that claims for discounts and additional charges are appropriate;

- (d) the principle that solar panels attached to domestic properties should not attract business rates or council tax charges be supported.**

135/11 CREATING AND SUSTAINING BUSINESS IN WALSALL

Members considered reports from the Panel's two Working Groups considering issues relating to the Business Start Up and Sustainability.

Business Start Up Working Group

Councillor Fitzpatrick, the Lead Member for the Business Start Up Working Group, explained that the following problems inviting banks to meet with the Working Group. Members had attended an 'Access to Finance' event. At this event, the Working Group spoke to financial institutions and the Chair of the European Regional Development Fund.

Following this meeting, the Working Group had identified a wish to speak to the Princes Trust and Prime who supported younger and older people respectively to set up their own businesses. It was also suggested that the Working Group spoke to Breathing Space about the support that they could offer.

Members were informed that the Princes Trust was particularly active in the Borough and was represented in the areas One Stop Employment Shops.

Business Sustainability Working Group

Councillor Jeavons, Lead Member of the Business Sustainability Working Group, explained that Members had met with a medium sized business. Their findings had identified a lack of the right skills in young people and unrealistic expectations of the work they would be required to complete, along with the importance of customer relationships and the significance of a good reputation and word of mouth advertising.

Following this meeting, the Working Group had identified a wish to speak to large companies and local Colleges.

Members were informed that a survey of 16 - 24 year olds had revealed that the majority of respondents were keen to learn in the workplace. The response indicated that they preferred to learn in the workplace as they had previously failed with classroom based learning.

The Panel also discussed problems with securing work experience opportunities in manufacturing environments. It was noted that the new University Technical College had introduced this experience in a learning environment.

RESOLVED:

That:-

- (1) the Business Start Up Working Group engage with:-**
 - (a) large businesses;**
 - (b) local Colleges and Schools;**
 - and**
- (2) the Business Sustainability Working Group engage with:-**
 - (a) the Princes Trust;**
 - (b) Prime;**
 - (c) Breathing Space.**

136/11 WORK PROGRAMME 2011/12 AND FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered its Work Programme and the latest edition of Cabinet's Forward Plan of key decisions.

RESOLVED:

That Corporate Asset Management 2011 - 2016 be added to the Panel's Work Programme.

137/11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the date of the next meeting was 6.00 p.m. on 19 January, 2012.

The meeting closed at 8.15 p.m.

Signed:

Date: