

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday 9 April 2009 at
6.00pm

Panel Members Present

Councillor Longhi (Chair)
Councillor Nazir (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Carpenter
Councillor Cook
Councillor Flower
Councillor Sarohi
Councillor Turner

Portfolio Holders Present

Cllr Mohammed Arif- Procurement, transformation and
performance management
Cllr Al Griffiths- Finance and personnel

Officers Present

Rory Borealis- Executive Director, Resources
Sarah Homer- Assistant Director, Transformation
Paul Milmore- Head of ICT Strategy & Client Services
Martin Sadler- Head of ICT Services & Support
Carol Williams- Head of ICT Delivery
Carol Mason- Community Development Manager
Darren Caveney- Head of Communications
Kim Neville- Press & PR Manager
John Pryce-Jones- Corporate Performance Manager
Colin Teasdale- Performance and Scrutiny Officer

76/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor Yasin

77/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitution(s) to the panel were submitted for the duration of the meeting:-

- Delete: Councillor Yasin
- Substitute: Councillor Carpenter

78/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

79/08 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2009, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

80/08 FORWARD PLAN

Members were advised that the forward plan published 9 March 2009 and circulated with papers had been updated on 8 April 2009 and a copy of the most recent version was tabled (annexed)

Resolved

That the forward plan of 8 April 2009 be noted

81/09 Citizens Advice Bureau Grant/SLA funding

Carol Mason introduced the briefing note (annexed) that had been drafted in response to the referral from Council to the Panel on the level of funding for the Citizens Advice Bureau.

In response to a Member's questions it was confirmed that the current funding agreement would run for 12 months and that at this stage there had been no approach to the Council from the CAB for any increase in funding, though officers did confirm that it was reasonable to expect an increase in demand for welfare advice services in the current economic climate.

Members agreed that this issue could only be tackled by developing a thorough understanding of all the welfare advice provision that was taking place within the borough from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and the impact that the current economic climate was having on these so that they could see where the overlaps and the pressure points were. To this end they agreed with the recommendation set out in the report to form a working group to address this issue and that invitations should be made to other Scrutiny Panels as issues crossed into their remit as well

It was agreed that it would make sense to appoint membership of this working group in the next municipal year when Panel membership had been confirmed.

RESOLVED

- 1. That a Working Group be formed in the new municipal year, with membership decided at that point, to address the issue of the level and type of welfare advice provided by the statutory, voluntary and**

- community sectors within the borough;**
- 2. That the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel should act as lead Panel for this working group but that invitations be made to other scrutiny panels to address issues that cut across their remits.**

82/09 Local Area Agreement (LAA)

At the request of the Chair, Clive Wright introduced the report on the LAA (annexed) which included 3 aspects: the target setting process; the delivery of those targets and the future reporting requirements of the Panel on LAA matters.

Members asked questions around the number of perception based indicators within the LAA and wanted to know how these were measured and baselined and how the targets were set. Clive informed Members that the Place Survey, which asked citizens a number of questions, provided this information. The first Place Survey provided the baseline and targets were negotiated from that though as the survey only takes place every 3 years there were no targets for years 1 and 2.

The Chair questioned which targets within the LAA officers felt were at the biggest risk of failing. Clive Wright responded that locally, as nationally, targets around worklessness and skills were the biggest challenges due to the economic climate and that every local area in the country was likely to struggle against these targets.

In response to questions around their future reporting requirements, Members felt it was important the LSP continued to report to the Panel due to the breadth of work undertaken. Clive Wright offered to bring the LSP business plan to the first panel meeting of the new municipal year to help inform Members' work programmes and help provide visibility to everything the partnership was delivering. He also suggested amalgamating performance reporting of the LAA with wider CAA reporting so that members had a more rounded picture.

Members noted from the report that there was an ongoing piece of work to review Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs) and shared a range of views on the effectiveness of these and the need for improvement. They also felt it was important to learn from best practice in this area and one Member cited the example of Blackpool that had just won an award for its community engagement. Clive Wright confirmed that the current review was being led by an independent consultant who had worked up and down the country and would bring learning from there with him. He also informed the Panel that work was ongoing to establish a clearer picture of what it is Walsall wanted LNPs to achieve and that all three party group leaders were involved with this.

Resolved

- 1. That the LSP business plan is brought to the Panel's first meeting of the new municipal year in June to help inform their work programme.**

83/09 ICT Strategy

The Chair invited officers to talk through the report distributed (annexed) which provided Members with an update on the ICT strategy last presented to them at their meeting of 22 July 2008.

The Portfolio Holder informed Members that systems had been put in place to stop services spending money on IT systems without ICT support as this service was in a better position to help identify needs, what will or will not work and what other services already have in place. This would help prevent unnecessary spend. He also informed Members that £150k had been saved so far just by ICT's ability to repair existing computers rather than allowing service to buy new ones.

Members noted the improvements shown on the National e-Service Delivery Standards (NeSDS) benchmarking but questioned why they appeared to have gone backwards on ICT training. Officers clarified that this was because the standards looked at training provided by the service itself but that training within the authority was provided by HRD and so could not count towards it.

Members queried whether, as the service desk appeared to be performing so well, if it would be an option to open up the service to other organisations such as schools, as had been recommended by this Panel for the Payroll service earlier in the year.

Officers informed members that the strength of the service had put them in a position where they were able to start negotiations along these lines and that work had already begun.

Members also wanted to know if there was any intelligence gathered on what types of problems people calling the service desk were having which may inform training needs or system faults.

Officers confirmed that analysis was done each month on calls coming into the service desk in order to establish what the biggest problem was. As an example they said that forgotten passwords were a common problem and the service was looking to develop a way to allow staff to reset their own passwords from a colleague's computer without the need to come through the service desk.

The Portfolio holder also informed Members that a 'VIP' service had been implemented on the service desk so that when elected members or executive directors, who were likely to be more pressed for time, called they were given a priority service.

Members reiterated their view that they had experienced a significant improvement in the ICT service in the previous couple of years and wished to place on record their thanks to the service for this improvement.

Resolved:

- 1. That the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel note the real and significant improvements made to the ICT service and place on record their appreciation to the service for this work.**

84/09 VALUE FOR MONEY REVIEW OF COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE

The Chair reminded the Panel that he had acted a lead member for a value for money review of the communications service and had worked with officers over the previous months to complete the review. He then invited Darren Caveney, Head of Communications to present a summary of the findings (annexed). Darren provided an overview of the service and provided his conclusion that in comparison with other authorities and relative to the amount of work that is produced by such a small team, the service did deliver good value for money.

The Chair informed the Panel that he supported the officers' overall conclusions that good value for money was being provided by the service. He commented that it was very difficult to measure the real value of the service which was not in the number of press releases or responses to press enquiries but in managing the reputation of the Council. He also noted that, given what Members had seen with the earlier item on the Local Area Agreement and the number of perception measures within the government's new assessment regime, it was even more important that this work was carried out effectively.

In discussing the reports, Members commented that there was a need to focus on the quality of press releases rather than the quantity. They also raised concerns about the number of times they had heard or seen Officers on the radio or in the press commenting on a policy decision. It was suggested that Members, as the accountable policy-makers, should be the only ones making such statements.

Members also noted, in the forward looking section of the report, the discussions around the use of social media as a communication and engagement tool. They discussed ways in which a number of councillors

and officers had already begun using different forms of social media and suggested that more work was carried out between Members and Officers outside of the meeting to explore these options further.

One Member also commented that it was important to get communication from services right in the first instance and cited the example of the new parking enforcement which, in his view had been poorly communicated to residents. Whilst this was down to the individual service, and not the Communications Unit, it put the Communications service on the back foot when responding reactively after implementation.

The Chair asked Members to confirm if they were all in agreement with the overall findings of the report and Members responded that they were.

Resolved

- 1. That, in the view of the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel, the Communications Unit provides good value for money;**
- 2. That focus is given to the quality, rather than quantity of press releases; and**
- 3. That further work be progressed to explore opportunities for the use of social media in public engagement.**

85/09 CARRY FORWARD ITEMS FOR 2009/10

Resolved:

That the following items are recommended to be included as carryover items into next years work programme

- 1. Procurement**
- 2. Payroll and Pensions**
- 3. Comprehensive Area Assessment**

86/09 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair confirmed to Members that future Panel dates would be agreed by Annual Council at it meeting of 20 May 2009

The meeting terminated at 8.20pm