

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**RESOURCES AND
PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY
AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**
held at the Council House,
Walsall, on **Thursday, 16
December 2004, at 6.00 p.m.**

PRESENT

Councillor Sanders (Chairman)
Councillor Sarohi (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Anson
Councillor Beilby
Councillor Griffiths
Councillor Micklewright
Councillor Mrs D A Shires
Councillor Turner
Councillor Underhill

CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Panel noted the following permanent change in membership:-

Delete	:	Councillor Martin
Substitute	:	Councillor Micklewright

The Chairman Councillor Sanders, on behalf of the panel, thanked Councillor Martin for her work and commitment to the Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel and welcomed Councillor Micklewright.

Panel noted the following change in membership for the duration of the meeting:-

Delete	:	Councillor Rochelle
Substitute	:	Councillor Beilby

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest.

MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2004, a copy having previously been circulated, to each member of the committee be agreed as a correct record.

PERFORMANCE BOARD – BENEFITS SERVICE

Councillor Sanders advised the panel that councillor Hughes, portfolio holder, was unable to attend the meeting and that he would be invited to the next panel meeting to discuss comparative data and Walsall Councils examination results.

Elizabeth Kennedy, head of revenue and benefits and Mick Bullock, welfare benefits manager were in attendance at the meeting to give a presentation and answer members questions.

A handout of the presentation was tabled:-

(see annexed)

A number of points for clarification and questions were asked during the presentation.

Councillor Anson referred to the closure of neighbourhood offices and asked if the current level of service to the public had improved since then.

Elizabeth Kennedy informed the panel that the service had undergone many legislative changes and this had prompted many changes with data systems. She advised that currently the process was poorer in the processing of claims, however the service has recently employed a number of agency staff and the data is being transferred.

In response to another question by Councillor Anson about the one stop shop, Elizabeth Kennedy advised that the staff in one stop shops would be trained and have skills and knowledge to deal with all enquiries and that people who could not attend the one stop shop would be visited by staff. She said it is anticipated that advisors will have knowledge on a number of issues and will be able to answer a number of over-lapping enquiries, thereby dealing with customers in a single visit.

Members welcomed the service 'going out' to people unable to attend one stop shop. Councillor Underhill asked what criteria citizens would need to meet to receive a home visit. Elizabeth Kennedy explained that the team was not yet up and running

therefore there was no set criteria yet. She advised that staff would be visiting homes and would have the most up -to-date knowledge and forms, but that the structure and training for that would need to be put in place.

In response to further questions Elizabeth Kennedy informed members that Walsall Housing Group (WHG) and the Council are working together and it was anticipated that WHG will be able to assist customers to process claims more quickly and that the public will be able to approach WHG to ask questions. Members were advised that WHG have agreed to pilot an area and would be meeting with WHG and WATMOS in the new year to discuss this further.

Councillor Sanders referred to the dip in performance during the change of data to the new system. Carole Evans advised that a dip in performance was to be expected during the implementation of new systems and that nationally there is information available about implementation dips, essentially performance will get worse before it gets better.

Members suggested criteria for home visits as follows:-

- Elderly and infirm
- Medically unfit
- Young mothers

There followed a brief discussion about the need for confidentiality when dealing with customers.

Councillor Sanders thanked Elizabeth Kennedy for a very informative presentation about welfare benefits.

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF WELFARE BENEFITS

The report of the Executive Director was submitted:-

(see annexed)

Resolved

Members noted the resolution of Cabinet at its meeting 1 December 2004.

RESOURCES SCRUTINY BUDGET DECISION CONFERENCE

The report of the Executive Director was submitted:-

(see annexed)

Vicky Crowshaw and Paul Simpson were in attendance to advise members. Vicky Crowshaw outlined the report highlighting the table (paragraph 1.4 of the report) illustrating the impact of the decisions discussed at the budget decision conferences on 6 and 9 December 2004 and paragraph 1.5 of the report, a number of requests for further information, she outlined the responses as follows:-

- (3) She advised that schools forum is the vehicle for schools to feed into the budget proposals.
- (7) In relation to the creation of 12 place supernumerary disability scheme and the information to create permanent posts, she was unable to provide a response this evening.
- (14) that a fixed term temporary post is advisable for record management due to the freedom of information Act.
- (15) Shop mobility – there is an intention to roll-out to the whole of the borough.
- (18) Paul Simpson advised panel relating to the post dealing with High Hedges legislation.

Members discussed whether an officer specific to High Hedges legislation was a priority A or B. They considered the role and voiced concerns whether there was enough evidence of demand to create a post at this time.

Councillor Sanders suggested that the case for creation of this post was not proven and that the post be moved to category B.

- (19) Members agreed that there was a need for park and ride facilities on heavily used routes.
- (21) Members were advised that there is a charge of £16.50 for new and replacement wheely bins.
- (23) & (24) Members were advised that there is an exit strategy and that the posts funded over time limited. They were further advised that the council will not automatically pick up activity.
- (42) Members were given further detail of the decriminalisation of car parking.

There followed a period of discussion members requested further clarification of detail within the investment bid document in particular to the following:-

- Toilets – members considered the need to retain public conveniences and agreed to pass a recommendation to Regeneration Environment Housings and Community SPP to request a review of toilets and for a new approach to public conveniences to be considered, taking into consideration accessibility, 'floating' attendants, opening times, district centres facilities, introduction of charges to use the toilets?
- (79, 80, 81) accommodation costs.

- (51) additional agency staff LAC
- (47) Parks and Green spaces improvement strategy
- (27) Expansion of gold standard across other district centres
- (36) Environmental action register

Following a further period of deliberation the following was moved by the chairman and agreed unanimously.

Resolved

1. That the panel recommends a council tax increase of no more than 4.94% for 2005/6.

2. That investment bids categorised as priority A by the Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel at its decision conference event on 6 and 9 December 2004 are recommended for approval by Cabinet subject to the following changes:

(i) Investment no. 47, parks and green space improvement strategy be reduced from £98k to £65k, the remaining £33k to be funded by the capital programme.

(ii) Investment no. 36, environment action register be reduced from £200k to £100k and the bid be revised to ensure it is deliverable within this revised amount.

(iii) Investment no. 27, expansion of gold standard to other district centres be reduced from £105k to £60 k and the roll-out of the standard be re-phased as appropriate.

(iv) Investment no. 18, High Hedges legislation be re-categorised as category B.

3. That the savings as detailed at appendix B be proposed for approval by Cabinet, subject to the following:

(i) Saving no. 9 be reduced from £180k to £100k, with the effect that no public conveniences are closed, but the two manned facilities at Bloxwich and Willenhall Town Centres be changed to non-attended sites.

FORWARD PLAN

The forward plan was submitted. Members requested that the Chairman of Regeneration Environment Housing and Community Safety SPP consider receiving further information on the neighbourhood resource centres report scheduled for 9 February 2005.

PRIVATE SESSION

The forward plan was submitted. Members requested that the Chairman of Regeneration Environment Housing and Community Safety SPP consider receiving

Exclusion of Public

Resolved

That during consideration of the remaining item on the agenda, the panel considers that the item for consideration is exempt information for the reasons set out there in and section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, and accordingly resolves to consider this item in private.

PUTTING THE CITIZEN FIRST

The report of the community organisation, leisure and culture SPP was submitted.

(see annexed)

Councillor Sanders introduced David Johnson, head of ISS, who was in attendance to outline the report and answer members questions. He circulated a copy of the guaranteed assurances given by Fujitsu for members information.

(see annexed)

Members considered the report before them. Councillor Sanders indicated that the third point of the resolution within the report contradicted a previous resolution of this panel and suggested that with respect to Community Organisation members, the anti-poverty unit, should remain within the scope.

Councillor Underhill raised concerns that the information she had received gives no indication of what the Citizen First project means to the Citizens of Walsall.

David Johnson advised Panel that the whole thrust of the contract is to provide Citizens of Walsall with better services, better access through local access points where an entire range of council services can be accessed electronically by trained staff, giving the public up-to-date information about a range of issues in one place.

Councillor Anson voiced concerns about the pensions gap and asked whether the Council would have problems in the future. David Johnson referred to the assurances document circulated which show that Fujitsu are seeking admitted body status to the West Midlands Local Government Pension fund for an open scheme and that staff transferring shall retain all benefits of their terms and conditions in existence

at the point of transfer for the duration of the Partnership agreement unless they choose to move into employment outside the partnership service with Fujitsu or United Utilities company.

Councillor Anson said this was the most important thing Walsall Council ever does and voiced concern that the public have not been consulted in the same manner as tenants were when the long scale voluntary transfer of housing stock took place.

Members were advised that Cabinet has the delegated power and have consulted with the Community Organisation, Leisure and Culture Scrutiny and Performance Panel because it falls within its remit. They were advised that throughout the process reports and presentations have been considered by Community Organisation panel leading to this stage 'the selection to the preferred bidder'. The scrutiny panel called in the decision of cabinet and sent a report to other scrutiny panels for comments.

There followed a period of deliberation, when concerns were raised about the information within the report.

That the Resources and Performance Scrutiny and Performance Panel request that the following comments of the panel be taken into consideration:-

1. That the panel agree that Fujitsu should be the preferred partner.
2. That the panel agrees that as long as all assurances, as set out in the guaranteed assurances document (see attached), are delivered, particularly the Legal and financial guarantees, panel agrees this project would be of benefit to the people of Walsall.
3. That this panel does not agree with the resolution of the Community Organisation Leisure and Culture Scrutiny and Performance panel's resolution relating to the removal of the anti-poverty unit from the scope of PTCF. As a result of the independent Review of Welfare Benefits, Resources and Performance Panel have already previously advised the Cabinet that the anti-poverty unit should be considered as an integral part of the Welfare Benefits structure.

Resolved

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8.55 p.m.

Chairman:

Date: