

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**RESOURCES AND
PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY
AND PERFORMANCE PANEL**
held at the Council House,
Walsall on **9 February 2006** at
6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Sanders (Chair)
Councillor Sarohi (Vice Chair)
Councillor Griffiths
Councillor Micklewright
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor D Shires
Councillor Turner
Councillor Young
Councillor Longhi
Councillor Burley

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Andy Burns (Assistant Director of Finance)
David Trethewey (Assistant Director for LAA)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Helen Dudson, (Service Development & Interim Scrutiny Manager)
Nikki Ehlen (Scrutiny Officer)

42. APOLOGIES

Apologies for non attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor Chambers.

43. SUBSTITUTIONS

For the duration of the meeting substitute Councillor Burley for Councillor Chambers.

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of the political groups represented on the Panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

45. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 December 2005, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(Annexed)

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(Annexed)

46. PANEL WORK UPDATE

Councillor Sanders informed the panel of a change to the agenda, this was to receive item 5.2 first and then to take item 5.1.

Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) consultation

Councillor Sanders welcomed David Trethewey to the meeting. David Trethewey then gave a presentation on the LAA and the current ODPM consultation regarding LSPs.

Councillor Burley asked if LNPs could form the LSP, David Trethewey stated that there are currently discussions about the role of LNPs and that there is potential for them to become essentially mini LSPs but that the overarching LSP will remain as some issues are borough wide, or even wider than the borough area. He informed the panel that the LSP is responsible for the LAA but that there is scope for the LNPs to deliver some of the targets particularly if there is a need for concentrated effort in the areas most affected.

Councillor Longhi expressed the opinion that the LSP is vital, particularly in areas of service provision where the council has less or no control and that the LSP allows wider aspirations.

Councillor Burley raised concern that there are too many organisations and stressed that action at a local level is needed.

Councillor Griffiths states that he was concerned about potential duplication and that the LSP was taking authority away from LNPs. In response to these points David Trethewey informed the panel that the LSP and the pending LAA firms up responsibility for actions and provides a framework for LNPs to work in the broadest sense. He also stated that the LSP and the LAA provide a greater opportunity to influence partners.

Councillor Sanders reminded the panel that the intention of the discussion was for the panel comments on the ODPM LSP consultation.

Councillor Rochelle asked if Councillors will be on the LSP board. David Trethewey explained that the three political group leaders are on the LSP board and that the role of the Council is to make sure the LSP is working and thriving. He also informed the panel that the LSP had recently appointed Clive Wright as director, and that Clive is intending and interested in talking to the panel about the future relationship between scrutiny and the LSP and that he will feed back the comments from the panel.

Councillor Sanders raised concerns that if LNPs are to continue they need to have influence and power otherwise their membership will weaken as people become frustrated and lose interest.

Councillor Burley said that it was important that LSPs listened to local people and their priorities will need to reflect local needs. David Trethewey confirmed that the government are keen to ensure local people are engaged and consulted and that this was reflected in the current consultation.

Andy Burns said that all organisations have a similar agenda and the challenge for the LAA will be streamline their activity so as to avoid duplication and overlap. He suggested that the panel may wish in the future to consider the value for money achieved by the LAA structures and the increasing or decreasing efficiency it brings. He also said that there was potential for reshaping the role of the LNPs to become mini LSPs.

Helen Dudson suggested that panel members pay particular consideration to the three questions from the consultation that David Trethewey had highlighted in his presentation and contact her by 15 February 2006 with their feedback which she would consolidate and forward to David Trethewey for inclusion in the cabinet report.

The panel thanked David Trethewey for his attendance.

AGREED

The panel will consider all information regarding the LSP consultation and feedback comments to Helen Dudson by 15 February 2006.

Value for money (CPA Use of Resources) work group

Helen Dudson informed the panel that she had circulated minutes from the Value for Money work group, and highlighted the name change of the group to better reflect the work it does.

It was agreed that the working group would meet on 1 March 2006. Councillor Griffiths and Sarohi agreed to arrange a meeting prior to this date to consider information the group have been provided with. Councillor Longhi stated that this was an area which overview and scrutiny has potential to have a proactive role.

47. INFORMATION ITEMS

Andy Burns informed the panel that the Cabinet report from 18 January 2006 regarding the councils CPA category and direction of travel statement had been circulated to the panel for information. Councillor Sanders congratulated the panel on the role it had played in the Council achieving three star status.

Councillor Longhi said he would like to emphasise that the Council has achieved three star status because of the hard work of the staff. It was also pointed out that Walsall Council is the only authority to have improved this much and he attributed this to staff dedication and thanked them for their hard work.

Councillor Burley asked Andy Burns how housing was inspected. Andy Burns explained that the CPA assessed the Council in terms of its role as a strategic housing authority, rather than as a manager of housing stock and that previously the authority had a low rating for homelessness, this had been greatly improved and that was the main contributor to the improved housing CPA score.

Councillor Burley raised concerns that this was not reflected in the borough. Councillor Sanders explained that that this may be because figures relating to this service are averages. Councillor Longhi added that these figures are raised according to government parameters, he concluded that the Council is not a four star authority and that work still needs to be done.

The panel discussed the revenues and benefits service, stating that it must be improved, and asked if outsourcing benefits had been considered. Andy Burns explained that as a consequence of the decision not to enter into the strategic partnership with Fujitsu, the Executive Management Team had been asked to look at alternative plans and a report will go to Cabinet in March.

Councillor Shires told the group that the Audit Commission had raised concerns about the Revenues and Benefits service. Andy Burns informed the panel that an inspection by the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) would take place in March and this detailed piece of work would address issues of concern, and members were assured that a high priority would be assigned to this matter.

Councillor Shires suggested that the best practise of other Councils is researched. Andy Burns informed the panel that since Christmas there had been an improvement in the time it takes to process new claims. He also explained that as a consequence of implementing a new computer system it is difficult to obtain and keep trained staff, as the skills these individuals held were highly sought after. In addition Andy Burns told the panel that often a lot of time is taken up in correspondence with claimants and so more time had been invested in verifying information with claimants during the initial stages of application.

The panel were informed that seven new staff had been recruited and four more staff are due to start shortly. Andy Burns agreed that the performance of Revenues and Benefits is currently not acceptable. As a result a detailed action plan has been developed and is being implemented, and it is hoped that by April/May a significant improvement will have been made.

Councillor Rochelle raised the point that the work of the Citizens Advice Bureau is relevant to Revenues and Benefits service, and asked if there was any possibility of staff from the Citizens Advice Bureau working for the Council as part of their training. Andy Burns stated that a number of benefits staff have previously for Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Young asked if it was true that the number of agency staff had been reduced because of the proposed Fujitsu partnership. Andy Burns responded to this by informing the panel that agency staff had been employed because of the anticipated backlog from the introduction of a new system. The staff were employed on short term contracts and a defined amount of money was available and that once this period had passed there was no funding to continue these temporary posts and that they had ended as originally planned. It was the intention that thirteen weeks worth of backlog would be cleared, however an approximate five week backlog still remains. He stated that it is important to manage within the budget, but that there is potentially Government funding to deal with the backlog.

The panel discussed the possibility of the scrutiny of the revenues and benefits service in the next municipal year and the panel thanked Andy Burns for the information he had provided.

TRAINING

The members were informed of training opportunities. Helen Dudson highlighted additional training for which the places have been allocated. Councillor Sanders recommended that panel members take advantage of the training opportunities.

MEMBER FOLDERS

Helen Dudson explained the aim of the member's folders that had been developed and that the intention was to pilot them with this panel and then fully roll out in the new municipal year. She requested that members feedback between now and the next meeting. Members welcomed the initiative and requested that when papers are sent out they are prepared ready for insertion into the folders.

48. PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORTS

Helen Dudson explained that the panel were asked to discuss and give feedback regarding the format of the Beacon Index report and any potential improvements.

Councillor Griffiths and Councillor Young pointed out that officer details needed to be updated. Helen Dudson explained that the example pages given with the briefing note were from the quarter two update which ended in September and that it had since been amended.

The panel agreed that the format of the report was excellent, and it is a good example that officers do listen as it is a great improvement.

49. FORWARD PLAN

Cabinet Forward Plan

No issues regarding the cabinet forward plan were raised.

AGREED

It was agreed that Helen Dudson would provide the revised hyperlink for the forward plan and send it by e-mail to all panel members

Panel Work Programme

The updated work programme for the panel had been circulated for information and it was agreed that a colour key would be put on the panel work programme.

50. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The panel were asked to note the change of date for the end of year event, which is now on 22 March 2006 at 5pm and that the next meeting of the panel would be on 13 April 2006 at 6pm.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business the meeting terminated at 7.30pm.

Chair.....

Date.....