

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Friday 25 January 2008 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present Councillor M. Longhi (chair)
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor J. Phillips
Councillor H. Sarohi
Councillor C. Towe
Councillor D. Turner

Officers present James Walsh – Assistant Director – Finance
Rob Flinter – Assistant Director – Performance Management
Sarah Homer – Assistant Director – Strategic Transformation
Vicky Buckley – Head of Corporate Finance
Alison Jarrett – Head of Service Finance
Michael Tomlinson - Capital & Treasury Manager
Craig Goodall – Scrutiny Officer

48/07 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillor M. Nazir.

49/07 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of this meeting.

50/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

51/07 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2007, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(annexed)

52/07 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

The panel noted the training opportunities as previously circulated.

(annexed)

53/07 FORWARD PLAN

The forward plan as at 7 January 2008 was submitted.

(annexed)

Members noted the item on the Welfare Rights Service (WRS) that was going to Cabinet on 6 February 2008.

The Chairman informed Members that the Procurement Strategy was being investigated as part of the Procurement Working Group and that the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement would be considered at the Panels next meeting.

In response to a question Craig Goodall advised that decision 97/07 'Award of Contract for the host organisation for LINKs' was a cross cutting issue for the Children and Young People's and Health, Social Care and Inclusion Scrutiny and Performance Panels to address.

Resolved

That the forward plan be noted.

54/07 DRAFT BUDGET 2008/09 PROPOSALS – CORPORATE SERVICES

The Panel considered draft budget proposals for the Corporate Services Directorate at Walsall Council for 2008/09.

Michael Tomlinson gave a presentation on the draft budget proposals for the Corporate Services Directorate.

(annexed)

Welfare Rights Service – Transfer to Trust Status

The Panel asked if the proposed £200,000 saving was due to transfer to a trust or a reduction in core service. A Member informed the Panel that this was a saving in the core service provided by the WRS in addition to the loss of Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) and other external funding. It was explained that the possibility of providing some funding to the WRS from the Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF) was being investigated.

James Walsh informed the Panel that WNF was a completely different type of funding to NRF.

After discussion the Panel felt that it was not acceptable to replace one lost grant with another. The current level of funding received by WRS from the council and external sources should become wholly core funded by the council due to the valuable service that it provided to the community. The £200,000 proposed saving should be reinstated and the external funding being lost should be replaced by a 0.24% rise in council tax.

Reduce Support to Members and Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNP's)

Vicky Buckley advised that this saving would be realised by reducing one post that supported Members and LNP's.

Members expressed some concern about the implications of the proposed saving.

A Member was of the opinion that he was in favour of the saving so long as it was not being made in Constitutional Services.

The Panel did not support the proposed saving.

Deletion of Finance Officer Post

Vicky Buckley advised that this was the deletion of a post from her team that had not been recruited to.

Reduce Discretionary Relief on National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)

James Walsh advised that Walsall granted more NNDR than most other local authorities. This saving would see NNDR declined to those organisations that did not meet the new criteria. For example, drinking clubs would no longer qualify for NNDR. It would be necessary for consultation to take place before the savings were made.

Members expressed caution with introducing these savings and advised that those organisations in receipt of rate relief usually received it for a reason.

The Panel did not support the proposed saving

Improvement of Recovery Rates of Overpayments

James Walsh advised that this would see the council improve its recovery rates of overpayments made to customers.

Reduction in Personal Assistant/Secretarial Support to Senior Managers

In response to questions Sarah Homer explained that this saving required the rationalisation of four posts across all PA's/Secretarial Assistants in the council. Individual posts had not yet been identified.

Members emphasised the importance of the role that PA's and Secretarial Assistants played at the Council and refused to support the proposed saving.

Reduction in Support of Non-Statutory Elements of Performance Management across Regeneration and Neighbourhood Services

Rob Flinter advised that this saving was an accumulative saving made across a number of teams that would have no impact on required services.

Resolved

That

- a) **Cabinet do not implement the proposed £200,000 saving in the Welfare Rights Service (WRS) and request that the savings be made in a different area(s). In addition to this the £235,000 WRS funding that is currently received but set to end on 31 March 2008 from Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and other outside sources be mainstreamed, with the funding to come from a recommended additional 0.24% increase in the council tax. This recommendation is in the spirit of the Notice of Motion passed by Council on 6 November 2006;**
- b) **the proposed reduction in support to Members and Local Neighbourhood Partnerships not be supported;**
- c) **the proposed reduction in discretionary relief on National Non-Domestic Rates not be supported;**
- d) **the proposed reduction in personal assistant/secretarial support to senior managers not be supported; and;**
- e) **the remaining proposed investments, fees and charges, and efficiencies were noted.**

55/07 DRAFT CORPORATE BUDGET 2008/09 PROPOSALS

The Panel considered the draft Cabinet report on the draft budget proposals for Walsall Council for 2008/09.

Michael Tomlinson gave an overview presentation on the draft corporate budget proposals for 2008/09.

(annexed)

Increase Trade Waste Collection Charges

Alison Jarrett clarified that the £20,000 increase in trade waste collection changes was expected to be raised by a small fee increase to current subscribers and a small growth to collections.

Reprovision of Darlaston Multi Purpose Centre and Reprovision at Future Date

Members questioned if the centre was to become an empty building or not as part of the proposed saving?

Part Time Gym Instructor – Reduced Availability of Gym Instruction in Children’s Gyms

Vicky Buckley clarified that this was a saving from removing one part time gym instructor. It was intended that schools would pick up costs themselves in the future.

Deletion of Two Part Time Car Park Attendants – No External Patrol of Leisure Centre

In response to questions Members were informed that the car park attendants did not issue tickets and were employed for security reasons only.

A Member commented that they felt this was a false economy that could result in the council expending greater sums than the cost of the two attendants rectifying the results of vandalism.

Alternative Medium for Delivering the Curriculum Programme which could allow us to reduce the narrowboats

Alison Jarrett reported that the council would still look to deliver the service but not through narrowboats. These would be released along with the narrowboat skipper.

Further Reduction in Waste Disposal

Alison Jarrett explained that this saving would be achieved as increased recycling rates would mean the council reducing its costs in domestic landfill.

Members suggested that Cabinet investigate the possibility of making additional savings through using the Highfield South landfill site rather than the Poplars.

Transfer of Contribution for Walsall Regeneration Company (WRC) and Black Country Consortium (BCC) from Revenue to LABGI Funding

Alison Jarrett explained that this was a transfer of £50,000 of the council's contribution to both the WRC and BCC for one year only. In response to a question the Panel was informed that the BCC received £337,000 a year from the council.

A Member expressed the view that he would be happy to stop funding the WRC and BCC all together. He felt that it was unfair that the WRC often took the credit for work that had been completed by council officers. He also felt that the BCC was not delivering value for money.

Alison Jarrett informed the meeting that discussions were taking place regarding future funding for the BCC.

The Panel supported the proposed transfer of funding to LABGI.

Reduction and Integration – Reduce Youth Service Support Staff

Vicky Buckley explained that this was a reduction in payments to external sources.

Members supported this proposed efficiency.

Reduce Support to Looked After Children

Vicky Buckley informed Members that this budget saving was possible as the finance was surplus to current requirements.

Members supported the proposed saving.

Delete Specialist Independent Consultancy Support

Vicky Buckley informed Members that this finance had been required as a one-off investment that was no longer needed.

Members supported the proposed saving.

Resolved

That

- f) the proposed increase in trade income in the Neighbourhoods Directorate be supported;**
- g) Cabinet be advised to make savings if possible through the disposal of domestic landfill waste at Highfield South rather than the Poplars landfill site, Cannock;**
- h) the proposed further increases in MOT charges in the Neighbourhoods Directorate be supported;**
- i) subject to there being no impact on services the proposed efficiency in Library staffing savings be supported;**
- j) the proposed transfer of contribution for Walsall Regeneration Company from revenue to Local Authority Business Growth Incentive funding be supported;**
- k) the proposed transfer of contribution for the Black Country Consortium from revenue to Local Authority Business Growth Incentive funding be supported;**
- l) the proposed efficiency for remodelling and integration – reduce youth support staff be supported;**
- m) the proposed efficiency to delete specialist independent consultancy support be supported; and;**
- n) the proposed efficiency to reduce support to looked after children be supported.**

56/07 DRAFT CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2008/09

The Panel considered the proposals for the draft capital programme for Walsall Council for 2008/09.

Michael Tomlinson gave an overview presentation of the proposed capital projects for 2008/09.

(annexed)

Vicky Buckley explained that a number of capital schemes had to go ahead. These were summarised in table 2 of the Cabinet report. This had committed £21m of the £28m available. The remaining funds were open for council directorates to bid for. Demand for this money was traditionally high.

Software to Automate Benefit Application Forms

In response to questions it was clarified that the proposed capital project to introduce software to automate benefit application forms would make significant improvements to benefits applications. The automated system would allow data to be shared between services quicker and allow applicants to track progress with their applications online.

The project had £10,000 revenue implications which could be met from existing budget and related to revenue items such as software licenses

In response to a question Vicky Buckley explained that supported borrowing was borrowing that would be financed through revenue grant in future years. Unsupported borrowing was borrowing made under the freedoms in the Prudential code which were allowable providing the financing costs could be demonstrated to be affordable, sustainable and prudent. There would be no financial implications if all finance received through prudential borrowing was not spent by the year end.

Resolved

That the proposed capital programme for 2008/09 be supported.

57/07 DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 7 February 2008.

The meeting terminated at 7.52 p.m.

Chair:

Date: