

Audit Committee – 28 February 2011

Summary of Outcomes from Scrutiny Panel Reviews

1.0 Summary of report:

To provide Audit Committee with a summary of outcomes from scrutiny panel reviews for the municipal year to date.

2.0 Background papers:

All published - Agenda, Minutes and working group reports.

3.0 Recommendation:

That the summary of outcomes from scrutiny panels be noted.

James T. Walsh
Assistant Director (Finance)



18 February 2011

4.0 Background

4.1 The council has 7 Scrutiny and Performance Panels (Corporate, Environment, Regeneration, Community, Social Care & Inclusion, Children & Young People and Health). Each panel is politically balanced and has a membership of up to 9 non-executive members from across all political groups. The four key roles of the panels are:

- Holding the Executive to account for their decisions;
- Scrutinising local partners (e.g. NHS Walsall);
- Reviewing and developing policies and making recommendations to Council and Cabinet on these; and
- Reviewing services to ensure they are providing value for money and meeting local needs.

4.2 As part of its function, the Audit Committee is tasked with providing independent assurance that there are adequate controls in place to mitigate key risks and to provide assurance that the authority is operating effectively.

4.3 This report is brought before members to provide assurance that the Scrutiny function continues to add real value to the decision making process in Walsall, as well as contributing to the Councils key priorities.

4.4 Scrutiny panels produce an Annual Report each year which provides evidence of a number of scrutiny panel reviews, together with outcomes achieved. The Audit Committee received the 2009/10 annual report at its meeting held on 25 October, 2010.

4.5 This report seeks to update the Audit Committee on further progress made since the start of the current municipal year May, 2010.

5.0 Resource and legal considerations:

5.1 Scrutiny Panels and any subsequent working groups are co-ordinated and facilitated by Constitutional Services. There are no direct implications for the team arising from this report.

6.0 Governance Issues/Citizen Impact

6.1 An effective Scrutiny function ensures that a wide range of policies are reviewed and the Executive are held to account for their decisions. This provides reassurance to the public that governance arrangements within Walsall are robust and transparent with an overall aim of improving services for local people.

7.0 Performance and risk management issues:

7.1 None arising directly from this report.

8.0 Equality Implications:

8.1 None arising from this report.

9.0 Consultation:

9.1 This report is produced in accordance with the agreed work programme for the Audit Committee as agreed at its meeting on 14 June 2010 in the report 'The Roles and Responsibilities of the Audit Committee'.

9.2 The chairs of the relevant panels have been consulted on the summary set out in this report detailing the work undertaken by their panel and have approved the narrative.

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10.0 Report Detail

10.1 Corporate Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.2 The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel has focussed its attention on areas including spending transparency procedures, progress made by the communications service following a best value review in 2009 and the Working Smarter Programme. This is in conjunction with being consulted twice in respect of the 2010/11 budget proposals. The Panel has also recognised the need to invest in the council website and background IT, to allow more services to be delivered online. As a result the Panel are due to consider the Web Improvement Plan at a future meeting.

10.3 As part of its consideration on the Working Smarter Programme, the Panel has established a working group entitled 'Delivering. Right, Fast and Simple'. The group is scheduled to have its first meeting on 14th February, 2011.

10.4 Environment Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.5 The Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel has been particularly active considering issues such as replacing damaged bins, residential parking and setting the local speed limit. As with all Scrutiny Panels the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel have also considered the 2011/2012 budget on two separate occasions. Following its deliberations and subsequent recommendations to Cabinet the cost of residential parking permits has been increased in-line with the recommendations made by the Panel. Cabinet agreed with Scrutiny that the cost of the initial permit be increased to £40.00.

10.6 Two working groups have been established by the Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel. The Dog Fouling working group was tasked with addressing concerns of many local residents to look at an issue which can have health risks. The working group undertake a detailed review having regard to the legal responsibilities and penalties in place for those whom disregarded their responsibilities as dog owners. The working group also endeavoured to investigate enforcement and public education as part of their review. The working groups' final report was presented to the Panel in January, 2011 and considered by Cabinet on 9th February, 2011.

10.7 The second working group was established to investigate Town Centre Parking. In particular the working groups' objectives are:-

- i. To clearly understand the influencing factors and constraints to the provision and management of parking facilities.
- ii. To review the current pricing structure, its impact on the local economy and its influence on demand for commuter parking.
- iii. To review the number and location of car parks;
- iv. To develop recommendations for a report to Cabinet on the future provision of car parks.

10.8 The working group is due to present its findings and recommendations final report shall be considered by the Panel in April, 2011.

10.9 Children & Young Peoples Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.10 The Panel has considered a broad range of issues during the Municipal Year, a key focus for officers has been to support Members in their challenge role. Significant items include consideration of each of the eight Serco Education Contract Themes. This enabled the Panel to gain a fuller insight into key areas of the contract and associated performance, including Early Years in the maintained sector. This process assisted the Panel in seeking to understand strategic decisions and outcomes.

The Panel have also considered a number of issues in relation to the Performance Scorecard and adopted an approach which facilitated greater understanding of the issues that underlined the performance data. For example, the Panel received presentations in relation to the prevalence of childhood obesity within the borough, the number of referrals to Children's social care for domestic abuse and levels of teenage pregnancy, which included guidance from key officers as to the action being taken to tackle each issue.

The Panel continued to receive regular reports regarding ongoing activity at Sneyd School and had an influential role in supporting the school in maintaining effective provision for the remaining pupils prior to its closure in August 2011. Members reinforced their understanding of the issues, challenges and achievements of the school by inviting the Head teacher and pupils to a Panel meeting. The Panel also ensured that it remained well informed regarding those challenges that were a consequence of the impact of ongoing central government funding reductions by requesting additional updates from officers. The Panel was keen to ensure that those pupils who transferred to other local schools were given support. As a consequence Serco provided financial assistance towards the purchase of school uniforms. In addition, the majority of transferring pupils were given bus passes to assist with their new journeys, while additional transport arrangements were made for pupils undertaking the more significant journey to Brownhills School. This enabled the Panel to develop a strong understanding of the inter relationships between service areas and make recommendations as to those services they considered should be prioritised. This activity complemented the Panel's meetings during which they considered the council's budget proposals for Children's Services.

The Panel also received regular updates regarding Specialist Services, including guidance on the outcome of a number of unannounced inspections and how the service had responded to increases in the number of Looked After Children (LAC).

10.11 The Panel made the decision that given the significance and complexity of challenges relating to the council's Safeguarding Services and the issue of obesity it would be most effective for them to be considered via working groups.

The Safeguarding working group was established in response to officers making the Panel aware of particular pressures faced by Children's Specialist Services,

with an increase in referrals and in turn more Initial Assessments, together with a rise in the number of Child Protection Investigations and a corresponding increase in the number of Looked After Children (LAC) and Child Protection Plans. At the same time the workforce has become less experienced compounded by difficulty in recruiting experienced social workers. This led to there being a number of LAC and Children in Need children without an allocated social worker. It was apparent that established working methods were not delivering the required outcomes. The working group met on a number of occasions during the Municipal Year and Members reported that key feature of the activity of the working group were frank exchanges and discussions which assisted in a thorough examination of the issues, including the caseload pressures on social workers. As a direct result of the activity of the working group a number of immediate improvements were delivered. These included establishing more appropriate interview room space for meetings between social workers and LAC or vulnerable children. A number of key recommendations were also identified by the working group and approved by the Panel. This included support for the service using experienced but non-social work qualified staff to provide support to LAC where appropriate, as well as a focus on increased Member participation in the Corporate Parenting Board and inspection activity. The working group's final report was presented to the Panel in January 2011 and is due to be considered by Cabinet in March 2011.

10.12 The working group met to consider obesity a number of times in 2011 and has discussed the challenges and potential solutions to a number of related issues with a range of witnesses, including local Head teachers and representatives from NHS Walsall and Serco. The working group is due to report its findings and recommendations to the Panel in April 2011.

10.13 Community Services Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.14 A major issue which the Panel have been considering this year is the development of the Big Society. The Panel have been considering the Big Society from the national policy perspective, considering how to use volunteers to add value to mainstream work and how to develop capacity in the local voluntary community sector for more large scale engagement in future years. Issues around making the Big Society in Walsall a reality are to be debated by the Panel on 22 February 2011.

10.15 As part of their holding the executive to account role the Panel have considered two call-ins to review the decisions to close Willenhall Leisure Centre and cease use of Bryntysilio Outdoor Education Centre. Members have also monitored progress by the Executive with the implementation of the recommendations from the former Anti-Social Behaviour Working group

10.16 Finally, as the nominated Scrutiny Panel for crime and disorder matters the Panel have co-opted a representative from the West Midland Police Authority. The representative actively takes part in meetings and provides a good example of Scrutiny engaging with external organisations.

10.17 Through its Leisure Centre and Libraries working group the Panel developed a vision for the future for both service areas. The working groups report, vision and recommendations were reported to Cabinet in November 2010. Cabinet noted

the working groups' recommendations and resolved to complete further work to develop future proposals for both services.

10.18 Social Care & Inclusion Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.19 The Panel has considered a range of issues during the Municipal Year and a period of significant change. The Panel received regular guidance regarding the major adaptations and Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), with a significant concern for Members was the lag time between referral and approval of schemes. The discussion with officers enabled the Panel to understand a number of practical challenges, including where families request that work is delayed to enable them to prepare and adjust to the adaptations and the level of complexity of some schemes. However, the Panel challenged officers to undertake further work to reduce internal processes including speeding up planning approval. The Panel continued to maintain a strong interest in this issue throughout the Municipal Year and officers acknowledged the importance of providing the fastest and most effective service possible to local residents, with common recognition of the need to prioritise greatest need.

The Panel has also continued to follow developments at the Links to Work service which has undergone significant restructuring activity. The Panel recognised the need to revise the aims and address the funding deficit that existed within the service, but also sought to ensure that action was taken so that where possible effected staff were given the opportunity of continued employment, rather than face compulsory redundancy. The Panel were also keen to ensure that service users received a more effective service and have influenced and supported recent efforts by officers in establishing an initiative to increase the number of disabled people in paid employment through the Council from two to fifty by the end of March 2011.

The Panel have retained a consistent interest in the activity of LINK, the local health service user representative body. The Panel have followed developments and continued to emphasise the importance of ensuring that the LINK acted as a fully representative and effective body and that it operated complementarily with My NHSWalsall, as well as seeking to ensure an effective transition to the new HealthWatch arrangements.

The Panel has also followed Adult Social Care Services through a significant period of change as the focus moves to the reablement of service users and responds to funding reductions, including the proposal to move from means-tested to benefit-based charging for services. In acknowledging the potential positive impact of the proposed restructured services, Members also highlighted the importance of monitoring to understand the practical impact for service users and any problems and anomalies which may arise once the detail of the new charging regime becomes available.

10.20 The Panel established a working group to consider the introduction of community-based support services for adults. The working group investigated a number of issues, including the Community Alarm System (CAS), as well as proposed changes to the council's in house home care and Neighbourhood Community Officer (NCO) services. A key aspect of the activity of the working group was consideration of the joint work undertaken between the council and

Walsall Housing Group (whg) in relation to telehealth care. The working group highlighted a number of issues in relation to the coordination of the removal of older alarm schemes and the replacement with modern pendant alarm systems within the homes of local residents. A recommendation subsequently approved by the Panel was the production of joint protocol between the organisations. The working group also considered the introduction of the reablement service. A review was also undertaken of changes to the meals on wheels service, including views of staff and service users.

10.21 A second working group was established to further consider the introduction of Personalisation. Areas that are being reviewed include how personal budgets will be audited and best practice from other authorities.

10.22 Regeneration Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.23 Economic Development has been a key theme for the Panel during 2010/11. Members have been receiving information gathered as part of the development of the Local Economic Assessment. As a result of their deliberations, the Panel made recommendations to Cabinet to bring on stream new employment land and ensure that economic development was a key priority moving forward, despite any budget constraints the Council may be under. As a result of these recommendations Cabinet agreed that economic development was a key priority for the local area and resolved to review the availability of land available for employment use including the possibility of developing new sites.

10.24 Members have also been heavily involved with the Asset Management 2010 project (now Smarter Working) and made recommendations to Cabinet to pursue ambitious targets with regard to reducing the Councils office portfolio.

10.25 The Panel have recently established a working group to consider the support required to assist local people establishing their own businesses. The working group was set up following a report that identified serious gaps between business start ups in the Walsall borough compared to regional and national figures.

10.26 Health Scrutiny & Performance Panel

10.27 The Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel have, and continue to have, a range of demands placed on them as a result of consultations in response to the fast moving changes in the health economy.

10.28 Members initially received information on the current arrangements for delivering NHS services in Walsall. This included information on the following organisations:

- NHS Walsall;
- West Midlands Strategic Health Authority;
- West Midlands Ambulance Service;
- Dudley Walsall Mental Health Partnership Trust;
- Walsall Manor Hospital;
- Walsall LINK.

- 10.29 The Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel were able to gain a greater understanding of how the NHS in Walsall operates, which would subsequently allow them to scrutinise more effectively.
- 10.30 The Scrutiny Panel have held a meeting at the Manor Hospital and received a tour of the new facilities.
- 10.31 The Scrutiny Panel considered the Transforming Community Services agenda. After seeking assurance that the new providers would receive a key profile in the new organisation, the Panel agreed the four week period of formal public consultation by NHS Walsall on the proposals set out on Transforming Community Services. The Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel considered and supported the proposals within the consultation document "Transforming Community Services".
- 10.32 The Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel were consulted by West Midlands Ambulance Service (WMAS) on their application for Foundation Trust status. Based on the options, the Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel supported the WMAS application for Foundation Trust status. Further information will be taken to Panel by WMAS on the issues affecting Walsall.
- 10.33 NHS Walsall's decision regarding the provision of GP services at Abbey Square, Mossley, was considered by the panel. The Scrutiny Panel were consulted on the future access to primary care to the Mossley and Dudley Fields community in the previous municipal year. Local residents were keen to attend the public scrutiny meetings to ensure that elected Members were aware of their opinions on the future of the GP services. In line with the Panels' recommendation the decision of the NHS Walsall Board was to retain GP services from the Abbey Square Surgery, subject to the procurement of a current local GP practice to operate the surgery.
- 10.34 The Panel received a briefing on the Health and Social Care Bill. A group of Members met with the Executive Director of Social Care to discuss the council's progress in preparing for the proposals within the Health and Social Care Bill and to respond to the consultation 'Local Democratic Legitimacy in Health'.