

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday 21 July 2009 at
6.00pm

Panel Members Present Councillor Longhi (Chair)
Councillor Nazir (Vice- Chair)
Councillor Cook
Councillor Harris
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Turner
Councillor Yasin
Councillor Young

Portfolio Holders Present Cllr C Towe- Finance and Personnel

Officers Present Rory Borealis- Executive Director (Resources)
James Walsh- Assistant Director (Finance)
Tim Ferguson- Head of Partnership and Performance, Walsall
Partnership
Michael Tomlinson- Corporate Financial Systems and Treasury
Manager
Colin Teasdale- Performance and Scrutiny Officer

Others Present Gary Stevens, CAA Lead for Walsall, Audit Commission

09/09 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor Coughlan and Councillor Arif

10/09 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of this meeting.

11/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

12/09 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2009, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

13/09 FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

That the Forward Plan as of 6 July 2009 be noted.

14/09 LOCALITY SELF EVALUATION

Tim Ferguson presented a summary of the Locality Self Evaluation (annexed) which had been compiled by the Walsall Partnership as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment process. He explained that the self evaluation was not a requirement but an opportunity to set out how the area thinks it is doing.

Members raised concerns about the language used by public sector organisations and inspectorates and stated that they felt there was a need for information to be presented in clear and simple terms which they could understand and more importantly that the public could.

The Chair commented that whilst he thought this was an important point, the intention of CAA as he understood it was to publish judgments in such a way as to make them accessible and easy to understand. He commented on the old CPA regime and how the annual audit letter within this was very much aimed at Officers and the Audit Commission themselves, whereas the CAA would produce a document aimed at explaining to the public how an area was performing.

In response to a Member query about the perceived decline in district centres, Tim Ferguson informed members that more analytical work was being undertaken to develop an understanding of the underlying reasons for this.

Members also raised a query regarding how people were selected to take part in the Place Survey. Tim Ferguson informed the Panel that whilst Walsall administered the survey for the local area it was a national survey with strict parameters set for the random selection of participants.

Members made a number of comments on the financial challenges that were facing the public sector nationally and were interested in particular about what approach was being taken shared services as a way of coping with tightening resources.

Rory Borealis informed the panel that discussions around shared services had been a prominent feature of the recent Walsall Partnership Annual Event and that the Council's Executive management team had met with the executive management team of the PCT to discuss shared resources around property, ICT and Human Resources.

In response to a member query, Rory Borealis confirmed that whilst the majority of opportunities for shared services were with our partners within the borough, they were not limiting themselves to just that but were also looking across the region and sub-region and in some circumstances even wider. The Chair commented that the value for money review this panel had undertaken on the payroll services provided a good example of this.

15/09 COMPREHENSIVE AREA ASSESSMENT (CAA)

Gary Stevens, the CAA lead for the Walsall area, was introduced to the panel, and delivered a presentation (annexed) outlining what CAA was and how it was supposed to work. He also outlined some of his initial findings that had been presented to the partnership board and explained that it was encouraging to see so much synergy between their findings and those highlighted in the Locality Self Evaluation from the previous item, as both activities had been undertaken independently.

In response from a member query, Gary confirmed that whilst the assessment would be based on local priorities there would also be a judgement on whether those priorities reflected local need so there would be a mechanism for identifying if they believed the priorities were the wrong ones. However he also stated that based on his initial work he did not believe that this would be the case as priorities did appear to be well aligned.

Members queried whether the organisation assessment element would take into account Walsall Housing Group (WHG) as the Registered Social Landlord (RSL.) It was confirmed that WHG would not form a part of the organisation assessment of the council but that RSLs were inspected by the audit commission and that it would also be picked up as part of the area assessment.

Linking to a point raised from the previous item, Members queried what was being done to make sure that reporting was delivered in plain language and accessible to the public. Gary Stevens clarified that the primary route would be through the website which had received positive feedback from an IPSOS MORI poll but in response to member concerns about those who did not have access to, or did not wish to use, computer technology reassured them that they were not ignoring other mechanisms.

Members raised a number of concerns about the economic downturn and the impact that this would have on the council's ability to deliver on its priorities. Gary Stevens acknowledged that this was a nationally accepted problem and assessments would take place within the context of this

downturn. However he explained that it was important that Council's and partners were seen to be doing everything they could to make the best use of limited resources.

Members also sought Gary's views on partnership working with scrutiny. They felt that currently there was a good relationship with partners responding to scrutiny requests for information but that this tended to be on a reactive basis. The Chair asked if Gary felt there was a role for a more proactive approach in partners coming to scrutiny with issues themselves. Gary agreed that there was this need at both a strategic and neighbourhood level but that there was also a challenge for him to keep involved as well. When asked how he felt partners were engaging with one another more generally, Gary stated that this was very much what he was trying to establish at the moment, he felt that they had built up a very good understanding of how individual organisations were performing but not yet how they were coming together.

Members also asked at what stage they would be able to see reports from other local authority areas so that they could pick up and learn from good practice elsewhere. Gary stated that they would not be able to see individual reports until they were all published in December, to allow places the change to respond. However he also said that if there were areas where Walsall needed support he would be using his national network of contacts to identify areas of good practice.

The Chair thanked Gary and Tim for their time.

16/09 FINANCIAL MONITORING

Michael Tomlinson introduced the report outlining the outturn financial position for corporate services for the 2008/09 year which highlighted an improvement on the underspend position reported to the Panel at Quarter 3.

It was reported that one of the significant reasons for this improvement was an increase in the throughput of the Benefits team gaining additional subsidy claims and increased recovery of overpayments. The Panel commented that the Benefits team should be applauded for this improvement position.

Members queried plans for the budget setting process for the 2010/11 year and at what stage they would be able to get involved as a scrutiny panel. James Walsh explained that the timetable was currently being drafted but that they were looking to bring proposals to scrutiny in November. He also added that budget setting was an ongoing process and the panels other work in identifying priorities and carrying out service reviews would also input into the process. The Portfolio Holder for Finance

and Personnel stated that he was committed to engaging scrutiny in a much more proactive way, including regular attendance at scrutiny meetings.

One Member raised a query relating to a news story in a local newspaper about tax collection rates. James Walsh stated that, whilst no large business ever collected 100% of its debt and that the economic situation was impacting on peoples' ability to pay but Walsall did have very favourable collection rates compared to other local authorities. In response to a query about direct debit payments, James Walsh stated that he did not think it would be possible to make this payment method compulsory and that they were not legally able to provide incentives for direct debits by offering discounts. In response to a member query about the cost to the individual of passing debt collection onto bailiffs, it was agreed that officers would feedback directly to the member.

Resolved

That the financial monitoring report for 2008/09 be noted.

17/09 VALUE FOR MONEY REVIEWS

The Chair informed Panel members that this item was to identify areas for a value for money review and whilst Officers had suggested the Safety, Health and Wellbeing service, he was keen to see more options and requested that members go away and think about potential areas and feedback to the next Panel meeting.

Resolved

That Value for Money reviews is added to the agenda for the next meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel and Members bring ot that meeting suggested areas for review.

18/09 WELFARE ADVICE WORKING GROUP

The Chair informed the Panel that they were asked to agree the membership and remit of the welfare advice working group (annexed) and asked for any comments from Members.

Resolved

That the initiation document for Welfare Advice Working Group be approved as set out.

19/09 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair confirmed the date of the next meeting was 15 September 2009

The meeting terminated at 7.45pm

Signed (Chair):

Date: