

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Monday, 1 August, 2011 at 6.00 p.m. in a Conference Room at the Council House, Walsall

Panel Members Present

Councillor S. Coughlan (Chair)
Councillor M. Flower (Vice-Chair)
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor M. Longhi
Councillor J. Murray
Councillor M. Nazir
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor D. Shires

Portfolio holders present

Councillor M. Arif - Business Support Services
Councillor C. Towe - Finance and personnel

Officers Present

Rory Borealis -	Executive Director (Resources)
Paul Milmore –	Head of Business Solutions
Lynn Hall -	Head of Benefits
Karl Dipple -	Acting Head of Revenues
Ian Jones -	Welfare Rights Manager
Neil Picken -	Senior Constitutional Services Officer

69/11 APOLOGY

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor K. Hussain.

70/11 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

71/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

72/11 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 June, 2011, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

73/11 WORKING SMARTER

Prior to consideration of this item the Chair reported that the Resource Allocation 2012/13 item on the agenda would be included as part of this item.

Members received a presentation (annexed) which set out the purpose and background to the working smarter programme along with its basic principles and future phases.

During the presentation, Members were advised that the working smarter programme had contributed £8 million, almost half, of the 2011/12 revenue budget proposals. Other notable successes included the approval by Council of the Council operating system and the commencement of the smarter workplaces programme. The latter sought to reduce the number of buildings from 25 to 2, the Council House and the Civic Centre. It was reported that area plans were in place with a high number of initiatives and actions included within future work streams.

It was emphasised that the working smarter programme was about improving the delivery and effectiveness of services rather than just reducing costs.

In response to the presentation, Members questioned whether buildings such as the new depot at Apex Road, Leisure and Youth Centres and Libraries were included. Officers advised that this was not the case as the programme focused on back office functions and office based staff. In total, members were advised that the Council owned circa 900 sites. There were 25 sites included within the smarter workplace programme and it was this number which would be reduced to two.

Members queried the submission that the cost of smarter workplaces would be balanced by capital receipts from the sale of buildings no longer required as the capital receipt may fluctuate. Officers advised that valuation experts had been appointed to address this matter and assured Members that the cost of the programme had been agreed and was below the expected capital receipts. It was further stated that the expenditure saved from leases would be integrated into central funds. Members considered that given the scale of smarter workplaces, that an item be included on the next agenda.

The Executive Director (Resources) then updated the Panel on resource allocation. The Panel were advised that 60% of the £19.2 million savings for 2011-12 had already been delivered. The strategy was to become 'best in class' in terms of cost efficiency by 2014/15. The draft budget would possibly be available in September, 2011 which would provide Scrutiny more time to scrutinise its contents than in previous years. Discussion ensued as to how the Council intended to monitor the new working smarter aims such as 'My Council helps when I need it'. It was explained that the traditional way of asking customers for feedback was not particularly effective. The new way of working assesses what happens at the point of interaction between the customer and staff.

Members questioned what measures were being put in place to address poor performance by managers as they would be under pressure to perform during a period of change. The Executive Director (Resources) stated that the performance management process was being streamlined. This was to align it to the Council's objectives and would ensure that staff would be held accountable to show the value that they were providing to the customer.

Having considered the presentation it was,

Resolved

- (1) That smarter workplaces be added to the work programme for consideration at the meeting scheduled to take place on 13 September, 2011;
- (2) That the presentation be noted.

74/11 BENEFITS SERVICE

Members considered a report and received a presentation (annexed) which set out the impact and response of the Benefits Service to the recession since April, 2008. Officers advised that despite the service being reduced productivity had improved. Key issues highlighted during the presentation included:-

- The performance during the recession;
- Improved service delivery under difficult conditions;
- Collaborative working;
- Impact on the customer;
- Reducing costs;
- Future initiatives;
- Welfare Reform Bill.

Members considered the presentation and noted that the Benefits Service had been transformed. The service was congratulated on improving services with reduced resources whilst managing an increased demand. It was acknowledged that improved methods of working and a better use of information technology were key to the success.

Discussion followed on the issue of direct payments. Concern was raised that people may not choose to use the money to pay rent which could cause difficulties for private landlords. Officers advised that a range of support was provided which included the Authority paying the landlord directly once a tenant was 8 weeks in arrears. Officers confirmed that there were risks associated with wholesale direct payments. Members raised concern that such difficulties could result in a higher number of landlords choosing to have private tenants thus putting pressure on the service.

Members then focussed their attention on the budget spend of the Benefit Service. The budget had been reduced from £920,051 in 2008/09 to £405,270 in 2010/11. It was noted that this reduction had not impacted on delivery of services. Officers reiterated that this was because of improved use of information technology and hard work and commitment of staff within the service. Members questioned whether or not the housing benefit budget was under pressure. Officers acknowledged that it was at risk but assured the Panel that the situation would become more apparent as the year progressed and that action would be taken if and when required.

Resolved

That the report and presentation be noted.

75/11 WELFARE RIGHTS SERVICE

The Panel received a detailed presentation on the Welfare Rights Service. The presentation set out:-

- The history of the benefits service;
- Performance of the service;
- The level of unclaimed benefits;
- Complimentary services provided by the Welfare Rights Service;
- Work streams;
- Future developments.

Members considered the presentation. It was mentioned that there were a number of Charities administered by the Council which offered support to those in need of assistance. It was suggested that the form for those Charities could be amended to include a tick box to which applicants could indicate whether they wished the Welfare Rights Service to contact them to establish whether further help could be afforded to them. The Senior Constitutional Services Officer, who managed the Charities, agreed to integrate this suggestion onto the forms.

Resolved

- (1) That the presentation be noted;
- (2) That the Senior Constitutional Services Officer amend the Charity forms to include a tick box to enable applicants to request further contact from the Welfare Rights Service if they so wished.

76/11 WORK PROGRAMME 2011/12 AND FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

- (1) That smarter workplaces be added to the Work Programme for consideration at the meeting to be held on 13 September, 2011;
- (2) That the work programme and forward plan be noted.

77/11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was noted as 13 September, 2011.

The meeting terminated at 7.45 p.m.

Signed:

Date: