

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Tuesday, 26 February, 2013 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 J. Rochelle
Councillor D. Shires
Councillor R. Worrall

Portfolio holders present

Councillor Mohammed Arif - Business Support Services

Officers Present

Rory Borealis, Executive Director, Resources
Paul Gordon, Head of Business Change
John Leach, Head of Communities and Partnerships
John Garner, Head of Democratic Services
Lynn Hall, Head of Benefits
Peter Allsop, Electoral Services Manager
Mohammed Irfan, Senior Accountant
Kevin Williams, Print and Design Manager
Craig Goodall, Committee Business and Governance Manager

187/13 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor D. Turner.

188/13 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

189/13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

190/13 MINUTES

The Panel agreed to amend the draft minutes concerning Item 182/13 "Walsall Crisis Support Scheme". Immediately after the "**Corruption/Fraud**" heading it was agreed to replace the first two sentences with the following text:

"Members queried whether the use of telephones could lead to corruption.

The view was expressed that highly centralised systems could lead to errors that would be difficult to identify."

Resolved

That:

- (1) the minutes of the meeting held on 3 January, 2013, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record;

and;
- (2) Members be provided with a briefing note explaining how the £9 per customer transaction charge for the First Stop Shop services is derived.

191/13 WALSALL SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY - THE WALSALL PLAN

The Panel reviewed a draft revision of the Walsall Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS).

The Head of Communities and Partnerships introduced the revised SCS. He explained the partnership approach taken in Walsall, the revisions in the new SCS and an outline of the reasons for these changes. A revised passage regarding the “Children’s” element of the SCS was tabled (annexed).

In response to a question, it was explained that the SCS was a statutory document that the Council was required to produce detailing its high level strategic outcomes. The SCS was drafted with local partners who would assist in delivering the strategy’s vision. The SCS would then feed into the Council’s and partners Corporate Plans. Delivery plans for each element of the SCS were currently being drafted.

The Panel were keen to ensure that the voluntary and community sector (VCS) was supported and asked how the SCS contributed to this direction? The Head of Communities and Partnerships reported that work was taking place with the local VCS to increase capacity. This included the appointment of a new Chief Executive to Walsall Voluntary Action and the appointment of a Grants Officer to attract more funding for the VCS in the Borough.

Members suggested that the ambition for the economy concerning support for young people in preparing for and finding work be strengthened and become more ambitious.

A Member made a number of suggestions for improved rail capacity in the Borough. The Head of Communities and Partnerships noted the suggestions and agreed to discuss and cross reference them with the Strategic Regeneration Team.

The following were the principle points from the ensuing discussion:

- The SCS should have an increased emphasis on the environment;
- The need for high and low skilled jobs was emphasised;
- The most recent data for the percentage of families in Walsall whose income fell below 60% of the median national income be included in the strategy;
- The wording concerning increased immigration be amended;
- A breakdown of the type of new home built in the Borough was requested;

- Concerns were expressed that Walsall had double the proportion of 18 - 24 year olds who were unable to find work. Members requested the Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel examine this issue further;
- Members were re-assured that problems with alcohol use would be focussed on problem areas;
- The importance of ensuring local communities were being engaged within the decision making process was discussed by Members. It was noted that proposals to improve community engagement with local residents and Area Community meetings were currently being developed.

Resolved

That:

- (1) the sustainable community strategy place a greater emphasis on the environment;
- (2) the Head of Communities and Partnerships review the rail aspirations contained in the sustainable community strategy with the Strategic Regeneration Team;
- (3) the Chair write to the Chair of the Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel suggesting the Panel consider issues relating to the high number of 18 - 24 year olds in the Borough who are unable to find a job;
- (4) the following passages be revised or reviewed:
 - (a) the overall vision should include the word “work” in the sustainable community strategy foreword;
 - (b) the priority concerning preparing young people for work be strengthened to become more ambitious;
 - (c) wording concerning a “sudden influx of Eastern European residents” be revised;
 - (d) the most recent data for the percentage of families in Walsall whose income fell below 60% of the median national income be included in the strategy;

and;
- (5) Members be provided with a breakdown of the type and tenure of new homes built in the Borough between 2008/09 and 2012/13 (last quarter estimate).

192 /13 QUARTER 3 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

Members were informed of the predicted revenue and capital outturn position for 2012/13 for services within the remit of the Panel.

The Executive Director (Resources) reported that for services under the remit of the Panel a revenue underspend of £691,000 was predicted. The capital budget was forecast to show an underspend of £527,000.

Following a question from a Member of the Panel, the Executive Director (Resources) explained that agency staff were required in the Benefits Service to maintain the service whilst investment and new improved ways of working were introduced and embedded. As improvements from the new ways of working were realised, overall costs and the need for agency staff would decline. For example, home working in the Benefits service had realised productivity benefits of 17% to 19% through larger work volumes and reduced sickness rates.

The Senior Accountant reported that the projected overspend of £119,000 in the First Stop Shop was attributable to the use of agency staff (£107,000) and the loss of blue badge income (£12,000). Changes by the Government to blue badge entitlement had seen the number of blue badges issued decline.

The current underspend in the "Finance Direct" budget was likely to be accounted for by year end. The current underspend in the "Working Smarter" budget was to be requested for carry forward to 2013/14.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director (Resources) for being open regarding the achievements and challenges of the working smarter programme. He explained that whilst it was important to challenge the change activity taking place he felt that Members from all groups were supportive of the programmes objectives of focussing on the customer and delivering improved efficiency.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

193/13 OPERATION OF THE POST ROOM

Members considered the report detailing information on the operation of the post room.

The Head of Business Change highlighted the range of data concerning the operation of the post room. This included post volumes, staff numbers, technology costs and future plans.

In response to a question, Members were informed that the Print and Design Unit had a machine that was able to automatically fill and seal envelopes.

Resolved

That Members be provided with a briefing note on postal volumes from previous years to enable them to identify trends.

194/13 ELECTORAL SERVICES

The Panel was updated on the current and future work of the Electoral Services (ES) Team.

The Electoral Services Manager highlighted the challenges in adopting Individual Electoral Registration (IER). He explained the process which was required to be followed, including the large volume of data sharing that would take place with the Department for Work and Pensions in order to verify individuals. The purpose of IER was to assist with reducing electoral fraud. The transfer process had a substantial information gathering and follow up process to update the new register built in. This would assist in identifying the maximum number of voters possible. The Council could issue fixed penalty notices to those who refused to register.

The Panel was re-assured by the Executive Director (Resources) that ES would be adequately resourced to see through the changes.

Members discussed the increased use of portakabins. The Electoral Services Manager explained that use had increased due to the unavailability of previously used venues. Alternatives to portakabins were always being sought.

An automated phone system was available that informed residents if their postal votes had been received.

Members commended the work of the ES and thanked the Electoral Services Manager for his role in delivering this important service.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

195/13 UPDATE ON THE WALSHALL CRISIS SUPPORT SCHEME

The Panel were informed of progress since the last meeting with the Walsall Crisis Support Scheme (WCSS).

The Head of Benefits tabled a briefing note (annexed) highlighting changes to the scheme following the Cabinet meeting on 23 January, 2013, product demonstrations taking place for a WCSS IT system, design of WCSS service delivery, risks and next steps.

Following a question, the Head of Benefits explained vouchers for goods were still an option for customers but other methods of support would be available. The Chair was pleased that alternative methods were available as he considered voucher systems humiliating for customers.

A Member suggested that electrical items purchased on behalf of customers should be as energy efficient as possible to avoid placing customers in fuel poverty by supplying energy hungry goods. He also added that if a customer required an item to cook food on, it would be preferential for them to be provided with a cooker rather than a

microwave as it enabled them to cook healthy meals rather than limit them to processed ones.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

196/13 FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

That the Forward Plan be noted.

197/13 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the time and date of the next meeting was 6.00 p.m. on 9 April, 2013.

The meeting closed at 7.47 p.m.

Signed:

Date: