

CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday, 27 October, 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 K. Hussain
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor M. Longhi
Councillor J. Rochelle
Councillor D. Shires

Portfolio holders present

Councillor Mike Bird - Leader
Councillor Mohammed Arif - Business Support Services
Councillor Chris Towe - Finance and personnel

Officers Present

Rory Borealis - Executive Director (Resources)
Steph Simcox - Service Accounting & Financial Training Manager
Darren Caveney – Head of Marketing and Communications
Kevin Dwyer – Senior Strategic Web Development Officer
Sharon Tait - Head of Revenues
Neil Picken - Senior Constitutional Services Officer

88/11 APOLOGY

An apology for non-attendance was received on behalf of Councillor J. Murray.

89/11 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

90/11 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

91/11 MINUTES

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 September, 2011, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

92/11 FINANCIAL PLAN 2012/13 TO 2014/15: DRAFT REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR CONSULTATION

Members received a report outlining the portfolio plans for future service delivery, along with the approach being taken to delivering service improvements and cost efficiency over the next three years (2012/13 to 2014/15).

Members were further advised that the draft budget proposals were being considered by all Scrutiny and Performance Panels prior to further submission to Cabinet. The final budget, including any change arising from these consultation arrangements, and final allocation of formal grants would be presented to Cabinet on 8 February, 2012 for recommendation to Council and then considered by Council on 23 February, 2012.

Members considered the report and sought clarity on a number of issues as follows:-

- Elections - a question was raised in relation to the savings achieved/income generated from selling surplus equipment, reviewing polling districts, reducing the number of polling stations and ceasing to send business reply envelopes with postal vote applications, with precise figures and yearly breakdowns requested;
- New anti-social behaviour IT system - a question was raised in relation to the installation of new anti-social behaviour IT system, as reported within the budget report, page 15 bullet point 4;
- Enforcement - a question was raised in relation to developing alternative approaches to expedite enforcement processes, including increased joined up and partnership working (joint enforcement/legal actions with partners for common problems) and for a more robust enforcement action, including the seizure of disturbing noise equipment;
- Brunel system thinking – Clarity was sought on Brunel system thinking.

Members were advised that a briefing note would be circulated providing answers to the matters raised. There being no further questions it was:-

Resolved

- 1) That the budget report be noted;
- 2) That a briefing note be circulated to Members of the Panel in relation to the questions raised in relation to savings made within the Elections Service, the new Anti Social Behaviour IT System, developing alternative approaches to the enforcement and clarity on Brunel Systems Thinking.

93/11 FINANCE DIRECT

Members received a presentation in relation to Finance Direct. A complex programme consisting of three projects of twelve workstreams that sought to bring the Council's financial systems into the 21st century.

Key messages were delivered during the presentation including the fact that P Cards had reduced transaction costs from £5.60 to 25p, predicted delivery costs for delivering the project in house was £2.5m (a saving of £1.6m on the original cost projection) and that Walsall continued to grow their own talent with a number of officers having benefited from development opportunities.

Following the presentation, Members asked a number of questions in relation to the specific IT requirements of the system in place. It was reported that £2.5m Oracle licensing costs had been avoided by simply adopting a new approach regarding the storage of extracts of financial data for analysis purposes.

Having considered the presentation it was:-

Resolved

That the presentation be noted.

94/11 UPDATE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEB DEVELOPMENTS

Members received a report updating the Panel of progress made by the Communications team in the past twelve months.

The activity and developments across both social media and the council web site were reported. In relation to Social Media, attention was drawn to:-

- The success of Walsall's **Twitter** feed which had attracted **3,927** followers, making Walsall one of the **top 10** most followed local authorities with almost **10,000** 'tweets' sent out since the feed was launched;
- Joint working between the communications team and regeneration's town centre team to transform the empty Tesco shop window into a showcase of town centre information and images from the Walsall Flickr group who are a group of more than 130 amateur photographers who live in and around Walsall;
- The use of Twitter to keep residents informed when gritters are despatched in icy conditions helping to reduce avoidable contact with officers and calls centres at **£zero** additional cost. Highlighted by Local Government Improvement and Development as well as Microsoft and SOGITM;
- The establishment of strong links with the borough's Flickr group facilitating photographic events and using images with permission on the council website – this has been highlighted as best practice by blogs around US government as well as by UK bloggers and Local Government Improvement and Development (formerly IDeA).

With regard future developments, the Panel were advised that a customer survey could be undertaken to ensure that information is received the way in which they want it.

Other initiatives included:-

- Opening up social media to all staff and elected members (and within current web usage protocols)
- Organising social media surgeries for elected members.
- Expanding training for officers.
- Creating support network for staff using social media.
- Installing Wifi in the council chamber
- Live streaming of council meetings
- Expand meeting tweeting from Full Council to cabinet and expand scrutiny social media as a tool of community engagement (e.g. Icelandic constitution)

- Working with other West Midlands councils to look at more regional opportunities for joint working across social media (e.g. a real time gritting map of the region)

Members were assured that whilst the media landscape had changed with the use of social media being integral to the future of communicating with our customers, traditional methods were also still being used to ensure as wide an audience was reached as is possible.

It was suggested that a further update could be brought to the Panel in 6 months.

In relation to the Website, Members were advised of the following highlights:-

- The launch of the new web site homepage in August 2011 (delivered in-house, at £0 spend)
- Refreshed What's on Walsall is now live. Training had been delivered and partners/services were contributing to the service which promotes a wide range of events and activities across Walsall to residents

Members were also advised that the potential to sell advertising space on the website was being explored with legal services and local businesses. If this was not a viable option the space could be used to promote internal services. An interactive calendar and breaking news area were also planned for implementation.

Future activity for the website included:-

- Potential options appraisal of new content management system (both open source/free and paid for option);
- Review of intranet and development of improved staff portal (in order to access information and forms 'right, fast and simple')

Discussion followed on the work of the Communications Team and praise was afforded by several Members for the work that had been undertaken to date. It was noted that customers were now able to pay for Council services online which brought the Council into the 21st century. The communications team were further congratulated for delivering the improvements at zero cost to the Council.

There then followed a number of questions by Members in relation to the potential for increased use of smart phones as oppose to Blackberries, the effectiveness of the open data site and whether the open source option was truly free. In response, it was reported that, in relation to smart phones, a few officers were undertaking a trial using smart phones as oppose to Blackberries. Further roll out would be subject to the Authority being fully confident that the transfer of data and emails would be secure. In relation to the open source site, Officers explained that its popularity had dipped since it was implemented fifteen months ago. It was suggested that this could be as a result of the way the data was interpreted and visualised on screen. It was suggested that Print and Design could be approached to make the data more visually appealing. In respect of the open source element, it was reported that investigations were being undertaken to ensure that the best possible decision was arrived at. Authorities such as Bristol were already operating using open source and so they would be approached for further discussion.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

95/11 WORKING SMARTER

Members received an update on the progress made with Working Smarter. Members were advised that the transition would be an organic process whereby the new system would work alongside the existing system before gradually replacing it. This method ensured a smoother transition and better service to customers.

It was asked when referring to 'Walsall Public Sector' how external partners were responding. Members were advised that the key partners within the borough management group were very positive. The greatest issue was that of data protection which was key to ensuring effective service delivery.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

96/11 WORK PROGRAMME 2011/12 AND FORWARD PLAN

Resolved

That the work programme and forward plan be noted.

97/11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Members were advised that two meetings were scheduled to be held on 5th and 9th December, 2011. The Chair suggested that business for these meetings could be transacted at one, rather than two meetings.

Further to ensuing discussion, it was

Resolved

That the meeting on 5 December be cancelled and that all business due to be transacted at that meeting be considered on 9 December.

The meeting terminated at 7.30 p.m.

Signed:

Date:

