

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL** held at
the Council House, Walsall on
22 June 2006 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Griffiths (Chair)
Councillor Sarohi (Vice Chair)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Phillips
Councillor D. Shires
Councillor Towe
Councillor Turner

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Homer (Assistant Director - Strategic Transformation)
Vicky Crowshaw (Head of Corporate & Strategic Finance)
Rob Flinter (Head of Corporate Performance Management)
Helen Dudson (Corporate Performance and Scrutiny Manager)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Officer)

1/06. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for this meeting.

2/06. SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for this meeting.

3/06. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of the political groups represented on the panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

4/06. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 April 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(Annexed)

Councillor Griffiths welcomed members to the first meeting of the new municipal year. He expressed thanks to Councillor Sanders for his work during the last year and then outlined his approach to the year ahead. He stated that he wished the panel to be pro-active in its approach, in order to better influence decisions. He wanted the panel to be clear and confident about its aims and he emphasised the need for a focused, member-led work programme; less is better.

5/06. KEY DISCUSSION ITEMS

Rob Flinter, Vicky Crowshaw, and Sarah Homer gave a presentation outlining the services / functions within remit of the panel and a brief overview of the corporate services directorate.

(annexed)

During the presentation, Councillor Bird asked for clarification on the line management structure for legal and internal audit. He stated that he was unhappy with the relationship and felt that it was an unhealthy situation for internal audit to report to the head of finance as the majority of issues flagged by internal audit were of a financial nature.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that it was not unusual, within councils, for internal audit to report to the head of finance. Indeed the head of finance has a statutory duty to ensure a robust internal audit function.

Councillor Turner agreed and stated that it had been his experience, working within a local authority setting, that it was not an usual arrangement.

Councillor Bird replied that individuals had stated that they felt their complaints had not always been taken seriously due to the nature of the reporting structure.

Councillor Phillips stated that it was a matter of perception. Things had to be seen to be done correctly.

Councillor Bird also addressed the issue of computing facilities for members. He felt that a significant number of members rarely used their computers and issuing them with blackberries might improve that communication so that they could then communicate more efficiently whilst in the wards.

Councillor Towe agreed that it would be good to be able to communicate straight from the ward and this would have a positive effect on customer experience.

Sarah Homer agreed that this would be a good idea but raised a health and safety issue around the continued use of small screens. Some members may not find these screens easy to use on a regular basis. A balanced approach would be needed.

Councillor Phillips agreed with issues raised by councillors Bird and Towe, but stated that he did use his laptop for his ward surgeries. He had found the biggest

obstacle that of the connection speed to the server, over the dial-up connection, and suggested that communications would be improved by increasing this speed; possibly by broadband. He also agreed with Sarah Homer by stating that a variety of options needed to be available.

Sarah Homer stated that she was willing to take these issues on board and would feed them into the review of provision.

Councillor Bird then asked if the council was making the best use of office space, as he was aware that leases were very expensive in places such as Tameway Tower.

Sarah Homer replied that a review was in progress, looking at the council's use of office space as part of the corporate property strategy, and that exit strategies for expensive lease areas were being developed.

Councillor Phillips suggested that more effective e-communications should be facilitating the regeneration of the outlying district centres, as council offices could be decentralised.

Councillor Griffiths was under the impression that this was already happening.

Sarah Homer replied that the corporate property strategy was feeding into district regeneration and that this would be facilitated by better e-communication.

Rob Flinter then presented some possible carry over and key work themes the panel might wish to address in its work programme for the year.

Councillor Towe hoped that scrutiny would have more influence on the budget this year.

Councillor Turner felt that many recommendations had been made and dropped by cabinet without any communication with scrutiny. He felt that if cabinet had better communicated their decisions to scrutiny, there would have been less disappointment at the outcome.

Councillor Bird stated that meaningful budget consultation needed a steer from cabinet as to the projected level of council tax for the year under consultation.

Councillor Towe stated that the council should be in a better position this year than last, as the settlement was unlikely to alter significantly.

Councillor Griffiths then referred the panel to page 5 of the attached item 6b, where possible carry over and key work themes were outlined.

(annexed)

Councillor Griffiths referred to the budget consultation that the panel had already touched on, and suggested that the panel might benefit from some training on the budget process. He felt that some members had struggled last year and he

was keen that everyone should have a meaningful input. He also suggested that the panel might start to look at the budget process for the following year to help set the budget priorities.

Councillor Bird stated that the council ran a £500million budget and he re-iterated that there needed to be some steer over that anticipated level of council tax.

Vicky Crowshaw stated that the council operated a 5-year rolling financial plan. The draft settlement in respect of 2007/8 was known and therefore the current forecast for 2007/8, excluding new investment and efficiency decisions was available. She further stated that it was possible for a series of scenarios to be developed around differing budget priorities and that it was not necessary for scrutiny to wait for cabinet's first report. It would be, therefore, possible for scrutiny look at the budget much earlier in the cycle.

Councillor Towe welcomed this as he had asked for something similar last year.

Vicky Crowshaw stated that she had organised a quarterly training programme around the budget setting process and she would be happy to run some bespoke training for the panel.

Councillor Bird asked that the details of the courses be circulated in advance, so that members could evaluate if they need to attend.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that she would be happy to do so and could provide a package, including copies of the overheads, for the members in advance of the meeting.

Rob Flinter suggested that members could take part in a workshop as part of a scheduled panel meeting, as he was aware that members were subject to considerable time constraints.

Councillor Bird then stated that he was concerned as to where monies for tribunals would be coming from and he asked what contingencies were being built in.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that she was unable to comment on specific cases, however, in general, the budget is subject to a financial risk assessment, taking into account service and other risks, and that a level of reserves is held to account for unexpected expenditure. Further, a small central contingency is set aside. The level of reserves was in the order of 1% of the revenue budget.

Councillor Bird replied that it was important to address, through the contingencies, items that might arise.

Councillor Griffiths stated that issues, such as the ones currently in process, should not arise again.

Councillor Turner stated that, in the present compensation culture, the council would need to look to refreshing the reserves annually.

Sarah Homer stated that human resources monitored the progress of upcoming cases and undertook risk assessments around likely outcomes.

Councillor Bird suggested that there might be a piece of work around looking at out-sourcing human resource complaints.

Councillor Griffiths then asked members to consider the issue of revenues and benefits.

Councillor Bird stated that scrutiny needed to consider the issue before it goes to cabinet.

Sarah Homer replied that the issue was not yet on the forward plan and she would be happy to bring it before the panel.

Councillor Bird stated that as it was an ongoing review and the service had previously under performed, he was keen to see this.

Councillor Sarohi stated that there was a need to follow up on previous recommendations.

Councillor Phillips stated that, although he may have to declare an interest due to his professional role in a neighbouring council, he thought the issue was important and should be looked at by the panel.

Councillor Griffiths then asked members to consider the continuation of the work undertaken on the value for money (vfm) framework. The framework pro-forma was tabled for member's consideration.

(annexed)

Councillor Griffiths suggested piloting the framework to other panels and to use it within a specific service.

Helen Dudson gave an overview of the background behind the development of the framework and asked the panel which service they might wish to use for the pilot and how they wished to consult with other panels.

Councillor Phillips stated that he would like to see more around the sections on employee satisfaction and a section for employee ideas as these were often invaluable.

Rob Flinter suggested that the framework would be best piloted in the corporate services directorate, alongside a service already undergoing a review. In response to a comment from Councillor Bird, he stated that revenues and benefits could be a possible candidate.

There was general agreement that the framework would be added to the work programme for the year.

Councillor Griffiths then asked members to consider the item on BV12, the performance indicator around sickness absence.

Councillor Towe stated that a lot of work had been done last year, by community organisation, leisure and culture scrutiny and performance panel, and that it might not be the best use of the panel's time to revisit the issue.

Councillor Griffiths commented that the libraries issue should fall to neighbourhoods scrutiny and performance panel as it sat more comfortably within its remit. He then asked members to consider the corporate assessment framework.

Rob Flinter stated that he was willing to provide members with more information on the subject as he realised that it was a complex issue.

Councillor Bird stated that the self-assessment report ought to come to scrutiny.

Rob Flinter replied that the self-assessment report would not be finalised until just before the inspection, which was planned for the 2007/8 financial year and that the council would not be notified of the date of the assessment until November 2006. He further stated that a report had been submitted to EMT and each assessment theme had been allocated an executive director as lead officer. The next stage was to identify a lead officer for each key line of enquiry, to pull evidence together and to identify gaps, which would form the basis on an action plan that will be considered by EMT in September before being submitted to cabinet for approval.

Councillor Phillips stated that self-assessment should be a continual process to ensure that the council is delivering on its vision and associated priorities. There was a need to concentrate on how the council was performing now to progress continuing self-assessment.

Rob Flinter replied that this was a new assessment process and although many of the requirements were in place the council do not package things in the same way as they are defined in the key lines of enquiry. Pulling together evidence and addressing any gaps will continue up to the date required to submit the self-assessment, which is usually about a month before the assessment team arrive on sight.

Councillor Griffiths then asked members to consider the role of members within performance management.

Councillor Phillips stated that performance management was important and that there was a need to look at the target setting process for senior staff and what assessment criteria were used.

Councillor Bird asked that a paper be produced on how performance assessment, in regards to performance related pay, was conducted and by whom.

Rob Flinter replied that he was not sure whether this sat within the remit of the panel but that he would look into the issue and stated that the intention of this work was to look at the roles of Council, cabinet, scrutiny, audit committee, officers etc in more detail

Councillor Griffiths then asked members to consider the issue of project management. He was aware that a great deal of work had been undertaken in this area and that a new team had been formed to oversee the processes.

Councillor Bird highlighted the Fibbersley Park School project, that had been poorly managed, and that it was important for the panel to look at this issue.

Rob Flinter provided an explanation regarding the establishment of a project office as part of the corporate performance management team. The team oversaw the monthly production of a project register covering nearly 300 projects, the development of the project management methodology, which was approved by EMT during April 2006, and running project management training courses.

Councillor Griffiths then asked the members if there were any other issues.

Councillor Turner replied that the panel might need to receive updates on the local area agreement.

Councillor Griffiths thanked the members and summarised that the panel had identified five main items of business for the year. These would be:

- Budget consultation
- The value for money framework
- The revenues and benefits service review
- The role of members in performance management
- Project management

Rob Flinter then asked the panel if they would like to form any working groups in order to progress the work.

Following discussions, the panel agreed its priorities and, as a result, they formed two working groups; the first to look at revenues & benefits and the second to look at the role of members in performance management. It was agreed that work on these items would begin before the next full meeting of the panel, 14 September 2006.

Membership of the work groups was agreed as:

Revenues and benefits working group;

- Councillor Towe (lead member)
- Councillor Phillips
- Councillor Bird

- Councillor Sarohi
- Councillor Griffiths
- Councillor D. Shires

Performance management working group;

- Councillor Bird (lead member)
- Councillor Towe
- Councillor Turner
- Councillor Rochelle
- Councillor Young

6/06 PERFORMANCE AND MONITORING ITEMS

Councillor Griffiths asked that panel if they had any questions about the reports on the beacon index and BVPI out-turn reports copies of which had been previously circulated.

(annexed)

Councillor Turner suggested that the targets for 1.9.1 and 2.1.1, in the beacon index, were optimistic.

Rob Flinter replied that the targets were set with regard to historical performance. The target for 1.9.1 had been missed by 1% and 2.1.1 had delivered a considerable improvement on the performance for the previous year.

Councillor Turner asked if 3.2.3a and b, collection of council tax and business rates, were somehow linked, as their performance seemed to mirror each other.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that the targets had been set with regards to an expected dip due to the implementation of a new system, but she was not aware of any underlying link between the performance of the two indicators.

Councillor Phillips found the level of the collection backlog worrying.

Councillor Griffiths suggested that the level of unclaimed benefit should also be investigated.

7/06 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Councillor Griffiths welcomed such opportunities and urged members to take advantage of such courses. He suggested that a separate resource for scrutiny should be provided to cater for member's training needs.

(annexed)

8/06 LATE ITEMS

The forward plan, 19 June 2006, was tabled for information. Councillor Towe asked that this should be taken earlier in the agenda for future meetings and that copies be circulated to members in advance.

(annexed)

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8:08 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....

DRAFT