

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

PRESENT

Councillor Griffiths (Chair)
Councillor Sarohi (Vice Chair)
Councillor Anson
Councillor Bird
Councillor Burley
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Towe
Councillor Turner

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

James Walsh (Assistant Director of Finance)
Vicky Crowshaw (Head of Corporate & Strategic Finance)
Simon Evans (Performance Officer)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Officer)

9/06. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor D. Shires

10/06. SUBSTITUTIONS

The chair advised the panel of the following substitution to the panel for the duration of this meeting: -

- Delete: Councillor Phillips
- Substitute: Councillor Anson

- Delete: Councillor Young
- Substitute: Councillor Burley

11/06. 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.

12/06. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 June 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record subject to the addition of Councillor Rochelle's apologies.

(Annexed)

13/06. FEEDBACK FROM WORKING GROUPS

Councillor Griffiths invited Councillor Towe to report on the progress of the Revenue and Benefits working group.

Councillor Towe reported that the group had met twice. The first meeting had been to consider the benefits service options appraisal, in order to feed the views of scrutiny through to cabinet. This meeting recommended that a 'mixed economy' approach be taken to develop the service. He added that Councillor Bird had raised the possibility of applying for charitable trust status, as he had been made aware of the possible benefits this might bring. This issue was addressed at the second meeting of the group where members met the welfare rights manager who had experience of a service obtaining charitable trust status. He stated that the data produced on the monies available and the possible projected revenues was a revelation.

Councillor Bird added that the work of the welfare rights service was making a real difference and it would seem that charitable status could further enhance the service.

Councillor Burley replied that it was good to hear that the service was now being recognised as she had always supported its work. She further added that the work of the service had been a godsend to the people of the more deprived areas of the borough.

Councillor Rochelle stated that previous funding has only been derived for areas of deprivation, but that he added that all areas could benefit from an improved service.

Councillor Griffiths added that the group would be looking to have a very active role in pursuing this.

Councillor Turner added that 2 years ago this panel had fought to maintain the funding for the service to enable a reactive service delivery. However, he felt that the service is more effective when it is able to be proactive and this needed to be stressed to cabinet.

Councillor Bird stated that the a recent change in legislation now means that certified copies of documents will no longer be acceptable and this may cause

significant problems for the service. He felt that the panel should help to support the service and work out how to help them.

Councillor Anson stated that there seemed to be a lack of communication between services and he felt that this needed to be addressed.

Councillor Towe replied that the working group needed to address this issue. He then added that the group then looked at the action plan arising from the benefit fraud inspectorate. The service replied that the plan was 65% complete and that they were predicting a distinct upturn in performance by quarter 3 of this year. The group were also made aware of the services desire to purchase an electronic data management system (EDMS) to help speed up the processing of claims. Some concerns as to how this would operate were raised and the group had asked to visit the manufacturer of the preferred system and an authority that had already successfully implemented the system. He added that he was fairly happy with the progress the working group had made.

Councillor Rochelle asked whether the citizen's advice bureau (CAB) could be approached to work together on this, as he was aware they were often a feeder for staff into our agency. He asked if they could be used as a gateway for the benefits service.

Councillor Griffiths replied that he felt sure that this was already the case.

Councillor Towe stated the group had felt it was important the full £400,000 be made available for the service regardless of the state of the department of works and pensions grant.

Resolved

- That the corporate scrutiny and performance panel request that cabinet ensures the £400,000 pump priming for the service transformation is made available; with the use of prudential borrowing if appropriate.

Councillor Griffiths then invited Councillor Bird to feedback on the work of the performance management working group.

Councillor Bird stated that the minutes were very informative and he highlighted that the group had received a presentation from Paul Smith (head of human resources) on performance related pay (PRP). He stated that it appeared that the framework was robust and working quite well and the group had recommended that the scheme be extended across the council.

Councillor Turner added that the group recognised that this would be subject to the implementation of single status across the council.

Councillor Bird stated that the group were now waiting for a draft of a pay and awards strategy in order to give scrutiny's views prior to cabinet approval.

Councillor Rochelle stated that he had raised the issue of the use of neighbourhood renewal fund (NRF) monies by the local neighbourhood partnerships (LNPs).

Councillor Turner replied that issues around NRF were being looked at by audit panel at its next meeting and he would be happy to report back following that.

Councillor Burley asked if the working group had asked if all members of staff had up to date job descriptions, as she was aware of issues around this.

Councillor Bird replied that it had not.

Councillor Towe replied that he felt sure that the council were looking at this issue as part of its re-evaluation process.

14/06. KEY DISCUSSION ITEMS

Councillor Griffiths invited Simon Evans to give the panel a brief overview of the value for money framework, previously circulated.

(annexed)

Simon Evans informed the members that the framework had been designed, by Councillor Griffiths and Councillor Sarohi with support from officers from the corporate performance management team, and was to be used as a tool by scrutiny and performance panels to conduct service reviews from a value for money (vfm) perspective. He added that no other authority had a similar tool and that Walsall were leading the way. The aim, now, was to see if it worked. He then took the panel through elements within the framework.

Councillor Griffiths stated that the tool could be used to prove to the public that the council provides value for money. He then suggested that the framework could be trialled by the revenues and benefits service, as this would supplement the working groups work programme.

Councillor Towe asked if the current budget would be used.

James Walsh replied that they would use the status quo position as the baseline. This, coupled with the improvement plan, could mean that the framework could be re-applied later as a further test of the framework.

Councillor Towe asked who would complete the performance data sections.

Councillor Burley stated that there was a need for any information to be evidence based and it needed to be reliable. Members would need reassurance that this was the case.

Simon Evans replied that the information would be supplied by the managers from a number of information sources. Data regarding BVPI's and CPA score

were already within the public domain so this would be the most reliable source of information currently available.

James Walsh added that the framework is not designed to be a full service review, but will be an indicator of where things are not right and a flag to trigger possible further intervention.

Councillor Towe stated that this was an important tool and, therefore, there was a need to be sure of the accuracy of the data so that it can be done right.

Councillor Rochelle asked whether the methods used by CAB to measure its performance could be applied, especially around areas of customer satisfaction.

Vicky Crowshaw stated that there would need to be clear guidance for the managers that all data produced would need to be measurable and evidence based.

James Walsh added that this would give confidence in the data provided.

Councillor Towe highlighted the need for effective benchmarking and he suggested that the panel should receive a brief presentation on benchmarking as he felt that it was the key in this instance.

Councillor Griffiths asked if Simon Evans could give a brief presentation on benchmarking to the next meeting of the panel.

Councillor Griffiths then asked if the framework could be populated by the next meeting of the panel.

James Walsh replied that it could be.

Resolved

- That the vfm framework be trialled on the revenues and benefits service subject to clear guidance being given to managers regarding the need for measurable and evidence based data.
- That the populated framework be presented at the next meeting of the panel, 26 October 2006.
- That Simon Evans give a brief presentation on benchmarking at the next meeting of the panel, 26 October 2006.

15/06 PERFORMANCE AND MONITORING ITEMS

The report on best value performance indicators – quarter 1 exception report 2006/7 was tabled.

(annexed)

James Walsh stated that the benefits indicators were expectedly poor and would remain so due to the incorporation of the backlog. However, the underlying performance of the service, on new claims, was much better. He added that he

had requested an additional performance indicator, on the turnaround of new claims since April 2006, be added in order to highlight the much better underlying performance of the service.

Councillor Rochelle stated that the increased level of claims would benefit the borough, as the number of claimants per area is part of the deprivation funding formula used by central government. Therefore, a cleared backlog would generate the extra £640 per claimant per year in deprivation allowance.

James Walsh replied that the funding formula was a little more complex but agreed that a cleared backlog would enable further funding streams to be opened up. He suggested that he could update the panel on how housing benefits affected the revenue support grant (RSG).

Councillor Griffiths asked how quickly the backlogs could be cleared.

James Walsh replied that the backlog should be cleared as of 31 August 2006, but he would need to check if they had actually been cleared and he would report to the next meeting of the revenues and benefits working group.

Resolved

- That James Walsh produce a paper on how housing benefits affected the revenue support grant for members information.
- That progress against the clearing the backlog of claims be reported to the next meeting of the revenues and benefits working group.

16/06 BUDGET

Vicky Crowshaw gave a presentation on the budget process, the aim of which was: to give a general understanding of how local government finance works; financial context and framework; Walsall's budgets - income and spending; and the budget process and means of balancing the budget. The presentation also gave an update on the corporate budget process for 2007/8+ before asking how the corporate scrutiny and performance panel wished to input into the process.

Councillor Anson asked when the RSG settlement was due.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that the draft settlement was due by the end of September but the council already had a fair idea of how much it would be.

Councillor Turner asked if cabinet were supplied with the borough's rate of inflation during their decision conferencing.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that they were advised of projected inflation rates, including contractual and pay inflation. This was also reviewed as part of the services work in refreshing the budget annually.

Councillor Towe asked if there was a dedicated officer looking at external funding streams.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that there was a team in regeneration dealing with external funding and ongoing work with but that was no dedicated finance officer looking at external funding streams.

James Walsh added that the process was ad hoc within directorates presently and the council could look to develop an external funding strategy to address this.

Councillor Towe asked what impact the increase in energy costs had on the costs of partnerships such as the lighting public finance initiative (PFI) with AMEY. He also asked if the technological progress in telecommunications and open source software had also been taken onboard by the council.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that she could not comment on any specific case but that it was likely that the cost would be bound by the contractual terms of the agreement. She also added that the council had an energy efficiency officer who advised on energy costs relating to the council.

Vicky Crowshaw then asked how the panel wished to be involved in the budget process from this point.

Councillor Griffiths replied that it was not possible to form a working group to address this, but it was possible for members to meet outside the panel meeting to discuss options that could then be fed back to the officers before the next panel meeting.

Councillor Rochelle stated that he would like to see the outcomes from the directorate meetings.

Vicky Crowshaw replied that she could bring more information, including spend per head, CPA ratings, etc... to further inform the panel and allow the panel to decide how best to focus their scrutiny in terms of the corporate budget and scrutiny of those services/functions within their remit.

James Walsh suggested that there could also be policy discussions around the level of charges / fees in order to ascertain the panel's views.

Councillor Turner stated that the panel should not lose sight of scrutiny's need to look at the decisions of cabinet alongside submitting its own views.

Vicky Crowshaw advised that that information would be advisable for the panels decisions conferencing event in late November, however there was also an opportunity for the panel to form their own recommendations in terms of the budget.

Councillor Griffiths then asked about other income as mentioned on page 4 of the 'introduction to local government finance and financial position of the authority', previously circulated.

(annexed)

Vicky Crowshaw replied that were standard practices around how monies were invested overnight and she was happy to produce a paper for the members information about the investment strategy and process.

Resolved

- That members liaise with officers to discuss what further information they would require for the next meeting.
- That Vicky Crowshaw produce a paper on investment income as defined on page 4 of the 'introduction to local government finance and financial position of the authority'.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8:16 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....