

REGENERATION SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

Thursday 31 July 2008 at 6.00 p.m.

Panel Members present

Councillor D. Pitt (Chair)
Councillor B. Douglas-Maul
Councillor H. Sarohi
Councillor K. Sears

Portfolio holders present

Councillor Andrew - Regeneration

Officers present

Tim Johnson – Executive Director – Regeneration
Mike Tichford – Assistant Director – Regeneration
Peter Cromar- Chief Executive, WRC
Clive Wright - Director, WBSP
Alison Jarrett- Head of Service Finance
Colin Teasdale- Performance and Scrutiny Officer

10/08 APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Councillors Shires and Tweddle.

11/08 SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitution(s) to the panel were submitted for the duration of the meeting:-

- Delete: Councillor Anson
- Substitute: Councillor Sarohi

12/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

13/08 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2008, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

(annexed)

14/08 FORWARD PLAN

The Chair explained to the Panel that they had been due to look at the St Matthew Quarter (item 37/08 on the forward plan) at this meeting but due to slippages this would now be presented in September when more details would be available.

The Portfolio Holder for Regeneration informed the panel that the item 38/08 on the forward plan, 'Police Station' had received significant press coverage and he was keen to reiterate that this was in the hands of the police and that the Council were currently awaiting an official approach from them before they could act but that when this came they would be happy to assist.

Members raised concerns about Gating Orders Policy and the time this was taking as it now was not scheduled to go to Cabinet until 14 January 2009. They felt that this was a particular area of concern for residents as expressed through various LNP meetings and requested information on the process being followed and the reasons for the time it was taking.

Members were advised that this fell within the remit of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny and Performance Panel but that a briefing note could be requested from the relevant officers to be circulated outside of the meeting.

Resolved:

- 1. That the Forward Plan dated 7 July 2008 be noted; and**
- 2. That a briefing note be requested to be distributed to members on the progress of Gating Orders Policy**

15/08 Regeneration Directorate Budget Outturn 2007/08

At this point the Chair advised the panel that items 8, 9 and 10 on the agenda would be moved up to be considered first.

Alison Jarrett presented the report, previously circulated (annexed) outlining the financial outturn for the Regeneration Directorate during 2007/08. She explained to the panel that there was a slight overspend (£51,855) mainly due to the under-recovery of markets income as the panel were aware of through their work on this issue during the previous year. She explained that there was a underspend in both External Funding and Capital, due to projects carrying over into the new year and that this would be carried forward.

Resolved

That the final outturn report for Regeneration 2007/08 be noted.

16/08 Regeneration Directorate Budget- First Quarter Monitoring

Alison Jarrett presented the report, previously circulated (annexed) outlining the Directorates revenue outturn forecast for 2008/09 based on first quarter performance. She explained to members that the national credit crunch was having a significant impact, mainly through the reduction in income through Land Charges as less people were moving house or building extensions resulting in a projected overspend of £250, 173 in this area alone.

The Chair commented that whilst the overspend in land charges was a big figure it was an unfortunate situation beyond the Council's control.

Tim Johnson informed members that changes this year to the Regeneration Directorate meant it had now taken on more services and therefore they had increased flexibility with more budget options to choose from when mitigating this overspend.

Mike Tichford pointed out to the Panel that whilst the reduction in Land Charges revenue was a national problem that had a significant impact on Walsall, the high quality of the service in Walsall- which had successfully held off competition from solicitors firm offering this service- put them in a relatively better position than other authorities nationwide.

Members queried the reasons for the slippage within the capital programme and if this meant that projects were off course.

Mike Tichford said he did not have the exact details of projects to hand but that in general their projects were performing well and as they were funded for the lifetime of the project rather than by financial year this did mean that you did get slippage from one financial year to the next in budgetary terms but this did not mean the project itself had slipped.

Resolved

That the first quarter monitoring report for the Regeneration Directorate Budget be noted.

17/08 Budget Process 2009/10- 2011/12

Alison Jarrett presented the report, previously circulated (annexed) outlining the proposed approach to the budget setting process and scrutiny's involvement in that. She informed the panel that the packs directorate had been asked to complete (appendix 2 of report) had already started to come back in and the quantity and quality of the information being provided was looking good. The pack for the Regeneration Directorate would be presented to this panel at its meeting on 2 October 2008.

Members commented that the late publishing of the government's final settlement figure last year had caused them problems in trying to make recommendations without the full picture. Members also raised a concern that the panels would only be getting a list of items selected by officers rather than the full picture.

Alison Jarrett clarified that this year the packs would give a 'story of the service' giving details of key drivers, outturn, previous performance, and benchmarking against other authorities so the panel would be getting the whole picture and then asked from that to identify what areas they wanted to be considered more closely for possible savings or investments. These recommendations would then go to Cabinet's decision conferencing which would report back to Scrutiny with proposals for savings.

Members commented that they were keen that the budget process should be a constructive one with members working proactively with Cabinet and officers rather than reactively.

Alison Jarrett reiterated to the panel that if there was any more assistance officers could provide to members then they would be happy to do so.

Resolved:

That that the report outlining the budget process 2008/09-2011/12 be noted.

18/08 Urban Regeneration Company

Peter Cromar delivered a presentation to the panel (annexed) outlining the work of the Walsall Regeneration Company and its achievements to date. He stressed that the WRC covers only a small proportion of the boroughs land and population but its work was aligned to the strategy for the borough as a whole. He underlined the importance of regenerating the economy, housing, leisure and retail all together to avoid problems caused by depopulation as younger generations moved out of the area.

Members commented that they were impressed with the work carried out to date and were keen to see that momentum continued. The Chair requested a regular monitoring report on progress be brought back to the panel which could be used to identify areas of hold-up which the panel could help to unblock where possible.

Peter Cromar commented that the panel had already been extremely helpful in the work they had carried out, particularly on the markets and that he felt a 6 month monitoring report would be the right timescale given the size of some of the projects being carried out.

The Chair thanked Peter Cromar for his presentation and the effort that had been put in to date on regenerating the borough. He commented that he was pleased to see the good working relationship between the WRC and the Council's Executive team.

Resolved

That the WRC bring a monitoring report to the panel on a 6 monthly basis providing an update on progress and areas of blockage.

19/08 Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF) and Area Based Grant (ABG)

Clive Wright provided the panel with an overview of ABG and WNF as outlined in the papers previously distributed (annexed.) He informed members that the ABG was made up of existing money from a variety of sources but whereas this had previously been ring-fenced for specific purposes the Council could now, through the Local Strategic Partnership and subject to Cabinet approval, spend this money in whatever way it felt best. He pointed out that this was a transitional year that was being used to identify where money was currently being spent and to work with partners to see where this needed to be spent in the future to deliver the shared priorities. Through working with partners they would also be seeking to unlock additional resources for this purpose.

Clive Wright stated that the WNF was one of the pots of money available within the ABG and it was not a replacement for NRF; the two things were fundamentally different and WNF was focussed on three key areas- Skills, Worklessness and Enterprise. It was about creating more and better jobs for local people.

The Portfolio Holder for Regeneration reiterated that the key word within WNF was 'working.' The Council was committed to ensuring the money was used to get people

economically active by getting the ready for the workplace and creating the jobs for them.

Clive Wright informed the panel that the process that would be used would be target action planning engaging all partners. This was a similar to process to what Walsall was already doing for two years, and the WBSP had been held of as an exemplar for this work; other authorities were now being required to work in this way but Walsall was already ahead of the game.

Members commented that whilst they were pleased with the results being shown, the experiences of people out in the wards that was being communicated to them via the LNPs was very different as there was a sense of disillusionment when funding requests for projects were not met. They also stressed the importance of appropriate exit strategies being in place to avoid situations such as that with the community wardens where funding was stopped by central government against local public opinion.

Clive Wright informed members that having a suitable exit strategy in place was a requirement for all bids and funding would not be made available without it. He commented that the new format for ABG, without ring fencing, meant there was greater flexibility to spend money where it was most needed but as there was only a limited pot of money available there would always be people left disappointed and agreed with members that it was important that the Council and the partnership effectively engage with people at local level to communicate how and why money was being spent and, critically, the positive outcomes of this spend.

Members raised concerns about community safety within their ward areas and were keen to see resources directed to tackling these issues. The Chair informed members that he sat on the Anti-Social Behaviour Working Group and would take these comments with him to the next meeting.

The Chair had previously requested regular updates to the panel and Clive Wright suggested a 4 monthly timescale for this.

Resolved:

- 1. That the WNF and ABG report be noted**
- 2. That Clive Wright brings updates to the panel on a 4 monthly basis**

20/07 Proposed Work Programme 2008/09

The Chair informed members that the proposed work programme for the panel for 2008/9 had been distributed with papers for their information and though this was subject to change it did give a good overview of what they would be looking at an when during the forthcoming year.

Resolved

That the work programme for 2008/09 be noted.

21/07 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 2 October 2008.

The meeting terminated at 7.40 pm.

Chair:

Date: