

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL** held at
the Council House, Walsall on
12 April 2007 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

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

Councillor Longhi (Portfolio Holder)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Sarah Homer Assistant Director – Strategic Transformation
Robert Flinter Assistant Director – Corporate Performance
Management
Lynn Hall - Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits
Sharon Tait - Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Simon Evans Performance and Scrutiny Officer
Colin Teasdale Performance and Scrutiny Officer

PRESENTERS

David Magor Chief Executive – Institute of Revenues, Rating and
Valuation
Simon Horsington Lead Consultant – Institute of Revenues, Rating
and Valuation

PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

Ian Jones. Welfare Rights Manager – Walsall Council

54/06 APOLOGIES

The Chair advised the panel that no apologies had been received for this meeting.

55/06 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 29 JANUARY

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2007, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

56/06 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 7 MARCH 2007

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2007, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record subject to the following amendments:

- That apology for this meeting be included from Councillor Phillips.

57/06 PRESENTATION ON WELFARE RIGHTS SERVICE

(Annexed)

Councillor Bird commented that it appears there is a lack of political will to support a further developed in-house service, and questioned whether that was a real option; he also asked what the benefits were of the trust and would the staff be protected if a transfer was to be made.

David Magor said the service could be easily measured in terms of extra monies coming into the borough, so evidence of improvement could be provided if the decision to move to a trust is made. He stated that this was a long term commitment that included the potential transfer of staff via TUPE arrangements. The consideration may not just be one of political will but also a budgetary decision.

Councillor Rochelle said the background to this came from discovering Walsall Council received less in Deprivation funding than neighbouring councils.

David Magor said that government funding streams change year on year, it was more important to ensure the service was well structured. He indicated that the current government favour the third sector as part of service delivery.

Councillor Shires asked whether other councils have gone down charitable status for the Welfare Rights Unit

Simon Horsington said that although other Trusts existed; there was no other Trust providing exactly the same service that was being provided in Walsall,

Councillor Turner said he would prefer an in-house option as this would provide more control for the Council than a Trust. David Magor confirmed that governance arrangements would have to be put in place if a Trust were to be selected.

Councillor Phillips said he prefers the Trust approach as a service level agreement could be put in place to secure an element of control in terms of what the council wanted to achieve.

Councillor Bird said the Welfare rights service has been consistently squeezed and if there was no political will then the council should move to a Trust; as long as there is a Service Level Agreement in place. This could set the parameters and would prove the Trust can do the job and attract additional funding. David Magor replied by saying that all the models were possible it was just a matter of choosing how the Council wanted to make it happen.

Councillor Towe asked whether the Salford Model mentioned in the presentation considered the same issues as Walsall. David Magor replied that Salford had a public/public model that would be able to cope with the changing issues facing the city.

Councillor Sarohi asked if a Trust would be accountable to the council. He also expressed concerns that funding generally was for a limited period which made it difficult to resource and plan for the future. David Magor confirmed that Governance arrangements would be in place which would be made up of those bodies that provide funding.

Councillor Phillips commented that examples of bodies who work in partnership, such as the CAB can work well, as long as it is effectively monitored.

Councillor Longhi said that after hearing the presentation there was no clear option to be preferred. He suggested that in the long-term a Trust status has lots of exciting opportunities. However, he would like to see a business plan for both options before a meaningful decision could be reached.

David Magor said a business plan would be contained within the report which would allow for an informed decision, although it would be very difficult to include specific financial detail.

Councillor Bird said that a business case is essential which also includes the access to unique funding which is open to a trust. Also including the costs associated with the running of a Trust.

Councillor Rochelle said he was led to believe that the funding available was dependent on the numbers of core funded staff.

Ian Jones confirmed the numbers of core funded staff

Councillor Turner said he was confident the scrutiny panel all wanted to choose the option that would best benefit the residents of Walsall.

Councillor Griffiths said he would advocate a developed in-house service as he felt this would continue the good work already achieved by the unit. He asked David Magor for his view of the best option to pursue.

David Magor said he preferred the in-house option which could be managed and measured. However, a Trust did provide a long-term commitment. A draft report, following the panel's comments would be presented to Officers by 20 April and following comments from officers the final report would be produced.

Councillor Phillips asked if the final report could be circulated to members once it has been produced.

Councillor Bird asked for the minutes to reflect the discussion held on the night and of the good work undertaken by the Welfare Rights Service.

Councillor Griffiths also commented on the excellent work undertaken by the whole of the unit delivering housing benefit, council tax benefit, relief's and discounts.

Councillor Towe asked for the Salford Public/Public option to be considered as an option within the final report.

RESOLVED

- That officers request David Magor to consider the public/public option developed by Salford within the draft report
- That officers provide a copy of the final report to scrutiny members upon completion.

58/06 CONSIDERATION OF SERVICE ISSUES

Councillor Griffiths introduced the item. Sarah Homer and Rob Flinter presented and asked for any questions

(Annexed)

Councillor Bird asked whether the salary component of sick pay could be reviewed to help to improve the levels of staff sickness.

Sarah Homer confirmed that Walsall Council is bound by national agreements. However, part of the job evaluation process would be to look at the total picture including terms and conditions.

Councillor Bird commented that additional resources for scrutiny should also be provided as scrutiny is now starting to make a difference.

Councillor Turner suggested that further independence could be gained in Scrutiny if the chairs of the panel were granted a budget, to look at such things as independent research. Councillor Bird suggested that additional funding for basic legal services should be found as some of the lack of resource was now starting to impact on grass roots services.

59/06 PERFORMANCE AND MONITORING ITEMS

Beacon Index

Councillor Griffiths introduced the item and invited Rob Flinter to comment.

Rob Flinter asked the panel for their comments on how the process of performance information was presented to the panel.

Councillor Longhi suggested that the panel should receive performance management information on a more frequent basis.

Rob Flinter commented that the Performance Information Management System would be rolled out to members during the year; this would also include the project management information.

RESOLVED

- That performance management reporting procedures are considered as a topic for the Corporate Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel's work programme for 2007/08.

60/06 END OF YEAR REPORT

Following a discussion of the work undertaken by the panel and the items still outstanding on the work programme the following was resolved:

RESOLVED

- That the work streams are carried over into the next municipal year.

61/06 FORWARD PLAN

Councillor Griffiths informed the panel that the item regarding Car Parks Strategy would be removed from the next Forward plan so was no longer appropriate for the panel to scrutinise.

62/06 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

The training opportunities were discussed by the Panel.

The chair thanked the panel and officers for their work through the year.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 8.07 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....