

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

PRESENT

Councillor Towe (Acting Chair)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Shires
Councillor Turner

PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Longhi

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

James Walsh (Assistant Director for Finance)
Vicky Buckley (Head of Corporate & Strategic Finance)
Lynn Hall (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)
Sharon Tait (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Simon Evans (Performance and Scrutiny Officer)

43/06 APOLOGIES

The Chair advised the panel that apologies had been received on behalf of Councillor Griffiths, Councillor Sarohi and Councillor Young. In the absence of both chair and vice-chair the panel agreed for Councillor Towe to chair the meeting.

44/06 SUBSTITUTIONS

The chair advised the panel there were no substitutions for the duration of this meeting.

45/06 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

46/06 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Members noted that there were no items for consideration in private session at this meeting.

47/06 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 29 JANUARY 2007

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.

48/06 USE OF RESOURCES – CORPORATE ASSESSMENT SCORE

(Annexed)

Vicky Buckley presented the item and asked councillors for their comments.

Councillor Bird asked why the annual report was not out in time.

Vicky Buckley said there was no deadline agreed for this, James Walsh advised it was published in January.

Councillor Bird asked whether the annual report was published later than in previous years.

James Walsh replied that it was the first time it was published.

Councillor Rochelle congratulated officers on the excellent report and on being the best in the West Midlands.

Councillor Towe asked if the variances reported in the budget presentation had been sorted out.

Vicky Buckley said that finance knew about them and have put a corrective action plan in place. She hoped the context had been provided at the time of it being questioned.

Councillor Longhi complemented officers on their hard work, and in particular to Ann Johnson and her team for achieving a score of 4 in risk management. He stated that this is an area where members have less of an input in terms of where they can impact on service delivery so it was a huge credit to the work of officers. He felt it was a shame that the Medium Term Financial Strategy scored 3 even though it was recognised as best practice.

49/06 UPDATE ON EDMS SYSTEM

Sharon Tait informed the panel that this is a 12 month project that is going to be delivered in a 4 month period. They are on target for completion by end of

March. The revenues element would be in by end of September but the bulk will be in by the end of July. This means the savings can be realised from July.

Lynn Hall stated that the service have received additional funding of £264k from the Department for Work and Pensions Performance Standards Fund to assist with financing the project to further improve service delivery. An element of the additional funding has financed the appointment of resources to support the teams whilst staff undertake training on the EDMS system. The benefits service speed of processing new claims performance for February was 23 days which is a major improvement from the September figure of 118 days.

Councillor Towe offered congratulations to the service as clear progress was evidently being made.

50/06 WELFARE RIGHTS SERVICE

Sharon Tait stated that quotes had been received from 5 organisations. The Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) were selected based on cost and expertise. The lead consultant David Magor OBE, is a past President of the IRRV, an ex director of Welfare Rights at Oxford City Council and a consultant for Central Government on Welfare Rights.

Councillor Bird said that following his meeting with IRRV he had mentioned that there are political issues that need to be resolved as some individuals need to be convinced this is a good idea. He acknowledged it was ground breaking. He said the consultant was asking all the right questions to put the business case together. He was aware that this is a priority and that there are 2 things to consider. Is it right for staff and Council, and what TUPE requirements need to be considered. He also asked him look at CAB and see whether we need a Service Level Agreement regarding funding.

Councillor Rochelle confirmed that the level of funding the CAB relies on from the council has reduced.

Councillor Bird asked how many core funded staff were in Welfare Rights.

Sharon Tait said there are 12 permanent and 6 temporary members of staff.

Councillor Bird stated that they are a small team who produce auditable figures and that they can help to generate additional funding.

Sharon Tait also asked the consultant to consider the impact on other agencies of funding implications if the council were to go down this route, particularly around the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The report will be available by end of March and will be presented to the panel on 12 April.

Councillor Towe offered his congratulations on a good piece of work to date.

51/06 FORWARD PLAN

Councillor Turner asked for Councillor Griffiths to consider the Car Parking Strategy at Agenda Setting on 19 March to see if there were any implications for this panel.

Councillor Bird asked whether borough wide decisions could come to scrutiny first, items such as the Car Parking Strategy. He suggested all key decisions should come to scrutiny first.

Councillor Towe confirmed that the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) had asked for details to be more obvious on the Forward Plan along with a column for scrutiny.

Councillor Shires said the panel should see items before they go on the forward plan. She felt scrutiny need to look at them prior to cabinet because decisions made at cabinet seldom change even if they are called in.

Councillor Longhi said portfolio holder's dealt with it differently. He made sure all key decisions go to scrutiny first, for all the reasons suggested.

Councillor Shires said a lot of councillors felt isolated from decision making. If a different attitude was taken then maybe councillors would look at it differently.

Councillor Longhi felt asking scrutiny first was good practice as it assisted the cabinet.

Councillor Turner said it was a matter of trust from cabinet towards councillors. To put it through scrutiny first was more efficient but cabinet have to trust councillors as a whole.

Councillor Towe asked whether it was possible to put a scrutiny date on the forward plan.

Councillor Longhi suggested one issue could be about the information being in the public domain early on. The press could make assumptions from it and it could negatively impact on morale.

Councillor Rochelle suggested the panel had been very effective in taking issues and pressing the cabinet. For example: the Welfare Rights Service.

Councillor Turner asked if the proposed column in the forward plan could also include the name of the relevant panel that would scrutinise the item.

Councillor Longhi suggested it was not just the forward plan that panels needed to consider, other issues were just as important e.g. telecoms masts and any partner organisations that could have an impact on Walsall residents.

Councillor Bird suggested SMB asks cabinet to request major decisions come to scrutiny prior to being put on the forward plan.

RESOLVED

- Raise the issue of a column within the forward plan at the next SMB meeting.
- Councillor Griffiths to consider Car Parking Strategy at next agenda setting.

52/06 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Councillor Towe reminded the panel of the date of the training event.

53/06 LATE ITEM – SCRUTINY SURVEY

Councillor Towe encouraged all members to complete the scrutiny survey and return it to the scrutiny team.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 6.50 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....

DRAFT