

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: Corporate Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel
DATE: 12 April 2007

RE: Draft - End of Year Review 2006/7

Purpose

To provide the panel with an overview of the major work streams undertaken during the municipal year 2006/7 and to agree any work streams to be carried over into the municipal year 2007/8.

Overview of major work streams 2006/7

The panel has considered a variety of issues from the work programme agreed at the start of the year. Key areas of work were:

Value for Money Framework

The panel have recognised the importance of the value for money (vfm) agenda and the need to ensure that the principles of economy, effectiveness and efficiency are built into operational processes. Members have worked closely with officers to produce a vfm framework. This is as an assessment tool which asks the selected service to provide financial data; benchmarking information, customer and user feedback and performance information. This enables the members and officers to make an assessment as to whether or not the service is providing vfm, and perhaps more importantly embedding the principles of vfm within its operations. The framework also enables members to offer constructive commentary and guidance based on the information.

Following a successful pilot within the Revenues and Benefits service, the vfm framework has been presented to the Scrutiny Management Board who have adopted the framework. This will now be considered for use by every panel that undertakes a service assessment.

Review of the Welfare Rights Service

Following a resolution at the Revenues and Benefits work group, a motion was passed at full Council requesting the panel to review the possible benefits of changing the status of the Welfare Rights Service to an independent trust.

The panel have worked closely with officers to agree a process for fully evaluating the proposal and ensuring that the decision is reached at the earliest possible opportunity in order to maximise the potential benefits.

Members have provided input to the consultants report and will have the opportunity to scrutinize further when the interim findings of this work are presented at their final panel in April.

Budget Consultation

In order to better prepare for the budget consultation, members requested and received training on Overview of the Budget Setting Process and An introduction to Local Government Finance.

The panel had a number of opportunities to consider the draft budget proposals for 2007/08. They undertook a decision conference event over 2 evenings in November and held a further special budget meeting in January. This covered both the Council wide proposals and specific proposals relating to services within their remit. The panel approved the investment proposals in full, and made a number of recommendations in respect of savings proposals, including recommending that 12 of the proposals not be reflected in the Cabinets draft budget; from this 7 were adopted. In addition, scrutiny raised 6 other ideas for identifying savings, of which one was taken on board. The 2 proposals which caused major concern (reducing litter sweeping frequencies and reducing central library opening hours) were taken on board by Cabinet and removed from their final budget proposals

Work Groups

Performance Related Pay

This panel explored the performance related pay scheme that operates at the Council. Members questioned who the scheme applies to, how it works and how targets were measured. Having been satisfied that the PRP scheme is working effectively and that targets are challenging, outcome focussed and are frequently reviewed, the panel were happy to conclude that the PRP scheme was making an effective contribution to the continuous improvement of Walsall Council.

Following the evidence presented within the work group, members were minded to suggest that the scheme be developed further to extend to other staff groups within the Council. The group also suggested that the Council build on the success of the PRP scheme and look to provide incentives as a means to help reduce sickness levels and absenteeism.

The outputs from the group were put forward as part of feedback towards a new pay and rewards strategy.

Revenues and Benefits

The revenues and benefits work group have looked at a number of items this year as part of a performance review of the service.

This has included:

- Member visit to Telford Council to look at their EDMS system
- Completion of the VFM assessment tool
- Consideration of the benefits service options appraisal

- Review of the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate Report and service action plan
- Monitoring of action plans
- EDMS implementation plan

As a result of this work and through excellent co-operation between members and officers the following recommendations have been made to Cabinet and subsequently supported:

1. That the “mixed economy” option be endorsed as the way forward for the Revenue and Benefits Service and that
2. That the requirement for front-loaded investment of c.£400k be noted and the proposed sources of this funding be endorsed.

In addition, throughout the year officers have regularly delivered progress updates on the revenues and benefits improvement plan; officers have found this process to be constructive and supportive which has led to detailed discussion and input from members which has helped to make a positive impact on the service performance.

Recommended work streams to be carried over into 2007/8

The following work streams have either, not yet been completed or, have been identified as potential items for scrutiny next year. It is recommended that the panel include them in their work programme for the municipal year 2007/8.

- The panel need to conclude the good work that has been started with the Revenues and Benefits work group. This could be following the successful implementation and integration of the EDMS system.
- The panel need to provide a final comment and recommendation on the options proposal for the welfare rights service.
- The panel have indicated the scrutiny of strategic performance management should be considered as a potential work stream for next year.

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