

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 8 July 2009

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Phil Mould (Chair), Councillor David Smith (Vice-Chair) and Councillors K Banks, G Chance, R King, W Norton, J Pearce, D Taylor and D Thomas

Also Present:

Councillor M Braley and M Collins (Vice Chair, Standards Committee)

Officers:

S Hanley and T Kristunas

Committee Services Officer:

J Bayley and H Saunders

26. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no apologies or named substitutes.

27. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or of any party whip.

28. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 17 June 2009 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

29. ACTIONS LIST

The Committee considered the latest version of the Actions List. Specific mention was made of the following matters:

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a) Scrutiny of the Countryside Centre

The Committee was informed, in relation to Action One, that a report was due to be considered by the Executive Committee at a meeting on 22 July, recommending that the Committee approve expenditure of £10,000 for consultants to undertake a piece of work examining the management and use of the Countryside Centre. Officers had approached Councillor Anderson regarding his proposal for a scrutiny exercise to examine the usage of the Countryside Centre. He had indicated that he felt there were advantages in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewing this issue.

The Chair suggested that this issue could be examined just as effectively by a Task and Finish Group and at no additional cost to the Council. He therefore suggested that a recommendation be made to the Executive Committee that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to establish a Task and Finish Group to undertake this work. The Committee unanimously agreed this suggestion.

b) National Angling Museum Domain Names

Officers updated Members under Action Three, about the purchase of the National angling Museum internet domain names. Instead of all four domain names having been purchased, the Council had only been able to buy two of the names. These had been the .org and .org.uk versions of the domain names. The more common .co.uk and .com versions had already been purchased by a different organisation. Members questioned whether the two domain names were operational. Officers confirmed that the domain names purchased by the Council were linked to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee pages but did not contain any content. The other domain names were currently with a host site and would remain so until the organisation's website became live.

c) Public Transport in Redditch

Officers referred to Action Ten, regarding the Committee's request for information from the Health Authority about public transport access to the Alexandra Hospital. Officers explained that they had received a response from John Rostill, the Chief Executive of Worcestershire Acute NHS Trust, to the questions Members had formulated at a previous meeting. This response was circulated to the

Committee. Members noted the responses and agreed that a letter should be written to Mr Rostill stating that the Committee agreed that better public transport was needed to remedy these problems and thanking him for his response.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee be asked, under the relevant item at the meeting of the Executive Committee on 22 July, to agree to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioning a Task and Finish Review of the Countryside Centre.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **a letter be written to Mr Rostill, Chief Executive of the Worcestershire Acute NHS Trust Hospitals to thank him for his response; and**
- 2) **the Actions List be noted.**

30. CALL-IN AND PRE-SCRUTINY

Officers referred to the Decision Notice for the meeting of the Executive Committee held on 1 July 2009. It was explained to the Committee that a report was considered at this meeting outlining proposals for Council reinvestment due to the economic downturn. Within these proposals was the request for resources to fund the Grants Support Officer post which was recommended by the Third Sector Task and Finish Group. It was reported that the Executive Committee had approved this particular proposal which would be considered by full Council at a future meeting.

Members requested that as Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings were held in public, where any reference to Appendices was made in the Decision Notice, these appendices should be made available at the meeting. This would ensure that any members of the public would be able to follow the discussion.

There were no call-ins or suggestions for pre-scrutiny.

RESOLVED that

appendices to reports referred to in the Decision Notice for Executive Committee meetings be made available at future Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.

31. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping documents.

The Chair informed the Committee that as some of the current Task and Finish Group reviews were nearing completion, capacity would soon exist to progress new Task and Finish Reviews. He suggested that Members think about any possible ideas for scrutiny to propose for when current reviews finished.

Councillor Thomas explained that she had been very interested in the report published by the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) regarding Local Area Agreements (LAA) in two-tier authorities. She expressed concern about the process by which LAA targets were evidenced and agreed, and the amount of opportunity Members of Redditch Borough Council were given to be involved in this process. She also explained that she had concerns about the openness and transparency of the Redditch Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). She felt that, again, many Members engaged very little with the LSP and that more should be done to offer opportunities for Member interaction with the LSP.

RESOLVED that

Councillor Thomas meet with Officers to produce a draft scoping document regarding the process of establishing the LAA targets and a review of the LSP and submit this to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at a future meeting.

32. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee received reports in relation to current reviews.

a) Council Flat Communal Cleaning – Chair, Councillor P Mould

The Chair confirmed that this report would be considered by the Executive Committee at a meeting on 22 July.

b) Dial-a-Ride – Chair, Councillor R King

Councillor King informed the Committee that the Group had not met recently. However, individual members of the Group had visited the Dial-a-Ride Offices to look at how the booking system operated and for a journey on the Dial-a-Ride buses. He informed Members that the next meeting of the Group was scheduled to take place on Thursday 16 July where the

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Group would be able to discuss their experiences of their visit to the Dial-a-Ride Offices.

c) National Angling Museum – Chair, Councillor P Mould

The Chair explained that the Group would be presenting a report at the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 29 July.

d) Neighbourhood Groups – Chair, Councillor K Banks

Councillor Banks informed the Committee that the Group had held their first meeting and that they had planned a Work Programme for the exercise. She also explained that a questionnaire had been circulated for completion by Members, the Police and also Officers involved in the Neighbourhood Groups process. She urged all Members and relevant Officers to complete this questionnaire and return it as soon as possible and stressed that all answers would be kept confidential.

RESOLVED that

the Task and Finish Group update reports be noted.

33. BUDGET STRATEGY AND BUDGET DEFICIT - DISCUSSION

Members considered the budget strategy and deficit item on the agenda. The Chair informed the Committee that questions had been proposed for Officers to answer regarding the budget strategy process.

a) What was the intention when the Council set the three year Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP): that it would balance; or run at a deficit; or even set a surplus?

Officers explained that the intention of the MTFP was to advise Members and other Officers of the forecast position and what actions the Council would need to take based on assumptions in the Plan. Members would be requested to take action for the forthcoming financial year in order to achieve a balanced budget in time for Council Tax setting. For the current year the Council's forecast had been for there to be a deficit and that there would be a need for the Council to make savings over time.

Members enquired what the deficit was. Officers explained that at the time of the report, the Plan had identified a budget gap of £630,000 for the years 2009/10, £720,000 for 2010/11, and 130,000 for 2011/12. Members asked for the current position regarding this deficit. Officers explained that owing to the savings that had already been approved by the Council, there would not be the need to make further savings until 2012/13. Officers explained that this was because when the original budget setting took place it was assumed that there would be a 2.9% pay increase. However this had now been set at 1.5%. It was important to note that the Council would need to take into consideration the costs that would be incurred through the Job Evaluation exercise in 2010.

- b) What are the “rules” for setting MTFP? Can we set a deficit in every/any year (assuming the current year must always show a balanced budget)?

Officers explained that it was possible for deficits to exist within the MTFP but these had to be addressed in the budget setting process. The Audit Commission’s Use of Resources Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE) process also had clearly set out the requirement for the Council to manage the financial health of the organisation effectively. Members asked whether the MTFP process was based on a formula or on Officers own assumptions. Officers explained that it would be based on their estimations and on other sources. These sources included using information gathered from regular meetings with treasurers from other local authorities.

- c) At what stage does the Council have to take steps to seek a balanced budget / MTFP?

Officers confirmed that the Council had to have taken steps to seek a balanced budget by March each year for the Council Tax setting.

- d) Is there any maximum level of a deficit which can be set for each year of the MTFP?

Officers confirmed that there was not any maximum level of deficit which could be set in the Plan each year of the MTFP.

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- e) Is there any maximum level of planned surplus which can be set for each year of the MTFP?

Officers confirmed that there was no maximum level of planned surplus which could be set in the Plan for each year of the MTFP.

- f) How commonplace is it in local government i) to have a MTFP ii) for MTFP to have a deficit?

Officers confirmed that it was common for other local authorities to have a MTFP and for these Plans to contain a deficit.

- g) Can we see examples of other Councils MTFP to compare how they are written and set out?

Officers informed Members that there were many examples of MTFPs on the webpages of different local authorities. These ranged from simple one page reports to large reports aimed at a variety of audiences including Councillors, Officers and external partners. Officers offered to ask the Council's auditors for examples of MTFPs produced by other local authorities.

- h) What steps, if any, are the Council currently taking to address the deficit in the MTFP (if so – when will they come to the Council/Overview and Scrutiny/the Executive)?

Officers explained that the Council had already taken steps to address the deficit. Members asked if the recent interest rate drop would be likely to increase the deficit. Officers explained that this was unlikely as they had factored in the potential for decreases when the economic situation began to impact on interest rates.

- i) What are the current projections of the MTFP (have they changed for the better/for the worse)?

Officers explained that with regards to current projections of the MTFP, the Council would not need to make savings until 2012. However, this forecast would need to take into account the findings of the consultants', SERCO's, business case. The Chair questioned what would happen if inflation or wages were to rise before 2012. Officers explained that there was a £200,000 margin for 2011/12 that could cover for this

eventuality. However, if circumstances were to significantly change, Officers would report a revised forecast to Members.

Members commented that similar questions regarding the MTFP process had been asked by Members on previous occasions and at other meetings. They agreed that this process should be open and transparent and Members should take the opportunities that are provided to input into the process.

i)) How often will/can you report major changes to the MTFP to Council/Overview and Scrutiny/the Executive?

Officers explained that they would have to report any major changes to the MTFP for Members' consideration as soon as they occurred. Members asked what percentage pay award would result in utilisation of the £200,000 margin. Officers confirmed that a rise in 1.5% would impact significantly on this margin assuming that the Job Evaluation had an impact on the salary bill of 3%.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **Officers provide best practice examples of MTFP documents from other local authorities; and**
- 2) **the report be noted.**

34. DISTRICT CENTRES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Officers explained that the purpose of this item was to monitor the responses to the recommendations that were made by the District Centres Task and Finish Group in June 2008.

Members asked if it would be possible to establish an improvement fund, as recommended by the Task and Finish Group. Officers confirmed that this would be possible but that a decision would be required by Council. The relevant Portfolio Holder, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management, commented that he believed that what was needed was a long term asset management plan for the allocation of resources and plans for the maintenance of all the Council's assets including the District Centres. He also informed the Committee that the Council had recently submitted a bid for funding from the Local Strategic Partnership to fund estate enhancements and security improvements at the Winyates Centre.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

35. WMLGA - SCRUTINY SKILLS TRAINING

The Committee received a report from Councillor Pearce regarding a training event that she had attended organised by the West Midlands Local Government Association (WMLGA).

Councillor Pearce explained that the training was very effective as it made use of interactive training techniques such as role play using actors to act out a scrutiny Committee scenario. The training demonstrated the differences between the old Committee and the new Cabinet and scrutiny system. One of the key messages from the training was the need for scrutiny Members to demonstrate political impartiality when participating in scrutiny related activities. Councillor Pearce explained that the training exercises helped participants explore some of the benefits of scrutiny and participants agreed that scrutiny enabled members to bring their own ideas to the table rather than their political party ideas.

A further message she had taken from the training was that scrutiny Members should be familiar with their Council's procedures and protocols. Councillor Pearce enquired if there was a protocol for Overview and Scrutiny at the Council. Officers confirmed that there was a procedures document for Overview and Scrutiny. However, with all of the ongoing additional changes to scrutiny processes, such as the introduction of Councillor Calls for Action (CCfA) it would not be issued until all of these new procedures had been approved by Members.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

36. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

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37. WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the Committee's Work Programme. They were informed that consideration of Councillor Anderson's proposed policy for the award of contracts to the Voluntary and Community Sector had been scheduled for the meeting on 29 July. However, owing to Officer availability, this had been rescheduled for the 19 August meeting.

Councillor Thomas expressed concern that neither she, nor any other member of the Third Sector Task and Finish Group, had been consulted on this proposed policy. She explained that she would be meeting with relevant Officers to discuss the need for this additional policy. It was requested that Policy Officers, Legal Services Officers section, and Councillor Anderson be invited to attend the meeting on 19 August.

The Chair suggested that as this rescheduling would make the agenda for the 19 August very full, the monitoring of the Role of the Mayor Task and Finish Group's recommendations be moved to the meeting scheduled on 23 September.

RESOLVED that

the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 8.15 pm