

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

28th April 2010

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Phil Mould (Chair), and Councillors K Banks, G Chance, J Pearce and D Taylor

Also Present:

Councillors P Anderson, M Braley and C Gandy.
T Buckley (Co-opted Representative – Unison)

Officers:

B Barr, C Felton and J Pickering
F Scott (Bromsgrove District Council)

Committee Services Officers:

J Bayley and J Smyth

229. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors R King, Smith and Thomas.

230. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any Party Whip.

231. MINUTES

The Committee was provided with brief updates on two of the minutes, namely:

- a) in respect of Minute 220 (Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Panel – Chair's Update), Members were informed that West Mercia Police Authority had made contact and advised that they would be considering the invitation to nominate a co-opted member to join the Panel at their Annual Meeting in June:
and

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Chair

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- b) in respect of Minute 224 c (CfPS Good Scrutiny Awards), Members were informed that ninety five submissions had been received and were currently being short listed. It was anticipated that the results of the short listed submissions would be announced on the 25th May.

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 7th April 2010 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

232. ACTIONS LIST

The Committee considered the latest version of the Actions List and specific mention was made of the following matter:

Action 5: Communal Cleaning Contract for Council properties

Members were informed that the further consultation work requested had commenced and would be completed within eight to twelve weeks. An update would be provided in due course.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

233. CALL-IN AND PRE-SCRUTINY

It was noted that due to the last scheduled meeting of the Executive Committee being cancelled, there had been no call-ins. There were also no requests for any item on the Forward Plan to be pre-scrutinised.

234. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping documents for the Committee to review.

235. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee received reports in relation to current reviews, namely:

- a) Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

Members were informed that the Task and Finish Group had held three further interviews since the last meeting of the

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Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It was further noted that the next meeting was likely to be organised for some time in May, following the Elections.

b) Joint Worcestershire Hub Review

Councillor Pearce reported that issues around monitoring and a general lack of available information had been discussed at the last meeting. Members noted that relevant Officers in at Redditch Borough Council would be providing information about the operation of the Hub in Redditch for consideration at the following meeting when the robustness of the monitoring process would be discussed.

RESOLVED that

the reports be noted.

236. BUS PASS SCHEME: COUNTY PROVISION - UPDATE

The Committee was informed that no further updates had been provided since the previous meeting.

Councillor Gandy reported that she had received a letter relating to a test case in London where the Institute for the Blind had taken a local Council to Court following their decision to restrict use of bus passes and not allow any use prior to 9.30am. They had won the case on the grounds that the decision discriminated against people with sight problems, who were reliant on buses at peak times as they were not able to drive. Councillor Gandy suggested that the success of the test case could potentially lead to other similar claims and was something that would have to be borne in mind and she was intending to raise the matter at a future Leaders Meeting.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

237. GENDER EQUALITIES - UPDATE REPORT

The Committee received a presentation on the Council's Gender Equalities Scheme and the Council's requirement to abide by a new Gender Equality Duty which came into force from April 2007 and publish a scheme showing how the Authority would meet their general duties to eliminate unlawful discrimination between men and women, eliminate harassment based on gender and promote equality of opportunity between men and women.

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Members noted that the gender equality duty required the Council to demonstrate through specific duties and practical measures how they intended to establish and operate the scheme and Officers suggested that a Lead Officer role would need to be established at the end of the process.

It was reported that the 2007 Duties were further amended in 2008 to include demonstrable actions to eliminate discrimination and harassment against transsexual and transgender people across all sectors. Officers advised that emerging new guidance meant the scheme was somewhat fluid at the moment and further changes were likely before coming into effect in June 2011.

Members were advised that the Council was expected to focus on four main issues identified as being the most significant for Gender Equality, namely:

1. income and pay gaps;
2. gender power;
3. violence and aggression against women and girls; and
4. discrimination and harassment against transsexual and transgender people.

The Council would be required to identify what functions were already in place to address the four areas and consider how to provide for what it did not have. Evidence would need to be collected to prove that appropriate consultation, monitoring, assessment of impact of actions and review progress had been undertaken to identify the most important issues for gender equality within the Council's remit. The Council would also have to consider addressing the gender pay-gap within its wider remit.

The Council's Policy would need to be clarified and the process would need to be achieved through:

- 1) leadership;
- 2) ownership of policy objectives by Service Departments;
- 3) collection of information by gender in delivery of services and employment opportunities whenever possible; and
- 4) consultation and involvement with the community and partners.

Members were informed that Bromsgrove's current scheme, whilst not perfect, would probably be acceptable under the new arrangements. Work was being done however, on a new scheme to address longer term objectives.

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Officers provided clarification on a number of points, including a query on whether the Council had undertaken a pay equality audit. Members were advised that this would form part of the Job Evaluation process.

The Head of Legal, Equalities and Democratic Services reported that the vagueness of initial guidance had not helped but new information being provided would help to set up a framework through which specific actions that would fall into the scheme could be taken as a matter of course.

Members discussed the contribution the Council could make to address issues of violence against women and children. Officers advised that the Council could consider providing a range of services, for example rape crisis centres and refuges. Local authorities were being looked to to provide services for an anticipated high demand. It was suggested that the Equality and Human Rights Commission did not seem to understand the financial constraints on small local authorities. Any provision of specialist services would have to be looked at on a partnership basis, such as through shared services.

Officers advised that both recording and monitoring of reported incidents were undertaken and gender discrimination would form part of part of any local authority scheme. Mention was made of the Community Forum, a vibrant group of people who provided very good input into consultations and various other partnerships, such as with the Police. The Council had a number of mechanisms that could be evidenced to prove its compliance; there was, however, a need to ensure that all measures possible were put in place to avoid any challenges.

The Union perspective was that the Gender Equalities Scheme covered a wide, often vague, subject matter and that budgets would potentially be an issue. It was, however, a step in the right direction and something that the Council, working with partners, needed to consider.

It was agreed that of the four main issues identified as being significant, the causes and consequences of violence against women and girls was the most important area for further scrutiny.

RESOLVED that

- 1) the presentation and supporting documents be noted;
and**

- 2) **the domestic violence strand of the identified four main focus areas be referred on to the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Panel for further discussion.**

238. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

The Committee considered a report which detailed youth employment statistics for Redditch Borough Council, together with current initiatives and potential developments. The following matters were highlighted:

- a) Under 30's Employment

The Human Resources Development Manager highlighted the figures detailed in the report which demonstrated the balance of young people employed by the Council on permanent and casual contracts. These figures were not too dissimilar to other authorities if casual employees were not included. It was noted, however, that the authority employed a greater percentage of casual 16 to 24 years that other Local Authorities, predominantly in Leisure Services.

- b) Existing initiatives: Apprenticeships / Work Experience initiatives

Members were reminded of the three year plan that had been agreed in 2009 when a budget had been agreed for the Council to participate in a pilot to encourage apprenticeships and work experience. The apprenticeships' budget was allocated following submissions for placements by Service Managers. The Council currently employed two apprentices with funding in place for a third.

It was reported that, in comparison to some authorities the Council was doing very well with placements increasing year by year, although they were often offered in the same departments. Officers were looking to address this problem and expand the opportunities for placements across the Authority. Members further noted that Officers were currently looking into supporting schools and colleges running the Diplomas in Public Services due to be introduced in September.

c) Potential Future Developments: Graduate Programme and Internships

Members were briefly updated on the National Graduate Development Programme which seeks to recruit and develop graduates with the potential to fill senior management roles in local government as well as the potential for the development of 12 month internships for third year undergraduates in local authorities. It was noted that there would be financial implications as undergraduates would generally be looking for paid placements and internships. For this reason, joining the programme was not regarded as viable at this time.

The Union representative attending suggested that graduate placements and internships formed part of a valid career structure and were worth considering at some point, particularly as there was the potential for the Council to find themselves with a huge gap in knowledge and experience when older, long serving members of staff retired. Members were informed that most local authorities were struggling with recruitment and retention of young people and it was suggested that shared services might provide better prospects for staff development and improve the situation.

Mention was also made of the Future Jobs Fund, a nationwide scheme which was designed to support the creation of jobs for young people aged 18-24 who had been out of work for a year or more. In Worcestershire many of the young people would be supported into 'green jobs' and would be required to work a minimum of 25 hours per week. There was no guarantee that these young people would be residents of Redditch and a number of applications for had been completed by residents living in other parts of Worcestershire. Officers agreed to discuss the matter further with Worcestershire County Council and to urge the authority to ensure that Pertemps, the employment agency which had won the contract to deliver this work in Worcestershire, advertised all Redditch opportunities within the Borough.

It was suggested that the higher aspirations young people had today were not always achievable and students often moved from course to course trying to find a career. Under these circumstances it was suggested that it might be useful for pupils to have 'tasters' of different jobs during school times as this might help them to decide what they wanted to do with their careers.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **the report be noted; and**
- 2) **the Committee continue to monitor the situation with regards to youth employment at the Council.**

239. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

The Committee considered a number of reports, provided by the Audit Commission, on best practice examples of other local authority Medium Term Financial Plans for comparison purposes. This provided an opportunity to identify measures, if any, that could be taken to improve the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy and Plan in future years.

The Director of Finance and Resources reported that, Redditch Borough Council had been scored as a two star Council, as had Bromsgrove. The Audit Commission had been challenged on a number of points, it had been acknowledged that a number of areas did require improvement.

Members were informed that, whilst there was not a lot of risk involved in Medium Term Financial Planning, budget setting was difficult and would remain so for the foreseeable future. Risk management would be important and there was a need to have a transparent plan that provided clear information for Councillors on all budgets and resources. Councillors needed this to ensure they understood budget setting arrangements and could make an informed contribution to the budget setting process. It was further suggested that the community, through Budget Juries, could be more involved in budget setting processes as this would provide an opportunity for better understanding of the Council's finances and efficiencies.

It was noted that a number of areas of the plan needed to be improved, including better management of efficiencies and performance management. It was suggested that Shared Services should be shown as a separate efficiency for clarity. The Plan provided a lot of statistics but did not inform, and this needed to be addressed to ensure Members knew exactly what the Council was doing and its financial position.

Members suggested that the Medium Term Financial Plan should reflect the Corporate Plan and that figures on accumulative borrowing should be shown. They also queried why spending was not shown against individual services. Officers acknowledged that

the accumulative borrowing figures were not provided in quarterly budget monitoring and that this point would be taken on board.

Members also expressed some concerns about budget juries. However, it was clear that the public needed to have a better understanding of the Council's finances and the difficult choices that would need to be made whilst the Council needed to get a feel for what people really wanted.

Members further commented that whilst clarity about the Council's finances was needed there was a risk that lobby groups could try and impose their views. Empowering people was important but not to the point that the Council lost control. The public needed to understand, in simple terms, what was happening with the authority's finances.

RESOLVED that

subject to the comments detailed in the preamble above, the report be noted.

240. REVIEW OF THE OPERATION OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - MUNICIPAL YEAR 2009/10

Members were invited to reflect on the operation of the Committee during the 2009/10 municipal year and consider whether they wished to propose any amendments to current practices.

The Chair commented that the Committee's Annual Report, which had been discussed at the previous meeting, had already highlighted the weaknesses and areas that required improvement. He did not, therefore, believe that the item was suitable for the Committee's consideration.

Members raised the matter of the Council Flat Communal Cleaning Task and Finish review and expressed disappointment at the lack of progress being made to implement the recommendations. The Committee had monitored the low response rate to the initial consultation at a previous meeting and Officers had therefore decided to undertake further, more locally focused, consultations in Winyates and Exhall Close. It was agreed therefore, that pending the completion of the consultation work in those two locations, the Committee continue to monitor the situation.

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RESOLVED that

- 1) **Officers be asked to review the applicability of the end of year review to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee; and**
- 2) **the consultation work being undertaken in response to the recommendations of the Council Flat Communal Cleaning Task and Finish Group continue to be monitored by the Committee.**

241. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

242. WORK PROGRAMME

Members were advised that David McGrath had been invited to deliver an Introduction to Overview and Scrutiny training session at a meeting of the Committee on 2nd June 2010.

The Committee agreed that a letter of thank you be sent to Councillor David Smith for his work and commitment to the Committee during his two years as Vice-Chair.

A note of thanks to the Chair of the Committee was formally requested for all his hard work and support over the past two years.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **a vote of thanks to the Chair of the Committee, Councillor Mould, for all his hard work and support over the past two years be formally recorded;**
- 2) **a letter of thanks be forwarded to Councillor Smith for his work and commitment to the Committee during his two years as Vice-Chair; and**
- 3) **subject to any updates previously agreed during the meeting, the Committee's Work Programme be noted.**

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 9.00 pm

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CHAIR