

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 19th January, 2011

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Diane Thomas (Chair), Councillor Anita Clayton (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Peter Anderson, Bill Hartnett, Roger Hill, Robin King, Brenda Quinney, Mark Shurmer and Graham Vickery.

Also Present:

Councillors Mike Braley and Andrew Brazier
M Collins (Vice Chair of the Standard Committee)

Officers:

J Godwin, C John, P Liddington, J Pickering and D Wheeler

Overview and Scrutiny Officers:

J Bayley and M Craggs

163. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor William Norton. Councillor Roger Hill was named as his substitute.

164. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest nor of any party whip.

165. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8th December 2010 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

166. ACTIONS LIST

Members considered the latest version of the Committee's Actions List. Officers advised Members that all the actions had either

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already been completed or were due to be completed during the course of the meeting.

In particular, Members heard that the Chair had approved a draft letter to Ms Trish Haines, Chief Executive, Worcestershire County Council, outlining the Committee's concerns with the Joint Worcestershire Hub Review.

RESOLVED that

the Committee's Actions List be noted.

167. CALL-IN AND SCRUTINY OF THE FORWARD PLAN

Members were advised that nine of the Committee's recommendations within the External Refurbishment of Housing Stock Report had been approved by the Executive Committee on 12th January 2011. The Chair of the Review, Councillor Graham Vickery, commented that the outcome of the meeting was very positive. The Executive recommended that certain sections of the report required further work, including consulting with Council tenants and owner occupiers in Ombersley Close and Rushock Close over the proposed repainting of their property façades. The outcome of this work would be reported for Members' consideration at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in due course.

Members reviewed the contents of the Forward Plan and considered whether any items were suitable for scrutiny

RESOLVED that

- 1) a report on the Private Sector Home Support Service be received at either Committee meeting of 9th February or 23rd March 2011 for post scrutiny;**
- 2) the Redditch Council Plan 2011-14 be received at the Committee meeting on 23rd March 2011 for pre-scrutiny;
and**
- 3) the Executive Committee decision notes for 12th January 2011 be noted.**

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168. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping documents for consideration.

169. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee received the following reports in relation to current reviews:

a) Promoting Redditch

Councillor Graham Vickery, Chair of the Promoting Redditch Task and Finish Group, informed the Committee that the Group was in the process of assessing other local authorities that represented areas that shared similarities with Redditch and had taken action to improve their town's image: Sunderland; Nuneaton; Telford; and Chorley. The Group was due to interview a representative from the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce to discuss the potential to promote Redditch to businesses at its next meeting on 25th January 2011.

b) Work Experience Opportunities

Councillor Peter Anderson, Chair of the Work Experience Opportunities Task and Finish Group, informed the Committee that Councillor Andrew Brazier had very recently replaced Councillor William Norton on the Group as a Conservative Group representative. Councillor Norton had resigned from the Group due to personal commitments.

The Committee heard that the Group had met with another representative from the Redditch Connexions Office to discuss the importance of work experience to local young people, especially those who were neither in education, employment, or training. The interview had reinforced the view held by the Group that the work of the Education Business Partnership (EBP) was integral to the future success of the Work Experience Scheme both within Redditch and County wide. The Group had therefore agreed to write a letter to Councillor Elizabeth Eyre, County Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Young People (12-19 years) to advocate the work of the EBP and to seek reassurance regarding its future function.

RESOLVED that

the update reports be noted.

170. CIVIL PARKING ENFORCEMENT

Members received a verbal summary of the report which provided an annual update on the Civil Parking Enforcement service.

Officers explained that the service was operating successfully overall. In particular, Officers reiterated the statement from the previous year's report that the service represented an excellent example of a successful partnership arrangement between neighbouring local authorities. Officers also reported that the public had become accustomed to parking their vehicles in compliance with the Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). Officers also referred Members to the actions that been taken to deal with the issues of concern highlighted by the Committee when the annual update was last received at a meeting on 24th February 2010.

Officers explained that the service was self-sufficient in terms of operating costs and reported that a small surplus had been achieved in 2009/10. However, it was emphasised that the scheme was in operation to improve the lives of local residents rather than to be profit-making. Officers also reported that the Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) were extremely responsive to increased patrol demand, for example by focusing on taxi areas late at night.

Members expressed concern that certain pay and display machines, especially within the town centre, were too complex which led to people attempting to avoid parking charges as a result. Furthermore, it was suggested that some parked cars had dangerously obstructed roads during the inclement weather. Officers undertook to note these concerns, but indicated that any obstruction on the Public Highway was a matter that could only be dealt with by the Police.

Members concluded by praising the excellent work of Officers involved.

RESOLVED that

the report be noted.

171. BUDGET BIDS 2011/12 UPDATE

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Officers delivered a presentation and report on the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2011-14 to enable Members to review the current position and recommend changes on the draft budget proposals.

Members were informed that only those revenue and capital bids that had been classified as a 'high' priority had been included within the Medium Term Financial Plan. This had been necessitated by the requirement to cover the Council's medium term shortfall resulting from the two year provisional grant settlement from Government that was significantly greater than previously estimated.

Other immediate means to cover the shortfall had been identified. This included the undertaking of a full detailed review of all unavoidable pressures and proposals for income generation, and also an extensive line by line analysis of all expenditure and income which would deliver savings that would have no detrimental impact on service delivery. A number of options for change had also been proposed, including staff terms and conditions of service; and also a reduction in the scrutiny budget.

Officers informed Members that the limiting of the Council Tax rise in 2011/12 to 0% would be off-set by a 2.5 per cent Government grant for 2011/12. This would cover the difference of the original assumption. This followed Government's assumption that there would be no Council Tax rises during this period, although it was explained to Members that the Council was not strictly prohibited from doing so.

Members suggested that it might be more appropriate for the Council to focus on achieving a gross rather than net minimum approved level of general fund balances. This had followed concern that the Council might underestimate the final balance by focusing on the net figure.

The Committee also argued that the principal focus of the budget bids should be on serving the immediate need of the public. It was suggested that bids that would enable the Council to deliver services that supported the public should be prioritised over those that promised either longer-term benefits or benefits that would not be directly accrued by the public.

Members heard that the capital bid for the installation of Solar PV panels on suitable Council buildings had been re-classified from a medium to a high bid. Officers expected that the cost of installation would be off-set by the Government's commitment to reward green

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measures introduced by local authorities. Members requested further information on the efficiency of the Solar Panel that had been installed at the Countryside Centre in 2005/6 on the basis that this would help to inform a decision regarding the Solar Panel capital bid (£48,000).

Members commented that they often encountered difficulties when attempting to use the Council's IT system. In part, this was due to a need for the Council to comply with Government protocol concerning IT usage at local authorities. Officers agreed to provide further information with regards to this matter.

The Committee also requested further information on a number of proposed bids, including: fleet replacement, in particular regarding mileage and age of the current fleet (Capital bid - £471,000); the costs and risks involved with not pursuing the revenue bid regarding security for PCs (£6,000); the breakdown of the revenue bid for organisational development (£50,000); and flood alleviation measures at Batchley Brook and the potential for Persimmon Homes to contribute to costs.

In relation to the organisational development bid to members commented that in previous years expenditure on training had been less than anticipated because many members of staff had not utilised the opportunity. In order to monitor this situation Officers agreed to provide information about the take-up of staff training and the costs involved within the quarterly budget monitoring reports.

Some Members expressed the view that the proposed funding of the Grants Officer post would help reflect the Council's continued commitment to supporting the voluntary sector. It was suggested that allocating further resources to supporting the voluntary sector would help enable voluntary sector organisations to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on the Council for support, thereby helping the Council to realise long term cost benefits as a consequence. However, it was conversely argued that the Council should prioritise short term benefits, including boosting employment rather than the Grants Officer post.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) Officers provide the information requested for consideration at the following meeting of the Committee;**
- 2) subject to receipt of this additional information the Committee reconsider the budget bids item at the following meeting of the Committee; and**

3) the report be noted.

172. NATIONAL ANGLING MUSEUM TASK AND FINISH GROUP - UPDATE ON ACTIONS

Members received a verbal summary of a report monitoring the outcome of actions taken in response to the work of the National Angling Museum Task and Finish Group.

In particular, Members were referred to the three actions within the report that Officers had committed to undertake to help Councillors assess the feasibility of setting up a National Angling Museum. The actions included: arranging for a temporary fishing tackle exhibition to take place at Forge Mill Needle Museum; hosting an angling competition at the Arrow Valley Lake; and discussing the feasibility of securing funding to establish a Museum in Redditch with the Regional Manager for the Heritage Lottery Fund.

A total of 216 visitors had attended the temporary fishing tackle exhibition at Forge Mill Needle Museum, which took place in October – November 2010. This was comparatively low to other exhibitions, despite the considerable resources that had been allocated. Members were informed that the planned angling competition at Arrow Valley Lake had not taken place at the same time as the exhibition, as originally requested, mainly because fish were semi-hibernating during the autumn months and it was not a suitable time to participate in fishing activities. Furthermore, due to changes in the Senior Management Team it was not known whether the discussion with the Regional Manager for the Heritage Lottery Fund took place. However, the estimated costs involved in extending Forge Mill Needle Museum in 2006 for a separate project had been between £500,000 - £1million and it was unlikely that developing the site to accommodate a National Angling Museum could be delivered under this budget.

The Chair expressed the view that proceeding with the establishment of a museum that appeared to attract very little public interest would represent a potential waste of a significant portion of the Council's limited resources and asserted that available resources should instead be directed towards upgrading the Borough's existing visitor attractions, including the Palace Theatre. Moreover, it was felt that the establishment of a National Angling Museum within the Borough did not appear to be commercially viable and would therefore be an inappropriate use of the Council's resources.

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However, some Members cautioned that the Committee was not in a suitable position to consider the report as not all of the earlier agreed actions had been carried out, regardless of whether it was inappropriate to proceed with the scheme. Moreover, monitoring the outcome of action agreed in response to a policy review formed an important Overview and Scrutiny function and consideration of the report remained a valid exercise.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) no further action be taken to establish a National Angling Museum in Redditch; and**
- 2) the report be noted**

173. JOINT WORCESTERSHIRE SCRUTINY FRAMEWORK

Having received the Joint Worcestershire Scrutiny Framework for consideration, Members reiterated their dissatisfaction with the Joint Worcestershire Hub Scrutiny Report.

Concerns were also expressed about the content of the draft framework which had been developed by the Worcestershire Joint Chairs and Vice Chairs Scrutiny Network. It was suggested that the framework needed to be simplified, though how this should be achieved was considered to require further consideration.

RESOLVED that:

the Joint Worcestershire Scrutiny Framework be reconsidered at the following meeting.

174. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

175. WORK PROGRAMME

Officers informed Members that the draft version of the Committee's 2010/11 Annual Report was due to be received on 2nd March 2011. Members were also advised of recent amendments to the Work Programme.

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RESOLVED that:

the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 9.20 pm