

AT A MEETING
- of the -
**CORPORATE SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL** held at
the Council House, Walsall on
26 October 2006 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor Griffiths (Chair)
Councillor Sarohi (Vice Chair)
Councillor Bird
Councillor Phillips
Councillor Rochelle
Councillor Turner

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Carole Evans (Executive Director Corporate Services)
Rob Flinter (Assistant Director Performance Management)
Lynn Hall (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)
Sharon Tait (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)
Simon Evans (Performance Officer)

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Stuart Bentley (Scrutiny Officer)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Councillor M. Longhi (Portfolio Holder – Transformation and Performance Management)

17/06. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors C.Towe and D.Shires.

18/06. SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for this meeting.

19/06. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of the political groups represented on the panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

20/06. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved

- That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 August 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as true and accurate.

(Annexed)

21/06. FEEDBACK FROM WORKING GROUPS

Councillor Griffiths reported that the recommendations for of the revenues and benefits service review group had now been drafted and circulated. He then invited comment.

(Annexed)

Councillor Bird sought clarification on the timescales for when this report would go to cabinet in order to establish their views on the position and funding for these recommendations.

Councillor Griffiths suggested that he didn't see a problem with the recommendations and they should go forward to the next cabinet meeting.

Councillor Bird thanked the chair and re-iterated his concerns over the current systems in place.

Resolved

- That the recommendations contained within the draft report of the revenues and benefits working group be taken forward for consideration at the next available cabinet.

Councillor Griffiths then invited Sharon Tait to provide an update on the member visit to Telford and Wrekin Council on Wednesday 1 November.

Sharon Tait confirmed that arrangements had been made to view the Electronic Data Management System (EDMS), although it would not be possible to see scanning of documents as these were all done off-site. Demonstrations had been requested to show; case management, priority management and work flow. Samples of the types of reports and management information would be available. Members were reminded that transportation was arranged for 8.30am at the front of the Council House with an 11.30am return from Telford.

Councillor Bird asked whether portfolio holders were made aware of such visits and sought clarification as to whether Councillor O'Hare, as portfolio holder for resources, would be coming.

Stuart Bentley informed the panel that minutes of full meetings were circulated to portfolio holders but that the minutes of working groups were not; hence Councillor O'Hare may not be aware of the visit. At the request of Panel, Stuart Bentley agreed to invite the portfolio holder.

Councillor Bird confirmed that he thought it would be a good idea due to the nature of the visit, the issues involved and the current backlog of cases.

Carole Evans replied to Councillor Bird to confirm that the backlog of 6000 new claim cases had now been cleared.

Simon Evans confirmed the names of the four members and two officers who would be attending the visit to Telford on Wednesday 1 November.

22/06. INFORMATION ITEMS

Councillor Griffiths introduced the briefing note on formula grant and deprivation indicators that had been circulated prior to the meeting and asked members if they would like to raise any questions.

(Annexed)

Councillor Bird commented that there was more opportunity to raise grants based on the level of performance of the welfare rights service.

Councillor Rochelle asked for clarity on the levels of grants that other authorities were receiving. He commented on the information presented by Ian Jones which showed that Sandwell Council were receiving £9m compared to Walsall's £2m.

Carole Evans clarified that there had been a degree of controversy over the allocation and calculation over one particular grant. She advised the panel that she would prepare and circulate a note to members which would show how grants are allocated.

Councillor Bird commented that it would be a good opportunity to get out and canvass in order to increase the number of people, which in turn would help to raise Walsall's grant income.

Councillor Griffiths asked whether it was possible to separate out the grants received or whether they were received in one lump sum.

Carole Evans commented that the calculation of grants was not always straightforward. If the council were to increase the number of claimants, it may not necessarily produce an increase in funding. The allocation was based on a proportion of the total pot, so if others were to similarly increase Walsall would receive the same amount of funding.

Councillor Turner commented that if Walsall should stand still and others did more, then Walsall could drop in level of funding. He asked whether any training could be made available to members to show what grants were previously available and what is available now.

Councillor Phillips stated that it was as easy to confuse the public as it was to support them with information. The subject was difficult and confusing and so

benefits awareness sessions, run by officers for members to make them aware of the information and issues, would be helpful. He commented that councillors could then improve the quality of advice they were giving.

Sharon Tait suggested that officers could put information on to the intranet site for members to access.

Councillor Bird asked whether the number of staff at Dartmouth House could be increased as this could help out the figures greatly.

Councillor Rochelle commented that members had already received training on Attendance Allowance and Severe Disability Allowance and meetings had been provided. He asked whether any further development was available and whether this could be mentioned to Organisational Development.

Councillor Phillips commented that a little signposting would be helpful. He asked for clarity as to whether the £195k figure in the briefing note was the final figure or could this figure go higher.

Councillor Bird suggested that this was an opportunity to get ahead of the game and really push it. He clarified whether there was still only six staff at Dartmouth House.

Sharon Tait stated that there were eleven permanent staff but the service was looking to recruit six extra staff for two years with Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) money.

Councillor Bird asked whether the extra six staff could be funded beyond the two years, utilising core funding.

Lynn Hall stated that the unit was investigating the possibility of moving towards charitable trust status, which would allow them to bring in extra funding and help to fund extra staff.

Councillor Bird asked whether it was possible to calculate how much each staff member brought in and then work out how much extra they could create with extra staff.

Councillor Griffiths suggested that further guidance would be required.

Lynn Hall agreed to provide details of the types of activity the welfare rights team were providing to the revenues and benefits working group.

Councillor Bird stated that this would allow them to see how much extra revenue was brought into the council.

Carole Evans commented that this was very much of a moving feast and was based on what other councils were also doing and so it would change every year. Data detailing the numbers of people lifted out of poverty would be seen as the best broad indicator to show this.

Councillor Bird reiterated the importance of getting the message out to those who were not benefits aware.

Councillor Rochelle stated that as the government provided the funding for the anti-poverty unit they were also able to direct where they worked. Now that there was core funding for the welfare rights service and these positions, were we able to go to other areas.

Councillor Bird responded by stating that deprivation existed in all wards and all locations, as such the team needed to work everywhere.

Councillor Griffiths commented that this information needed to be available as soon as possible to the revenues and benefits working group.

Resolved

- Officers to prepare figures and information on the impact of the welfare rights unit and present them at the next meeting of the revenues and benefits working group.
- Carole Evans to prepare and circulate a note to members which shows how grants are allocated.

Councillor Griffiths then welcome Simon Evans to the meeting.

Simon Evans presented an overview of benchmarking theory, its purpose and how members could get engaged. He further tabled a sheet detailing useful internet webpages for benchmarking.

(Annexed)

Councillor Griffiths stated that the sharing of information was the ideal position and asked if other councils were prepared to share.

Simon Evans replied that it depended on the circumstances, but that in general, most councils were willing to share as long as it was a two-way street.

Carole Evans added that other councils actively sought to benchmark against Walsall, where Walsall was seen to be exemplars of best practice, e.g. First Stop Shop, the Corporate Integrated Planning and Performance Framework (CIPPF).

Councillor Bird stated that affecting change had always been an issue and he asked if Simon had seen this.

Simon Evans replied that is was increasingly the case that to stand still would effectively mean that the council would go backwards. There was a continuing culture change and services were increasingly open to transformation.

Lynn Hall added that the revenues and benefits service were finalising a software package that would produce a list of best practice services in order to benchmark against.

Sharon Tait also added that the service was a member of a benchmarking club with other authorities.

Councillor Longhi stated the new Performance Information Management System (PIMS) was in the process of being rolled out and was keen for members to be kept informed.

Rob Flinter added that this was a software package designed to help manage performance data in a much better way, enabling members to access more live data.

Councillor Bird asked what it would tell him.

Rob Flinter replied that it would be possible for members to see how services were performing against targets and how they were placed in a national context.

Councillor Griffiths stated that reduction in time taken from data production to it being available to members, would be beneficial.

Councillor Bird asked if this would improve services at the grass roots level.

Rob Flinter replied that some of the indicators available measure customer satisfaction and these would be available through PIMS.

Councillor Turner added that inspectors also consult the public during the inspection process.

Rob Flinter confirmed this and added that mystery shopping was part of the inspection process.

Councillor Phillips added a note of caution that the answers to surveys were very dependant on the phrasing of the questions asked.

Rob Flinter replied that the questions were set at a national level to be populated locally.

Councillor Phillips also highlighted that some services gave differing responses to elected members than to the general public. However, he agreed that benchmarking could also help to avoid problems when transforming a service.

Councillor Griffiths stated that it was the role of elected members to ensure that services were performing.

23/06 KEY DISCUSSION ITEMS

Councillor Griffiths presented a briefing note on the review of the value for money (vfm) framework trialled by the revenue and benefits service and asked Sharon Tait and Lynn Hall to take the panel through the findings.

Lynn Hall stated that the service had found the exercise very useful as a method of producing a baseline for the service and it may be useful to re-apply the framework at a later date in order to evaluate improvement. However, they would like to have had a meeting with scrutiny to clarify certain issues upfront, such as the reasoning behind the assessment. Further, any future service would require more time to collate the required data.

Sharon Tait added that benchmarking was difficult as other councils did not run in exactly the same way as Walsall. She also thought the document needed to change to make it more user friendly.

Councillor Griffiths replied that the original framework was originally a guide and he was pleased to see that some very interesting issues had arisen.

Lynn Hall highlighted that benchmarking needed to be well underway before the framework was applied.

Sharon Tait added that the framework had helped the service focus on value for money, which had now informed service plan development.

Cllr Bird raised concerns regarding the length of time taken to answer telephone calls and stated that he had contacted BT who were busy but took his number and promised to 'phone back which they did within 15 minutes.

Lynn Hall responded that we hadn't got this type of up to date technology but teams had been realigned to improve performance and services to customers.

Simon Evans added that the service would have welcomed a hand back to a scrutiny meeting in order to go over the findings.

Rob Flinter added that the framework may also benefit from a direction of travel statement and the development of clear criteria for the choosing of services to be assessed.

Simon Evans then tabled a revised framework and highlighted the main changes to the original document.

(annexed)

Resolved

- Officers to prepare draft guidelines that incorporate the findings of the revenues and benefits pilot. This will be presented to panel at the next full meeting.

24/06 TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Councillor Griffiths informed members of a forthcoming event on the 29 November organised by INLOGOV.

25/06 FORWARD PLAN

Stuart Bentley informed the panel that this item would be sent out separately.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.20 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....

DRAFT