

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

**PRESENT**

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

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

Carole Evans (Executive Director (Corporate Services))  
Sarah Homer (Assistant Director - Strategic Transformation)  
James Walsh (Assistant Director - Finance)  
Lynn Hall (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)  
Sharon Tait (Joint Head of Revenues and Benefits)

**SCRUTINY SUPPORT**

Simon Evans (Performance and Scrutiny Officer)

**26/06. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillor C Towe.

**27/06. SUBSTITUTIONS**

There were no substitutions for this meeting.

**28/06. 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.

**29/06. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

Councillor Young asked for her apologies to be noted in the minutes.

## RESOLVED

- That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as true and accurate, following the addition of Councillor Young's comments.

(Annexed)

## 30/06. FEEDBACK FROM WORKING GROUPS

Councillor Griffiths asked if the minutes represented a true and accurate reflection of the minutes.

Councillor Phillips asked for his apologies to be added to the minutes.

## RESOLVED

- That the minutes of the working group held on 5 December 2006, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as true and accurate, following the addition of Councillor Phillip's comments.

(Annexed)

## 31/06 FEEDBACK FROM THE MEMBER VISIT TO TELFORD COUNCIL

Councillor Griffiths thanked Sharon Tait for the briefing note on the visit to Telford Council which clearly demonstrated the benefits of having an EDMS system

Councillor Bird asked whether the proposed visit to Lichfield to view the competitor system to the one in use at Telford had been arranged yet.

Lynn Hall stated that a December date had been identified with Lichfield Council, but this would have proved to be very tight in terms of timescales. Particularly in light of extra funding now being available if the EDMS system is introduced by 31 March 2007. As a result tenders have now been distributed which have to be returned by the end of December. This will result in on-site demonstrations from potential suppliers.

## RESOLVED

- Officers to inform members of the dates when suppliers will be holding on-site demonstrations of their EDMS systems.

## 31/06 BRIEFING NOTE ON THE COUNCIL MOTION TO CONSIDER INDEPENDENT TRUST FOR THE WELFARE RIGHTS SERVICE

Councillor Bird reminded the panel that Council had asked scrutiny to look at the proposal and whether indeed it was the right move for Walsall, particularly in line with the tight timescales.

Councillor Griffiths questioned whether the timescales could be quickened if outside consultants were used; he suggested the process would take longer if we undertook an internal assessment.

Sharon Tait informed the panel that there was no budget provision to pay for a consultant and the service plan had not included this activity, so the appointment of an external consultant would provide the capacity necessary to undertake this project.

Councillor Phillips reminded the panel that trust status has been considered before, for example the New Art Gallery and that in that case it was possible to move towards trust status quite quickly.

Councillor Bird stated that as this was a directive from Council we would have to find the money to fund a consultant.

Carole Evans informed the panel that it is both important and good practice to produce a full business options appraisal to consider the pros and cons of the various options open to the council. The 2006/7 Revenues and Benefits service plan did not include any mention of this proposal and consequently no budget or time had been put aside. She stated the turnaround of the service so far had been very good and it was important not to jeopardise the progress. She also stated that it was important not to embark on new projects without a comprehensive understanding and clear plan set out knowing the full implications of the approach. If the panel made the decision to engage a consultant to investigate this proposal then monies would have to be found to pay for it from the wider council budget, central contingency having been exhausted for this year.,

Councillor Young stated that as the motion was passed unanimously at Council, then a way had to be found of ensuring it was in place by April 2007.

Councillor Phillips wanted to congratulate the service for their figures and improvement and asked for clarity on what a business case for each item actually meant. He also expressed his disappointment that the Welfare Rights manager was not invited to attend the meeting.

Councillor Griffiths explained that Lynn Hall and Sharon Tait were the joint Heads of Revenues and Benefits and were here to represent the service and advise the panel.

Councillor Phillips expressed his concerns around the timescale to reach a decision.

Councillor Bird asked whether there was any idea on costs involved for the consultant and whether or not the Corporate Services Panel still had a budget to cover such costs

Sharon Tait responded that no detailed work had been undertaken on costs yet but provided a preliminary estimate in the region of £10 - £15k.

Carole Evans confirmed that a modest budget existed but that this was across the whole of scrutiny and not apportioned directly to individual panels.

Councillor Bird stated that Ian Jones had presented a very strong case and that a resolution had been passed at Council stating that if it was the right decision then we should look to implement it. If this meant that funding had to be identified then this needed to happen. He suggested that there are two key stages; firstly to consider is it the right thing to do for Walsall, secondly, if it was how quickly it could be in place. He stated that he was unhappy with what he was hearing and suggested that the service should also be core funded.

Carole Evans replied to the questions raised. She said that officers need to feel comfortable that they can bring information to and advise the panel even when messages may be difficult. Prior to a decision being made as to the way forward, it was essential that a proper objective options appraisal is undertaken to inform that decision. In order to do this within the timescales indicated, the service needed to procure external specialist advice. Such an appraisal would provide information regarding funding regimes, which ones would open and which would close along with other opportunities and risks. The consultants would talk to staff and external contacts and determine whether similar approaches had been taken elsewhere and value for money issues. She stated that to move to a trust approach for this activity would be groundbreaking and as such the best possible advice needed to be sought to enable informed decision making.

Councillor Bird stated that previous reports had gone to full council with a detailed financial report and questioned why this had not happened for this item.

Councillor Rochelle commented that as the proposal wasn't in next years budget either the panel should make a recommendation for it to be so.

Carole Evans confirmed that new monies would be available from the central contingency fund in April when the new financial year begins.

Councillor Young said that if we believe the benefits of a charitable trust then a figure of £10k - £15k for consultants is comparatively small and questioned whether the benefits would still be available if we delayed any longer.

Councillor Turner commented that it would be wrong to let another year to go by. He stated that a lot of people in need are new cases, often people in their 70s and 80s, he claimed that deprivation has changed and the council needed to consider how it used the welfare rights service.

Carole Evans reiterated the importance of producing a detailed business case prior to making a decision.

Councillor Young commented that if the facts and figures are to be believed then we need to go ahead and an external consultant needed to confirm this.

Councillor Bird said he agreed with the comments made by Carole Evans and referred to the two pronged approach mentioned earlier whilst also questioning what it meant for staff, the service, the borough and to consider TUPE arrangements. He stated that the panel should not pre-judge this and would need the advice of a consultant to look at this independently, possibly with a separate panel who would ask the full panel to recommend it.

Sharon Tait acknowledged the benefit of the work of the consultant and suggested this work could also be used as a revenue stream as the information could then be sold to other councils.

Councillor Bird commented that next year's budget is not yet set and the panel does not have to support it. There was the possibility of putting this proposal forward and taking something else out.

Carole Evans stated that the deadline of 31 March is tight and even if the panel agreed to implement the findings of a consultant it could not be in place by 1 April. She confirmed that she had authority to make allocations from central contingency, although there were no funds from that source until next financial year.

Councillor Bird stated that it was his recollection that the service would be core funded and questioned as to how this would be accommodated in next year's budget.

Carole Evans stated that a greater proportion of the service was now funded from the council's mainstream budget as approved by council at last year's budget setting meeting. Choosing to fund the whole service in this way could sub optimise the funding streams available and this may not be the best value for money for the council and its residents. In order to achieve the best value for money all options would need to be evaluated.

Councillor Griffiths clarified that this represented a huge potential opportunity and benefit particularly as no other Council had this in place.

Councillor Bird suggested that this was in place at Sandwell.

Lynn Hall replied that she could find no evidence that it was in place at Sandwell.

Councillor Shires asked whether it was outsourced as well as a charitable trust in Sandwell.

Lynn Hall confirmed that only parts of the Sandwell service are outsourced and that she had been advised that they did not have a charitable trust in place at Sandwell.

Councillor Griffiths stated that there were no examples of other authorities having this in place yet they were able to draw in extra funding, as a result it would also be important to look at this channel before moving down any other.

Councillor Rochelle said that Ian Jones had informed the panel that both Wolverhampton and Sandwell receive more funding than Walsall.

James Walsh said that deprivation facts and figures had been presented to the panel previously and it was difficult to directly link deprivation to grant allocation as there were a variety of factors that impacted on funding. Dampening, and the changes in the numbers of benefit recipients in other councils, relative to Walsall, removed the theoretical pound for pound linkage between the increase in claimants and an increase in grant allocation.

Councillor Phillips asked for clarification on this point.

Carole Evans stated that whilst a link existed, as set out in the briefing note to the panel at a previous meeting, it was very difficult to provide a direct correlation between the two. In addition, the position for Walsall had to be considered relative to all other councils and it was important not to overstate the notional financial benefits by just focussing on the local picture. The most important outcomes were the additional benefits for Walsall residents to improve quality of life and alleviate poverty.

Councillor Turner said that if we do nothing and stand still others would go forward, and that this was in the minutes of the last meeting.

James Walsh stated that a value for money assessment had not been completed on the welfare rights service and this needed to be completed before making any assessment against other authorities. He suggested that they may receive extra funding but that this could be achieved on a different level of resources. He advised that the total picture of an anti-poverty strategy should be considered.

Councillor Shires questioned why no other council has gone down this path if the benefits were so great. She also asked for clarification on who Ian Jones was.

Sharon Tait informed the panel that Ian Jones was the manager of the welfare rights service.

Councillor Shires said she was informed that he was also a Councillor at Sandwell and so why hadn't Sandwell gone down this route?

Councillor Bird said that he had pushed this issue and not Ian Jones as he could see the potential benefits of a charitable trust for Walsall.

Lynn Hall replied that the consultant would establish whether other councils had gone down this route.

Councillor Phillips clarified that the grant fund is available as a percentage of a finite pot and the longer we wait the less chance we would have of a bigger slice.

Councillor Griffiths stated that we needed to see whether it would turn out to be as beneficial as it appeared to be from the preliminary figures

Councillor Young asked for a date to be confirmed as to when it would be in place.

Carole Evans stated that the advice and findings of the consultant should be reviewed before confirming dates and that a special meeting could be arranged to consider the findings. If the business options appraisal showed that moving to a trust status was in the best interests of the council, then the process would be commenced once a decision had been made. The various steps of the process would indicate that it would be in place at some point during 2007/8, but the consultants brief would include an assessment of next steps for this route.

Councillor Phillips asked for assurances that the timeline presented would be the very latest dates and there would be no slippage in this.

Councillor Bird asked whether the work for the consultant had to go out to tender.

Carole Evans confirmed that the process had to comply with the council's finance and contract procedure rules but would maintain best endeavours to ensure the timeline was met.

Councillor Griffiths suggested that it would be a good idea to have an update on proceedings at the next full panel meeting on 8 February.

#### RESOLVED

- Officers to engage outside consultants to undertake a comprehensive options appraisal to identify whether it is in the best interests of Walsall Council for the Welfare Rights Service to become an Independent Trust
- Officers to identify resources to pay for the work of the consultants

Councillor Young suggested a vote on the resolution.

Councillor Griffiths asked for those in favour of the resolution to show their hand.

The resolution was passed unanimously.

#### 32/06 REVISED VALUE FOR MONEY (VFM) ASSESSMENT TOOL

Councillor Griffiths reminded members that this item had been successfully trialled within the revenues and benefits service and now incorporated the feedback from this trial. He asked members for comments.

Councillor Phillips commented that the document includes additional guidance which was not for the panel to decide today but would prove helpful.

#### RESOLVED

- That the vfm assessment tool be taken forward to Scrutiny Management Board and recommended for use with all other scrutiny panels.

33/06 BRIEFING NOTE ON HOUSING GRANT ALLOCATION

Councillor Griffiths introduced this item and asked Carole Evans for any additional comments.

Carole Evans responded that the note refers back to a request at the last scrutiny panel. She indicated that the level of grant funding would alter again for 2007/08.

34/06 Forward Plan

Contents of the forward plan were noted.

35/06 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 29 January 2007 (budget) and 8 February 2007 full panel.

TERMINATION OF MEETING

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.06 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....