

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
HELD ON MONDAY 21 MARCH 2011 FROM 7PM TO 8.05PM**

*Present:- Norman Jorgensen (Chairman), Michael Firmager (Vice-Chairman),
Alistair Auty, Jenny Lissaman and Stuart Munro*

Also present:-

*Andy Nicholls, Economic Development Officer
Madeleine Shopland, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Councillor Philip Mirfin, Chair of Audit Committee*

PART I

49. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 6 January 2011 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

50. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Chris Bowring.

51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Alistair Auty declared a personal interest in Item 55.00 Update on Governance Arrangements of Local Authority Companies and the Executive Trading and Enterprise Sub-Committee Report on the grounds that he had been approached with regards to becoming a Member Director of Wokingham Enterprises Limited.

52. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

53. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

54. UPDATE ON CONSULTATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Given the current situation with the SDL's it had been agreed to defer the Consultation Scrutiny review.

RESOLVED That the update be noted.

55. UPDATE ON GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY COMPANIES AND THE EXECUTIVE TRADING AND ENTERPRISE SUB-COMMITTEE REPORT

Councillor Mirfin presented the Audit Committee's comments on the Panel's review on the Governance Arrangements of Local Authority Companies and the Executive Trading and Enterprise Sub Committee.

During the discussion of this item the following points were made:

- The Audit Committee had made comments on the Panel's report and had asked various questions of the Head of Governance and Democratic Services who had provided answers. The Audit Committee would be reviewing these answers at a future meeting.

- The Audit Committee had recommended that a 'generic governance checklist' be formulated which could be followed prior to the establishment of any future local authority trading companies to ensure consistency. The Audit Committee had felt that they should be made aware of any forthcoming local authority trading companies before they were established.
- It was important that officer directors had the appropriate skills and were from the relevant service area.
- Whilst the Audit Committee had felt that the Joint Board should meet in public to further transparency Councillor Mirfin accepted that this would not necessarily be possible because of commercially sensitive information which would be discussed at these meetings.
- Audit Committee members had asked whether there were any restrictions on the company issuing additional shares. It was felt that this area could be further looked at.
- The Audit Committee believed that it was important that governance arrangements were handled correctly.
- Members had some concerns regarding Members as Directors and possible conflicts of interest and had questioned whether Overview and Scrutiny members and Audit Committee members would be able to be Directors.
- Training would be integral for Officers and Members who were appointed as Directors.
- Members had questioned how the Council would convey its wishes to the Authorised Representative and how this Authorised Representatives would convey these wishes to WEL at the Annual General meeting. The Chair of the Audit Committee questioned how the Council would convey its wishes to TESC.
- The Panel had recommended that for the initial two years of trading the reporting should be on a quarterly basis, the frequency to be reviewed after two years. The Audit Committee had suggested that updates be provided every three years on an ongoing basis.
- It was noted that the Executive had accepted all of the Panel's recommendations at its meeting on 22 February.
- The Panel requested that an update be provided at the Panel's first meeting in the next municipal year on WEL's progress and the progress of the implementation of the Panel's recommendations.

RESOLVED That the update be noted.

56. REVIEW INTO POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE TO RESIDENTS DURING THE RECESSION

The Panel were reminded that the now defunct Finance Overview and Scrutiny Panel had conducted a review into possible assistance to residents during the recession, in 2009. Monitoring the progress of the review's recommendations had been delegated to the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel. The Economic Development Officer provided an update on the progress of the three of eight recommendations that had been agreed by the Executive on 25 March 2010.

During the discussion of this item the following points were made:

- The Panel were informed that approximately 1500 people were claiming Job Seekers Allowance, which was a 25% reduction in the number of people claiming just over a year ago. In addition the number of unfilled vacancies in the borough had increased. Whilst recent economic indicators were positive the situation remained fragile and it was possible that the recent events in the Middle East and Japan could impact on businesses in the Thames Valley.

- The first recommendation had been that advice and schemes already offered by the Council to assist residents and local businesses through the economic downturn be better publicised. Members were informed that the Council's website had been updated and improved. Pages had been redesigned to make them more user-friendly and new sections had been added, including information on vacant property units across Wokingham Borough aimed at helping individuals interested in setting up their own business. A Member commented that whilst the website was a good means of engaging with residents not all people had access to the internet.
- Businesses had been advised of the business rate referral scheme and of appropriate discounts and exemptions.
- The Council was continuing to pay the majority of invoices below £2000 within 10 days. A Member questioned whether the Council used credit cards to pay invoices. The Economic Development Officer commented that he wasn't aware of this but offered to investigate and report back.
- Meetings were being held regularly with Chamber of Commerce to keep them informed of developments effecting business. In addition the Economic Development Officer continues to work closely with individuals businesses and arranges meetings to resolve issues and develop strong relationships.
- The Council was working with other Berkshire authorities on a Berkshire wide procurement process. It was hoped that this would make the process easier to access. Members stressed that it was important that small businesses were also able to access the procurement process. The Panel questioned whether Senior Officers met with local businesses. The Economic Development Officer commented that the Chief Executive supported Business Forum breakfasts, the next of which would be held on 11 May 2011 and also meets with individual businesses when required. The Council was looking to hold at least four business events a year. The Strategic Director for Strategy & Corporate Affairs also meets regularly with the Chamber of Commerce. It was agreed that whilst Senior Officers should meet with local businesses meetings needed to have a purpose.
- The Revenue and Benefits team had received a Customer Service Award from the Cabinet Office for excellence in dealing with customer queries and promoting awareness amongst residents.
- The Finance Overview and Scrutiny Panel's third recommendation had been that the potential benefits and cost implications of a Berkshire wide Credit Union is further examined. Members were notified that there had initially been concerns regarding the long term financial viability of a Credit Union. However, these issues are being resolved and the Council had indicated to Community Savings and Loans that a contribution of £15,000 would be made which would be funded from the Proceeds of Crime Act monies. In response to Member queries regarding the Credit Union, the Economic Development Officer stated that many of those people who used the Union were unable to access conventional bank loans which and were forced to borrow at more expensive rates. These financial difficulties potentially impacted on their ability to pay their rent and other bills and led to the further difficulties. The Council would work with the Credit Union to help mitigate the impact of people falling into debt.
- Whilst the Credit Union no longer had an office at Woodley it had recently opened an office in the Wokingham Citizens Advice Bureau and the impact of this is being monitored.
- Recommendation 6 was that the Council continue to work with other organisations such as Connexions with the aim of reducing the level of those people not in employment or training in the Wokingham Borough. There were approximately 150 NEETs in Wokingham. Children's Services and Connexions had done a lot to reduce the number of NEETs in the borough. Members were informed that the likely reduction

in the service provided by Connexions due to changes in funding levels would pose a challenge and there would be possible implications for Wokingham.

- Members were pleased to note that the number of NEETs had decreased and questioned where those who were formerly NEET now were. The Economic Development Officer indicated that they had moved into employment into a variety of sectors such as hospitality which had vacancies. A number were undertaking further training.
- The Panel learnt that the Council would be supporting an initiative launched by the Forest School aimed at setting up a Business Academy to help young people under the age of 25 interested in setting up their own business.
- An event had been held in February at Shute End to raise awareness of apprenticeships with young people and their parents. It was hoped that the Council would be able to offer a small number of apprenticeships in the future.
- A Careers Fair had been held in November 2010 which was attended by 1800 young people and a follow up event is being planned for later this year. A Jobs Fair is also under consideration to support people back into employment.
- An event aimed at promoting STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) to young people and to help with future curriculum choices was held in March. A number of technical businesses such as BT, Sony and Proctor and Gamble had supported the event.

RESOLVED That the report be noted.

These are the Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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