

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 2 NOVEMBER 2015 FROM 7.30 PM TO 9.50 PM

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Tim Holton (Chairman), Michael Firmager (Vice-Chairman), Prue Bray, Kate Haines, Pauline Helliar-Symons, John Jarvis, Norman Jorgensen, Dianne King, Ken Miall, Malcolm Richards and Shahid Younis

Other Councillors Present

Anthony Pollock

Officers Present

Matt Davey, Head of Highways and Transport

Rob Stubbs, Head of Finance

Anne Hunter, Service Manager, Democratic Services

Neil Carr, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Democratic Services

32. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 7 September 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Chairman highlighted the following matters arising from the minutes:

- Minute 24 – Balanced Scorecard 2015/16 Quarter 1. It was noted that answers to the Committee's questions had been supplied. In relation to the indicator on apprenticeships Members noted the explanation that, although performance was below target, anecdotal evidence indicated that the target would be met. The Committee confirmed that performance should be measured using hard evidence rather than word of mouth.
- Minute 28 – Consideration of the Current Executive Forward Programme. It was noted that details of the authorities involved in the proposed new Four-Way Building Control Service had been circulated to the Committee.

33. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor UllaKarin Clark.

34. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

35. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

36. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

37. REVIEW OF DELIVERY OPTIONS FOR THE HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORT SERVICES

The Committee considered a report, set out on Agenda pages 19-22, outlining the various options that were being considered for the delivery of the Highways and Transport Service post April 2018.

Matt Davey, Head of Highways and Transport, advised Members that the current contract was delivered through the Wokingham Highway Alliance which comprised the Council, WSP (design services) and Balfour Beatty Living Places (infrastructure works). As reported to the Committee in March 2015, a project group had been tasked to look at options for the future delivery of the service. The three options identified by the project group were:

Option A - Re-let the existing Professional Services and Works Services contracts in 2018 with the inclusion of higher value capital works (linked to the SDLs) and a more outcome focussed specification.

Option B - Re-let the Works Services contract as in Option A with a multi-client Professional Services Framework replacing the Professional services contract.

Option C – Extend one or more of the existing contracts on the condition that Balfour Beatty and/or WSP sign up to Agile Partnering throughout the extension. This option would allow the Council more time to develop potential shared service options.

The next steps included discussions with the current suppliers on the potential for delivering additional value through the contract extension option. The review was expected to conclude in early 2016 with a final report to Executive before the end of the current financial year.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Members asked for a definition of the term “Agile Partnering”. It was confirmed that this entailed more flexible working between the Council and its suppliers with the aim of improving service delivery as the contract progressed.
- Members asked about the current state of the highways infrastructure market. It was reported that recent developments such as the Government’s announcement of significant road and rail projects could make the market more competitive with potential for increased prices. The state of the market was being closely monitored during the review.
- Members asked about the current performance of WSP and Balfour Beatty. It was reported that both suppliers had experienced problems resulting in uneven performance but had worked collaboratively with the Council to address these issues.
- Members inquired about the potential for efficiencies through joint working, for example through the development of a single resurfacing team covering several local authority areas. It was confirmed that issues such as peaks and troughs in workload would have to be addressed but there was potential in this idea, for example in increased buying power and service quality.

- Members noted the potential benefits from Option C in terms of flexibility, economies of scale from a shared service arrangement and the benefits from Agile Partnering in optimising contract spend to deliver improved service outcomes.
- Members asked about the potential economies from using bigger suppliers such as the companies delivering the Highway Agency Area 3 contract. It was confirmed that this idea was worth following up and that conversations would take place with the Area 3 contractors.
- Members asked for clarification on the operation of the existing contracts with WSP and Balfour Beatty. It was confirmed that the current contracts included a schedule of rates and that the Council called off projects and pieces of work using those rates. The contracts included a provision for annual increases relating to inflation within the construction sector. Ongoing monitoring indicated that WSP and Balfour Beatty were competitive on price, but it was important to note that the quality of working relationships was also important.

RESOLVED: That the progress of the Highways and Transport review be noted with a further progress report to be submitted to the January 2016 meeting of the Committee.

38. COUNCIL TAX SINGLE PERSON DISCOUNT REVIEW

The Committee considered a report, set out on Agenda pages 23-24, relating to the work that was being undertaken to review claims for Council Tax Single Person Discounts (SPD).

Rob Stubbs, Head of Finance, introduced the report and advised that previous reviews had taken place in 2010/11, 2013/14 and 2014/15. These reviews had delivered additional Council Tax income totalling £820k. The next review, in 2016/17, would involve a full data matching exercise carried out by an external contractor. It was anticipated that this work would generate additional Council Tax income of at least £100k.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- Members asked about the costs involved in carrying out the various SPD reviews. It was confirmed that the costs incurred to date were in the region of £15k to £20k. Typically, the arrangement involved the external contractor retaining a proportion of the additional income generated.
- Members asked about the availability of comparative data showing the performance of other Councils in SPD work. It was confirmed that comparative data was being sought and would be circulated to the Committee as and when it became available.
- Members inquired about trends in the number of cases identified in each of the reviews. It was confirmed that improvements in data matching and sources of information meant that more cases were being identified and reported.
- Members asked about the approaches taken by other Local Authorities, for example in relation to the imposition of fines. It was confirmed that a number of authorities imposed fines relating to invalid claims for SPD. The introduction of fines was under consideration locally and was likely to be included in the 2016/17 Budget process.

- Members asked about the potential for requiring SPD claimants to sign an annual declaration in support of their claim. This form could be circulated with the annual Council Tax documentation. It was confirmed that this idea would be considered and could be pursued if the administrative costs of the procedure were not significant.
- Members asked about the implications of SPD for student households. It was confirmed that details of the operation of SPD in relation to student households would be circulated to the Committee.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the Head of Finance attend a future meeting of the Committee to brief Members on details of the contract relating to the next review of claims for Council Tax Single Person Discounts;
- 2) the contents of the report and the continuing work undertaken by the Council to maintain the initiative against Single Person Discount fraudulent claims be noted;
- 3) the proposed introduction of a Single Person Discount fines system in the 2016/17 Budget be supported;
- 4) further consideration be given to the introduction of an annual signed declaration form for Single Person Discount claimants with a further report to the January 2016 meeting of the Committee on feasibility and costs.

39. DISCUSSION WITH COUNCILLOR POLLOCK - EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND FINANCE

The Chairman commented that as part of its role of holding the Executive to account for the delivery of Council services it had decided to invite Councillor Pollock to speak to the activities within his portfolio and take questions from the Committee.

The Committee was referred to the list of Councillor Pollock's responsibilities, as set out on Agenda page 25 and the tabled list of those Council Plan performance indicators that the Executive Member was responsible for.

Councillor Pollock went through his various areas of responsibility and answered the Committee's questions. During discussion the following points were made:

- Capital Budget Monitoring – Members noted the improved presentation of data but also asked about ways of identifying that capital projects were delivered to specification as well as to budget. It was confirmed that Officers would investigate ways of presenting this information, possibly through more detailed information in the Capital Out-turn report.
- Council Tax Collection – Members welcomed the achievement of a 99.51% collection rate in 2014/15. It was confirmed that this collection rate was the best of any Council in the country.
- Debtors Collection – Members inquired about progress in setting new targets for this performance indicator. It was confirmed that the new Debtor Collection target would be set at 80% and would be monitored from the start of Quarter 3 in 2015/16.

- Rents Collection – Members asked about the 2014/15 Out-turn figure of 102.04%. It was confirmed that this figure included the collection of arrears from the previous financial year.
- Returns on External Investment of Cash – Members asked about the procedure for monitoring external fund managers who were performing below expectations. It was confirmed that the Council invested through an in-house team and through external fund managers. It was confirmed that all investments were monitored closely with any areas of under-performance being followed up.
- Members asked about the management of risk within Councillor Pollock’s portfolio. It was confirmed that various mechanisms were used to forecast and manage risks. The Council’s annual update of the Medium Term Financial Plan included the Chief Finance Officer’s report which carried out horizon scanning on the financial pressures facing the Council. In addition Members received regular Revenue and Capital Monitoring reports. Each service area was also responsible for the development of risk registers which highlighted key risks and their likely financial consequences.
- Members asked about the management of Council investments and the timescales currently in use. It was confirmed that Council investments were currently limited to 12 months. This reflected the current volatility in world financial markets. The timescales were under review and could be increased to 15 months. The state of the market was closely monitored to determine the appropriate length of investment.

Councillor Pollock also gave feedback to the Committee on the recent Public Budget Consultations. As this was the first year of this form of consultation exercise it was considered to be a good start. There had been some teething problems in terms of public notice, venues, etc. and these would be addressed as part of future events. The following points were raised:

- Members asked about the ideas generated by residents attending the events and how such ideas were to be fed into the Budget process. It was important that residents received feedback on the ideas raised and how they were being taken forward. It was confirmed that the feedback from the events was still being evaluated and that any good ideas would be subject to further investigation.
- Members asked about the involvement of Town and Parish Councils in the consultation events and the potential to use the Borough/Parish Liaison Forum as a sounding board. It was confirmed that a number of Town and Parish Councillors had attended the recent events and that ways of strengthening links with the Towns and Parishes would be investigated further.
- Members inquired about the topics included on discussion boards at the events and the need to give clear guidance to residents e.g. the risks and knock-on effects of terminating or reducing a service. It was confirmed that the discussion topics had been generated by individual service areas. Feedback and ideas raised by the Committee would be used to strengthen the Budget Consultation process in 2016/17.

- Members asked about the potential for incentivising residents and Officers to come forward with good ideas to improve services and/or reduce Council expenditure. It was confirmed that this suggestion was worthy of further investigation and would be included in the discussions about the consultation process for 2016.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) a report be submitted to the January 2016 meeting of the Committee setting out the range of ideas generated through the recent 2015/16 public Budget Consultation meetings;
- 2) Councillor Pollock be invited to attend the March 2016 meeting of the Committee to discuss plans for the 2016/17 Public Budget Consultation.

40. FEEDBACK FROM AUDIT COMMITTEE AND OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE CHAIRS' MEETING

The Committee considered the notes from the meeting held between the Chairman of the Audit Committee and the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee which took place on 28 September 2015, as set out on Agenda page 27.

RESOLVED: That the feedback from the Audit Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee Chairmen's meeting be noted.

41. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE FORWARD PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a recently published version of the Executive Forward Programme which was tabled at the meeting.

The following comments were made on the Forward Programme:

- It was confirmed that the Library Offer report would be submitted to the Executive in November 2015 followed by an 8 week consultation period. Consequently the report could be considered by the January 2016 meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the Executive Forward Programme be noted.

42. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered its forward work programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 35-54. During the discussion the following points were made:

- Further to Minute 29 of the meeting held on 7 September 2015 Members considered the timetabling of a review of the Council's Shared Services. It was agreed that the review would commence shortly. Councillor Younis agreed to be a member of the Task and Finish Group. Officers were asked to contact Members of the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees to ask if they wished to join the Task and Finish Group.
- The Chairman referred to previous discussions about the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in improving oversight of the work of the other Scrutiny Committees. Members were invited to submit thoughts on potential improvements to Democratic Services prior to a discussion at the next meeting of the Committee.
- Members considered the current format of reports and the ongoing incidence of recommendations that asked Members to "note" reports. It was confirmed that research was under way to determine how other authorities structured their Overview and Scrutiny reports with particular attention to the way they dealt with recommendations.

- The Chairman referred to the recent Scrutiny Member training session. Members discussed the content of the session and ideas for improving future sessions. It was felt that the use of worked examples and case studies would make the sessions more challenging and rewarding.

RESOLVED: That

- 1) the current work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee be noted subject to the addition of the following items to the January 2016 meeting;
 - Budget Participatory Consultation Feedback
 - Council Tax Single Person Discount Declaration Form
 - Highways and Transport Review
- 2) the Assets Review item be deferred to the March 2016 meeting of the Committee;
- 3) a Task and Finish Group of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee be established to consider the review of the Council's Shared Services;
- 4) all Scrutiny Members be invited to take part in the Shared Services Task and Finish Group with a start date of January 2016;
- 5) the current work programme of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted subject to the addition of an item on the current Ofsted Inspection at the February 2016 meeting;
- 6) the current work programme of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted subject to the deferral of the item on the Government's Right to Buy Scheme from the November 2015 meeting;
- 7) Members submit ideas to Democratic Services on ways to improve the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in improving oversight of the work of the other Scrutiny Committees.

43. UPDATE REPORTS FROM CHAIRMEN OR NOMINATED MEMBER OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Committee received an update report from the Chairman of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee relating to the meeting held on 22 September 2015 as set out on Agenda Page 55. The Chairman also gave a verbal update on the meeting held on 27 October 2015.

The Chairman of the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee gave a verbal update on the discussions that had taken place at the meeting held on 19 October 2015.

RESOLVED: That the report of the Chairman of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the verbal report of the Chairman of the Community and Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee be noted.

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