

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Shirehall, Hereford on Friday, 14th January, 2005 at 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor T.M. James (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: B.F. Ashton, W.L.S. Bowen, A.C.R. Chappell,
J.H.R. Goodwin, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J. Stone and J.P. Thomas

In attendance: Councillors Mrs. J.P. French and R.J. Phillips.

43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

45. HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGY PROGRESS

The Committee considered progress against the Council's Human Resources (HR) Strategy including main findings from the 2004 Staff Opinion Survey and 2003-4 exit surveys, as reported to Cabinet in December 2004.

The Head of Human Resources commented on the findings as set out in the report drawing attention to the fact that the Staff Opinion Survey had been issued shortly after the Job Evaluation and Single Status Results had been announced, which it was thought had influenced both the results and the response rate, which at 38 % was slightly down on the 2003 return (41%). He also noted that the current HR Strategy expired in 2005 and would be replaced by the Pay and Workforce Development Strategy 2005-08. Progress against selected targets was set out in the appendix to the report.

In the course of discussion the following principal points were made:

- That in broad terms there was little significant change from the previous year's survey.
- Whilst acknowledging the impact of Job Evaluation on the Survey the Chief Executive cautioned that care should be taken about attributing everything to that exercise. The findings of the 2005 survey would need to assess carefully the extent to which it was a factor.
- That confidence that the Council was committed to supporting employees during Job Evaluation (30%) was still low, even though an improvement on 2003 (21%). In response the Head of Human Resources commented that improvements had been made and he believed the trend was positive.
- The number of those feeling that they were sometimes bullied/harassed by Members remained at 13% compared with the Council target of 0%. The Chief

Executive suggested that this reinforced the view that it was important that Members should take care to address their concerns to officers at the appropriate level within the Organisation. Officers with the appropriate seniority, expertise and authority to respond to Members' requests may well recognise as legitimate an approach which more junior officers might find unsettling.

- There was concern that, whilst at the top end of response rates for surveys of this type, the response rate at 38% was too low. It was acknowledged that Job Evaluation may have had an impact, that the survey had been well publicised and that work was underway to seek to encourage a higher response rate. However, it was thought that more action was needed to improve the rate.
- In relation to the reduction in the percentage of those agreeing that opportunities for development within the job were good (36%) compared with 54% in 2003, the Chief Executive commented that retention rates were very high. Staff had to recognise that the Authority simply could not accommodate the career aspirations of every employee. They had at some point to accept that to progress their career they may well have to move to another authority. The benefits of working in Herefordshire had to be balanced against career aspirations.
- It was noted that work was ongoing with the Trade Unions to develop training opportunities.

RESOLVED: That performance against selected targets in the Human Resources Strategy 2002-2005 indicators be noted.

46. BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WITH A PHYSICAL DISABILITY - STAGE 3 REPORT

The Committee considered the Stage 3 report of the Best Value Review of social care services for people with a disability.

The detailed review report considered by the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny committee on 13th December, 2004 had been circulated separately to Members of the Committee. The covering report in the agenda papers explained how the review had been conducted to comply with the Best Value regime.

The Chairman of the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee emphasised the extent to which the views of service users had informed the review. She also highlighted the distinction drawn between those recommendations which could be implemented within existing resources and those, which would require further feasibility work and additional resources if they were to be progressed.

The Head of Social Care (Adults) commented that the review's recommendations would lead to enhanced service provision. Whilst not a cross-cutting review there were implications for Health services and she noted also the review's findings on transport arrangements.

In the course of discussion it was confirmed that relations between the Primary Care Trust and the Council remained strong, with a focus on achieving the best outcomes for Herefordshire.

RESOLVED: That the recommendation of the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee on the Stage 3 report of the Best Value Review of Physical Disabilities Services (18-64) be endorsed and

the findings referred to the Cabinet Member (Social Care and Strategic Housing) for consideration, subject to advising the Cabinet Member (Social Care and Strategic Housing) in considering the recommendations and preparing an Improvement Plan to have regard to the view:

- (i) that recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 as set out in section 4 of the review report could be implemented within existing resources and should be progressed;
- (ii) that the remaining recommendations in section 4 of the review report, recommendations 1, 6 & 7 should be the subject of further feasibility work to ensure that sufficient resources were available to implement them; and
- (iii) that the additional recommendations in section 5 of the report be progressed as feasible within existing resources.

47. DRAFT CORPORATE PLAN

The Committee noted the draft Corporate Plan approved by Cabinet in December 2004 for use immediately as the basis for the preparation of the Council's annual operating plan and directorate and service plans for 2005-06.

The Chief Executive presented the report commenting on the importance of the Operational Plan.

The need to learn from any complaints received from the public was acknowledged and the Director of Policy and Community reported that the corporate complaints system was being reviewed.

RESOLVED: That the draft Corporate Plan for 2005 to 2008 be noted.

48. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - CORPORATE HEALTH

The Committee received the report to Cabinet on 16th December, 2004 on the Council's corporate performance in relation to the Best Value Indicators from 1st April to 30th September 2004.

In the course of discussion the following principal points were made:

- Concern was expressed about performance against the targets for processing new benefit claims and claims where there had been a notification of a change in circumstance. It was recognised that this was an important area for the Council to address. The County Treasurer commented that priority was being given to processing new claims which explained why performance in that area was better than in processing claims where there had been a change in circumstance. He reminded the Committee of the recent independent inspection of the Benefits Service by the Benefit Fraud Agency which had highlighted that the Service was demonstrating good practice in many areas. He informed the Committee that the imminent implementation of a new processing system might have an adverse impact in the short-term but performance should then improve.
- It was noted that high turnover of benefits staff remained a concern and was receiving attention.

- Work to reduce processing times by explaining to claimants what documentation they required when submitting their claims was also ongoing in line with recommendations made by the Service Improvement Team.

RESOLVED: That the Council's corporate performance from 1st April 2004 to 30th September 2004 be noted.

49. COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FROM 2005

The Committee was informed of the provisional timetable for joint area reviews and Corporate Assessment and associated arrangements, as reflected in the report to Cabinet on 13th January, 2005.

The Chief Executive presented the report drawing attention to the challenge, which the new system of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) inspection presented. He reported that the Council would be in the first tranche of authorities to be assessed. Until all authorities had been assessed under the new regime this could potentially present a misleading impression to the public of the Council's standing, particularly as the Audit Commission was at the same time recalibrating the basis on which it classified authorities.

He emphasised that the corporate assessment would contain a statement on political and managerial leadership which would include an assessment of the scrutiny function as well as the administration. In this context he emphasised that, amongst other things, the Committee needed to give careful consideration to the extent to which the scrutiny function could demonstrate that it was involved in contributing to the Council's aims. It was, for example, incumbent on the Scrutiny function to make a reasoned challenge of the Corporate Plan if it did not support it.

He reported that Cabinet had approved the arrangements for supporting the inspection process and noted the impact this would have on the Director of Policy and Community's role in day-to-day management of the Directorate.

He also reported that Cabinet had authorised him to pursue a number of options for an external peer review prior to the CPA inspection and explained factors to be taken into account in determining the most beneficial approach for the Authority.

The Committee noted that consideration would be given to how best the scrutiny function could respond to the inspection process.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

50. RACE EQUALITY SCHEME - PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received a report on progress against the action plan accompanying the Council's Race Equality Scheme, key initiatives to promote Race Equality and progress in delivering diversity training.

The Director of Policy and Community highlighted work underway to provide training and raise awareness within the Council. She advised that the review of the Scheme to be completed by March 2005 was on target.

It was noted that Group Leaders would be considering further Member training on race and diversity issues.

RESOLVED: That progress to date be noted.

51. LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENT

The Committee received a report on the development of the Council's second Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA 2) as reported to Cabinet on 13th January, 2005.

The Chief Executive presented the report drawing attention to a letter from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) which highlighted the need for a significant amount of work to be carried out on establishing outcome focused targets in a number of areas. He commented that communications from the ODPM and their timeliness had not been helpful, noting the pressure this had placed upon the Council and the implications for the timetable for the agreement's completion, which would have to be revised with the ODPM's agreement.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

52. DEVELOPING THE CHILDREN'S AGENDA IN HEREFORDSHIRE - CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

The Committee received the report to Cabinet of 13th January, 2005 on the response to the Change for Children and Local Performance Improvement Agenda and the next steps locally.

The Chief Executive presented the report commenting on the plans to reassure schools about the changes and the establishment of a change team, financed from reserves, to respond to the change programme and prepare for the expected Joint Area Review.

He added that the forthcoming inspection of services for 14-19 year olds would be an important indicator for the Joint Area Review.

In the course of discussion the arrangements for a lead role for School Improvement/Development in support of the interim Director of Children's Services were considered. It was suggested that there was some evidence of concern on the part of some Schools about the changes. Some Members suggested further consideration needed to be given to the job title of the lead role for schools as part of the process of reassuring schools that there had been no diminution in their status.

The Chief Executive emphasised in reply that the purpose of the Children's Act had been to create an integrated approach to Children's Services and it was important for the Council to demonstrate that it was embracing this change rather than simply making symbolic adjustments.

The interim Director of Children's Services informed the Committee of action she was taking to ensure that Members and all parties affected by the changes were kept fully informed of developments. She sought support from Councillors in their role as School Governors in providing reassurance to schools about the changes.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

53. BUDGET MONITORING 2004/2005

The Committee was informed of the position with regard to revenue budget monitoring as at 30th November, 2004 for Programme Areas in 2004/2005, as reported to Cabinet on 13th January, 2005.

The County Treasurer presented the report. He drew attention to the continuing pressure on the Social Care budget reiterating that this was neither acceptable nor sustainable and that proposals would be forthcoming as part of the preparation of the 2005/2006 budget.

He also noted the overspend on the property budget, acknowledging this could be offset by underspendings elsewhere in the Environment Directorate.

He added that a net underspending of £1.1 million was expected from financing transactions including debt rescheduling, stabilisation of interest rates and significant slippage of the capital programme. Whilst satisfied that the debt rescheduling was a prudent measure he expressed concern at the slippage of the capital programme.

The Committee discussed the carry forward of underspends and the position on reserves noting that a full analysis would be included in the report on the 2005/2006 budget. It was suggested that the Environment Scrutiny Committee should consider whether there was scope within the budget for additional resources to be allocated to planning enforcement activity.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

54. CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2004/05 TO 30 NOVEMBER 2004

The Committee was informed of the Capital Programme forecast for the period up to the end of November 2004 and the current position regarding prudential indicators, as reported to Cabinet on 13th January, 2005.

The County Treasurer presented the report expressing some concern at the slippage in the Programme. He reported that the Chief Executive's Management Team had been informed and at this stage it appeared that the Programme would be delivered without the loss of any resources secured from other agencies conditional upon them being spent in 2004/2005.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

55. INTERIM AUDIT ASSURANCE REPORT 2004/05

The Committee was informed of the key internal control issues identified during the course of audit work and updated on action taken, as reported to Cabinet on 25th November, 2004.

The need for a different approach to auditing the contract with Herefordshire Jarvis Services, recognising it was a partner and that the Authority needed to derive the maximum benefit from the contract by working in partnership was noted.

In response to a question the Director of Policy and Community reported that progress was being made on IT security arrangements and it was expected that compliance with the relevant British Standard would be achieved. However, further work to manage risk still needed to be taken.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

56. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT

The Committee noted the work being undertaken by the Scrutiny Committees.

The Chairman of the Social and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee informed the Committee of an imminent review meeting to consider further pedestrianisation of part of Hereford City Centre and an additional meeting of the Committee to discuss the findings of the review of the Courtyard Centre for the Arts.

It was also noted that the Highways Agency had now published the route management strategy for the A49 and the Environment Scrutiny was making arrangements to scrutinise the issue.

The meeting ended at 12.15 p.m.

CHAIRMAN