

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday 16 March 2009 at 9.30 am

Present: Councillor PJ Edwards (Chairman)
Councillor WLS Bowen (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: PA Andrews, KG Grumbley, TM James, RI Matthews and AT Oliver

In attendance: Councillors JP French (Cabinet Member - Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources) and PD Price (Cabinet Member – ICT, Education and Achievement).

65. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors WU Atfield, PM Morgan, SJ Robertson and JK Swinburne. Apologies were also received from Councillor RJ Phillips – Leader of the Council.

66. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

67. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 February 2009 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

68. SUGGESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON ISSUES FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY

There were no suggestions from members of the public.

69. REVIEW OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY SERVICES – CABINET'S RESPONSE

The Committee considered Cabinet's response to the recommendations made to it in the Scrutiny Review of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) Services.

The review had been approved by the Committee in November 2008 and Cabinet had considered its response to the findings on 19 February 2009.

The interim Head of ICT Services (IHICT) presented the report. He informed the Committee that since Cabinet had approved its response to the review, advice had been received from Human Resources on review recommendations v and w relating to recruitment of staff and reimbursement of training costs by employees who left the Council. Conditions in the job market had changed since the review had been published making it easier to recruit to some posts. Market supplements continued to be applied where that was necessary. A study leave policy was being prepared that would address the issue of reimbursement of training costs.

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

- Asked about the encryption of laptops and memory sticks the IHICT confirmed that it was intended to encrypt all mobile ICT devices. Tests were currently being carried out prior to implementing the policy. At this stage he could not confirm an implementation date but would inform the Committee of this, once agreed.
- Replying to a question about progress in joint working between health and social care the IHICT said that it was a complex national issue. There was no single ICT system available that would adequately cater for all health and social care requirements, however, standard “message sets” for exchanging information between systems were being defined and developed at national level and were planned to be in place by April 2010. Locally, direct access to health care systems and social care systems for professionals from either organisation was available arranged on a case by case basis.
- Asked about links with Welsh ICT systems given the number of cross-border patients the IHICT said that these were less than ideal and although there are some high-level working groups on this subject, it is not an immediate priority on either side of the border. However, the work on the national message sets should be transferable.
- Assurance was sought on the appropriateness of the arrangements for information sharing between health and social care having regard to failures in Haringey that had led to the death of “baby P”. The IHICT observed that human interaction was more important than a technological solution and the development of integrated health and social care teams under the Herefordshire Public Services partnership provided grounds for reassurance.
- In reply to a question about progress in providing Broadband to the Rotherwas Industrial Estate the IHICT said that discussions were continuing with British Telecom (BT). Wales and the West Midlands formed one BT region and at the moment provision in Herefordshire was seen as the second highest priority in that region. However, BT was a commercial organisation and determined its investment priorities on that basis. The Council would, however, have the opportunity to press its case.
- Asked if the review had identified any issues of which the ICT Service had been unaware the IHICT said that the review had been useful in producing a report that consolidated the many issues facing the service. It had also been right to highlight the critical importance of the two key infrastructure projects: the replacement Data Centre and the Community Network Upgrade. He agreed to update Members of the Committee on progress with the replacement Data Centre on which he received weekly updates.
- The resilience of the proposed data centre arrangements and business continuity planning was discussed. The IHICT said that the proposed arrangements were in line with other similar Health and Local Government authorities.
- A question was asked about implementation of two of the recommendations from the 2006 scrutiny review of ICT Services, progress against which had been reported as part of the 2008 review. The first related to the transfer of responsibility for management of all ICT staff within the authority. The IHICT said that some staff with ICT responsibilities continued to be line managed within the Children’s Services directorate. However, discussions continued with the

Children's Services directorate to ensure ICT related work was viewed corporately.

The second related to the enforcement of procurement policies and procedures. The Director of Resources said that management training had addressed issues of compliance. The procurement section was small and work continued with the West Midlands Centre for Excellence and the Primary Care Trust to develop capacity. Interim postings were currently being used. He was satisfied, however, that the arrangements in place were fit for purpose. The IHICT added that a recent review by the Internal Audit Service had found arrangements to be satisfactory.

- It was asked whether the ICT needs of the electoral registration service were being met. It was noted that a procedure was in place requiring a business case to be made for any ICT requests.

RESOLVED:

- That**
- (a) Cabinet's response to the findings of the review of the support for ICT Services be approved; and**
 - (b) a further report on progress in response to the Review be made after six months with consideration then being given to the need for any further reports to be made.**

70. ELECTORAL REGISTRATION SERVICES

The Committee considered an update on the Parish and Council by-elections undertaken by Electoral Registration Services over the last 12 months.

The Assistant Chief Executive – Legal and Democratic (ACELD) presented the report. He highlighted the improved processes and procedures that had been implemented in accordance with the action plan developed following the May 2007 elections: improved communication arrangements; training provided in preparation for the forthcoming European elections and the performance standards introduced for electoral registration officers. The action plan produced following the May 2007 elections showing progress made against the recommendations was appended to the report.

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

- Some of the arrangements for the Aylestone Ward by-election for the City Council were criticised and the hope expressed that these issues would be remedied before the next Unitary Council elections.
- Assurance was sought that steps had been taken to ensure that the difficulties encountered with postal votes in the May 2007 elections would not be repeated. The Electoral Registration Services Manager reported that the Council would produce the paperwork in-house for the next elections. It was considered that the external supplier had been responsible for many of the difficulties that had been encountered in May 2007.
- Arrangements for billing Parish and Town Councils for elections were discussed. The ACELD said that discussions were taking place with Herefordshire Association of Local Councils (HALC) to try to simplify costings and make clearer the costs councils could expect to bear. He added that his advice to HALC was that councils should make provision in the precept for the cost of one by-election.

It was added that costings for the various actions associated with the elections had been agreed with HALC.

- It was requested that the electoral registration service should keep parish and town councils informed of communications it sent to the electorate.
- A Member questioned whether the cost of writing to every elector notifying them of parish council elections was justified.
- Performance against the performance standards for electoral registration officers was noted, highlighting the Electoral Commission's comment on the need for written evidence to demonstrate that measures to improve performance against the standards were in place.

The Committee noted the report.

71. PRESENTATION BY THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Mr Adrian Green, Regional Manager – South West gave a presentation on the Electoral Commission's work. He described the Commission's structure noting that its two main functions were to regulate party and election finance and set standards for well-run elections. This included registering parties and regulating finances, reporting on the conduct of elections and referendums, setting performance standards, advising on electoral law and procedures and providing public information and awareness.

He emphasised that the Commission did not make the rules or run elections or register electors. Its role was to issue advice and guidance and make recommendations to government on election reporting.

He commented that many of the concerns expressed in the discussion of the previous agenda item on Electoral Registration Services had been shared regionally and nationally. The 2007 elections had been very difficult because of the introduction of new legislation shortly beforehand and in particular the collection and checking of personal identifiers.

Key findings from the 2008 local elections were that they had generally run smoothly, election rules had been unchanged from 2007, the Electoral Administration Act was bedding down in England and Wales, there were a very small number of electoral fraud incidents, more people were voting by post, the majority of Returning Officers were checking 100% of postal voting identifiers (PVI), and there was overall elector satisfaction with voting process

Key issues included concerns, if there were a general election, over the tightness of the electoral timetable, the higher number of late registration applications, the higher number of postal votes (printing, processing, checking PVI) with possible capacity issues for suppliers, handling postal votes on cross local authority boundaries, and more postal votes being handed into polling station – with the consequent effect on the start of the count

Recommendations to government had included that there should be a six-month period between legislation and the date of scheduled elections, standardisation of the electoral timetable for all elections to 25 working days, enabling independent candidates to have equal access to the register, the mandatory 100% checking of PVI (whilst the legal minimum was 20% the Commission firmly believed it should be 100%), greater clarity on waiver rules and provision for refreshing personal

identifiers, and mandatory standards for personal identifier storage, maintenance and exchange.

He added that the Political Parties and Elections Bill contained provisions for individual registration for electors in place of household registration.

Recommendations for electoral administrators had included that they should continue to hold briefings with candidates and agents, check 100% of PVI statements, write to electors whose signature or date of birth did not match, continue to provide training for all polling station staff (to a level equivalent to that of the presiding officer, as many problems seemed to occur in the temporary absence of the presiding officer), and provide better communication at counts for candidates and agents.

He commented also on the performance standards for electoral registration officers and the draft performance standards for returning officers.

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

- A question was asked about arrangements for delivery of postal votes. Mr Green said that guidance was issued to Royal Mail about the process. The Returning Officer should make clear when postal votes would enter the system so that political parties could plan their campaigns accordingly.
- Asked about the Council's plans to print postal voting forms in-house Mr Green said that there was no national guidance covering this issue but the Commission was seeking to establish a standard way of holding postal voting identifiers so that the information could be transferred if needed.
- The role of the Boundary Committee was discussed in the light of concerns of some Members that there were some anomalies in ward boundaries, with, for example, parts of a village being registered in different wards. Mr Green said the principal aim was to secure equality of representation, although the Boundary Committee did have some discretion. When a periodic review of the Unitary Authority was undertaken the Committee would publish draft proposals and it was at that stage that objections could be raised. It was noted that Parish Councils or a specified proportion of the relevant electorate could petition the Unitary Authority to conduct a boundary review.
- In response to comments about the storage of postal votes, and disclosure of information about them, officers confirmed that postal votes were stored securely and taken to the Count. Agents and Candidates were notified of when postal votes were to be counted. Lists of those who had requested a postal vote could be made available to candidates on request

The Chairman thanked Mr Green for attending the meeting.

72. WORK PROGRAMME

It was noted that consideration of the work programme would form part of the informal meeting on 7 April.

The meeting ended at 11.25 am

CHAIRMAN