

MINUTES of the meeting of General Overview & Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, The Shire Hall, St Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Tuesday 27 September 2016 at 9.30 am

Present: Councillor WLS Bowen (Chairman)
Councillor CA Gandy (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: BA Baker, MJK Cooper, J Hardwick, EPJ Harvey, EL Holton, FM Norman, GJ Powell, AJW Powers, NE Shaw, EJ Swinglehurst and A Warmington

In attendance: Councillors JM Bartlett, H Bramer- cabinet member contracts and assets, DG Harlow - cabinet member economy and corporate services and AW Johnson – leader of the council.

Officers: G Hughes – director economy, communities and corporate, N Silver – assistant director communities, J Chedgzoy – library service manager, M Coldman - customer service area manager, M Samuels – director for adults and wellbeing

29. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors JM Bartlett, JF Johnson, MT McEvelly and SD Williams. Apologies were also received from the statutory consultees; Mr P Burbidge, Mrs A Fisher and Mr P Sell.

30. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor BC Baker substituted for Councillor JF Johnson, Councillor EL Holton for Councillor SD Williams, Councillor FM Norman for Councillor JM Bartlett and Councillor GJ Powell for Councillor MT McEvelly.

31. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

32. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2016 be approved as a correct record.

33. SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

There were none.

34. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

There were none.

35. CUSTOMER SERVICES AND LIBRARIES

The Committee's views were sought on the model for future operation of customer services and libraries across the county considering the budget pressures on the local authority.

The Assistant Director communities gave a presentation. The presentation slides had been circulated with the agenda papers.

Clare Llewellyn West, Chair of Joint Action for Herefordshire Libraries (JAHL), also gave a presentation. A document produced by JAHL had been circulated to the Committee as a supplement. She made the following principal points:

- Libraries supported the four main objectives of the Council. Their positive effect included savings in mental health provision, avoiding damage to literacy of children and young adults; increased footfall for local retailers, benefits to small businesses in terms of research via the library and internet access. National and international research showed that a healthy library service contributed to prosperity and quality of life.
- Libraries were excellent value for money and also the Council's presence in each community, providing the access point to most Council services and being a key factor in the county's economy.
- To meet the required savings the choice was to cut expenditure or increase income. There was little left to cut without fatally damaging the service.
- Income could be increased indirectly by continuing to develop libraries as multi service hubs. Libraries were safe and welcoming places, and provided access to Council & government services which were increasingly online. More directly there were opportunities for hiring out space/meeting areas, running events, and merchandising.
- The Group did not believe that there could be a cost free library service, but did believe it represented a genuine investment in the future of the county.
- The Group's work had led it to the following conclusions:
 - volunteer libraries can work – but only when the community has the capacity to take on the role, and the volunteers are fully trained and continuously supported by professionals. Increasing the number of libraries run by volunteers, may reduce the number of library assistants but the size of the core library team would need to increase.
 - investment in the fabric of the library, as achieved in Ledbury, leads to an increase in library use.
 - partnerships work when there is a synergy between the traditional role of the library and the partner services.
 - library culture can have a positive and beneficial effect on other services, the move of the Ross jobcentre to the library being an example.
 - exploring new opportunities and investing in both premises and, most importantly, in professional staff would bring real benefits and enable the Library Service to have a key role in the future prosperity and well-being of Herefordshire. A new library in Hereford would need to be supported by a county network to serve the dispersed and often geographically disadvantaged population.

- The council's role was to make savings whilst mitigating the impact on the community. An intelligent and strategic approach to libraries and customer services as an investment, fulfilled that role.

In summary, JAHL asked the Committee to recommend that savings were made by continuing to combine council services using libraries as multi service hubs and by identifying more opportunities to generate income.

In discussion the following principal points were made:

- The council was part way through a 10 year savings programme. It was important to secure a long term, deliverable solution for customer services and the library service that was viable and sustainable and would amongst other things provide certainty for staff and volunteers
- Multi-functional hubs in communities would have a significant role to play in delivering a range of services.
- Library services would have to be provided by communities themselves, noting, as an example, the way in which provision had been grown locally following the withdrawal of the mobile library service.
- A significant amount of the customer services queries related to council tax and benefits. The providers of these services should be made responsible for answering questions from the public. This might provide an incentive to them to ensure that the service was delivered in a better way by improving the quality of the information provided to the public in the first place including clearer and easier to use forms.
- A note of caution was expressed that whilst there was an attraction in the argument that providers should be made to deal with the queries their service generated, many people who sought assistance through customer services had multiple issues to be addressed. It was better for the individual to have their issues addressed in the round and staff could assist in identifying needs a person may have.
- Some Members considered Option 3 to be the best option, providing an element of savings, whilst retaining support for community and voluntary links and being deliverable.
- Other members considered that option 3 would remove substantial parts of the library service and, whilst seeking to ensure compliance with the council's legal responsibilities, sought to centralise the service as much as possible in Hereford. Option 4, providing an enhanced service was the preferable option. Studies had shown that learning to read for pleasure at an early age was important in helping children escape from poverty. Libraries played an important role in society.
- It was noted that it was not straightforward to make comparisons based on the statistics in the report because like was not being compared with like. Belmont and Hereford libraries, for example, were solely libraries, without a customer services presence. Footfall in Ledbury included attendance at a range of events held in the library accounting for the fact that fewer visits resulted in a book being borrowed.
- It was questioned whether the library service could continue to be free to all.
- It was asked whether the council could allow discounts to people who paid bills by direct debit.
- There were opportunities to generate income from libraries. Examples given included leasing out space to a coffee shop.

- The role of the local councillor as a source of information to residents should not be overlooked.
- The loss of customer services centres could have many expensive consequences.
- Account should be taken of the social role Libraries fulfilled.
- There was support for expanding the service.
- There was much more scope to explore funding that could be provided by Parish and Town Councils to support services. Good communication was essential. It was important that discussions took place at an early stage. However, it was also observed that a number of Parish and Town councils had already taken on responsibilities from the Council and there was a limit to their resources.
- The retention of professionally qualified library staff to support volunteer staff was essential.
- Provision continued to need to be made for face to face contact for those who would not or could not access services online. Improving the quality of the provision of services online might over time provide an incentive to more people to make the transition to that method of accessing services.
- Consideration should be given to how the delivery of other services such as some adult wellbeing services might be delivered.
- Innovation should be constantly sought and encouraged.
- The running costs of some buildings appeared high. It was asked whether there was scope for invest to save work to reduce energy costs.
- It would have been helpful to the Committee to have been presented with the results of the libraries and customer services research consultation. It was premature to recommend an option without access to this information. In response the assistant director commented that the information was to be released shortly. There were some 1,500 comments to assess. However, the main headline findings had been outlined in her presentation.
- A concern was expressed that limiting the focus on savings to within the economy, communities and corporate directorate prevented the development of a more strategic approach to facilitating change in service delivery and in the community. Customer Services staff had an important role to play in providing access to information informing people of the choices available to them and encouraging people to make the changes that the Council wanted them to make.
- The leader of council commented that directorates were working collaboratively.
- The evidence showed that different age groups used the county's libraries in different ways and the council needed to have regard to this.
- The proposed reductions in service sat awkwardly with the bid for Hereford to be the City of Culture 2021.
- In response to questions the Assistant Director commented as follows:
 - Hereford library was scheduled to reopen in January 2017, in line with the plan set out in the report to Cabinet in May 2016.
 - The planned savings would be phased over 2 years. Some actions could be implemented right away. The timing would also be influenced by the mitigation in

the needs and impact assessment. Scheduling the change in services would allow time to discuss with Parish and Town Councils whether they would be interested in providing support for services.

- She confirmed that even though there had been a national decline in library use research showed that social economic groups on lower incomes continued to use libraries. This together with geographical factors was taken into account in the impact assessment.
- She confirmed that staffing costs in Leominster appeared higher because of the proportion of supervisor costs. She would seek clarification of when rating valuations were last reviewed, noting concerns about the business rates paid by some libraries.
- It was proposed that cabinet should be recommended to support option 3 – retained libraries and central service with an emphasis on making best use of them as contact points for council services, extending service options and exploring new ways of working, and the report to cabinet should include a delivery plan.
- An amendment was proposed, but not seconded, that Cabinet should be recommended to consider savings programme option 3 in preference to all others and also that Cabinet reflect most on the impacts of all planned and future changes as affect defined areas of deprivation in the County.
- Improvements to the council website and software would help to improve the delivery of services online.
- A member cautioned against making assumptions about affluence in parts of the county and developing a disproportionate settlement, noting that there were pockets of deprivation in all areas and a wish for face to face contact.

RESOLVED: That Cabinet be recommended to support option 3 – retained libraries and central service with an emphasis on making best use of them and community libraries as contact points for council services, extending service options and exploring new ways of working, and the report to cabinet should include a delivery plan.

36. ECONOMIC MASTER PLAN

The Committee's views were sought on the draft Economic Master Plan for 2017-2031 and it was invited to consider whether to make any recommendations to inform cabinet's consideration of the plan.

The cabinet member – economy and corporate services introduced the report. He commented that the draft plan represented the start of a conversation. The projects within it would be regularly refreshed. He sought ongoing engagement and intended to submit further reports to the Committee.

The economic development manager gave a presentation. The presentation slides had been circulated with the agenda papers.

The following is a summary of the principal points identified for consideration:

- The plan should strive to address the major constraints that were inhibiting plans for growth and seek to make the county more marketable, mindful of what it was within the council's own powers to influence and effect.
- It was important to be clear who the audience for the document was.
- It was suggested the document should include a section on the history and geography of the county, and why the county was a good place to live and work, and

set out the opportunities and attractions for people who were thinking of moving to the county, set out the objectives and ambitions so that people could judge whether they wished to be associated with them.

- Clear timelines were needed. It was suggested that the plan should be in chunks recognising that changes would inevitably take place over the life of the plan and ensuring that it remained adaptable.
- Pitch documents were a good idea, possibly split into geographical or industry sectors and so targeting potential investors.
- The case studies provided were helpful.
- Account should be taken of the links with planning policy and the need to identify where policy could be improved.
- The importance of tourism to the County's growth and sustainability needed to be recognised. Maintaining the county's roads was important to the tourist industry.
- Promoting the County as a setting for film and tv locations would be advantageous.
- The possibility of businesses using underused council property should be explored.
- The Church Commissioners should be approached about scope for public use of their property
- Communication and marketing were key.
- The Plan needed to consider the needs of the whole County. At the moment it was dominated by projects within the city.
- Regard should be had to the horticultural sector within the county.
- The tensions between preserving the county and growth and development needed to be recognised.
- There should be a focus on celebrating what was unique in the county and protecting that. An audit of the county's strengths had been proposed at the Committee's meeting in July but nothing appeared to have happened as a result.
- The photograph on the front cover should be replaced with a more distinctive image relating to the county.
- An implementation plan was needed.
- Having identified needs in the county there could be an opportunity to explore ways of meeting these needs, adopting a market led approach.
- Consideration should be given to seeking a view from external consultants on the plan.
- Clarification should be provided on the consultation process. In addition, including a section on those who had been consulted on the plan's development would lend it credibility.
- There seemed to be no reference to the small and medium enterprises that formed the majority of the county's businesses.
- The wording in relation to Cargills (p120 of the agenda papers) and to phosphate pollution (p59) needed to be revisited.
- It was questioned whether the proposals for the river quarter took account of the National Planning Policy Framework and the core strategy.
- The leader commented that the plan was essential to the county's financial security and it would be important to ensure the implementation of the approved plan.

The cabinet member – economy and corporate services commented that the intention was that the plan would be a marketing tool and people would not have to read the document as a whole but could turn to relevant sections. He outlined a number of actions being undertaken and invited members to help bring forward projects from the market towns and elsewhere of which they were aware.

The economic development manager thanked the committee for its comments.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Member be recommended to have regard to the points raised by the Committee in discussion and in particular the summary of the principal points set out above.

37. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered its work programme and related scrutiny activities.

The Chairman highlighted a number of revisions to the work programme set out at paragraph 5 of the report. He also mentioned that a seminar with the Police and Crime commissioner and the chief constable was to be held on morning of 21 November.

In discussing the proposed task and finish group on devolution a number of amendments were suggested to the scoping statement: the addition of neighbouring authorities as witnesses, the addition of the Chief Executive as a consultee, the addition of the West Midlands Combined Authority's strategy to the research required, amendment of the section on publicity requirements, and revision of the timetable.

The Chairman also proposed that, following the recent nutrient management seminar, the cabinet member – infrastructure be asked to ensure that the Nutrient Management Board submit a monitoring report to Members on an annual basis, with consideration also given to a further seminar.

In addition a proposal was made that Welsh Water should be invited to attend the Committee in the New Year to comment on its infrastructure plans and how these would support the council's growth plans, also provide an update on the effectiveness of measures to reduce phosphate levels in the county's rivers and the operation of sewage treatment plants in the County.

RESOLVED:

- That:**
- (a) the draft work programme as set out at appendix 1 to the report be approved, with the addition of an invitation to Welsh Water to attend the Committee in the New Year;**
 - (b) a task and finish group on devolution be established to undertake the work outlined in the scoping statement (Appendix 2 to the report, as amended, and the membership be confirmed as Councillors JM Bartlett (tbc), WLS Bowen (Chairman), ACR Chappell, RJ Phillips, and GJ Powell; and**
 - (c) the cabinet member – infrastructure be asked to ensure that the Nutrient Management Board submits a monitoring report to Members on an annual basis, with consideration also given to a further seminar.**

38. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 14 November 2015 from 9.30am.

The meeting ended at 1.23 pm

CHAIRMAN