

**MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 13th October, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.**

**Present:** Councillor T.M. James (Chairman)

**Councillors:** W.L.S. Bowen, A.C.R. Chappell, J.H.R. Goodwin, J. Stone, J.P. Thomas and W.J.S. Thomas

**In attendance:** Councillors B.F. Ashton, Mrs. J.P. French, P.E. Harling, R.J. Phillips, R.V. Stockton and D.B. Wilcox

**16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor Mrs P.A.Andrews, Mrs M.D. Lloyd-Hayes and D.C. Short.

**17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of Interest.

**18. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 7th July, 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Chairman formally thanked Hilary Preedy Policy Officer, for the work she had carried out on behalf of the Committee and wished her well in her new job.

**19. HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

The Committee considered the first monitoring report on progress in respect of the Herefordshire Council Improvement Plan 2002-2005.

It was noted that the majority of actions had been completed or were fully on track for completion by the target date. Further monitoring reports on the Improvement Plan would be considered in line with the Council's agreed performance monitoring intervals. Cabinet had requested that these incorporate appropriate milestones.

The Committee sought and received explanations of action being taken to address significant issues that could affect the timing or performance of the Plan and other areas where issues had arisen but which were not expected to impact on the achievement of the overall Plan.

In the ensuing discussion the following principal points were made:

- That the Executive was shortly to give further consideration to the future of Local Area forums and to the future of the publication, "Herefordshire Matters".
- That staff roadshows were planned but had not yet taken place.

- That it was important that the Council met its statutory obligations in relation to the disability scheme. Confirmation was given that work to meet the targets was in hand.
- It was confirmed that the scrutiny review of property was to commence. It was suggested that it would be important to have regard to the views of the Cabinet Member (Economic Development, Markets and Property) and to how Members were involved in the review.

**RESOLVED: that progress in respect of Herefordshire Council's Improvement plan be noted.**

## 20. LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENT

The Committee considered an analysis of the half-term progress towards the Council's Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) targets.

The report noted that overall performance was mixed. Where there were problems these were generally owing to the original stretched targets being particularly difficult to achieve and changes in the definition of individual indicators. Some targets were also sensitive to single, major incidents.

It was intended that regular reporting, on at least a monthly basis by exception, would take place to the Chief Executive's Management Team as many of the targets were based on performance purely in 2004/05. Any resourcing decisions needed to be made at an early stage in order to impact sufficiently on performance. The Committee was advised that the Cabinet had asked for advice on what targets were thought to be achievable so that consideration could be given to allocating resources to those areas to secure as much performance reward grant as possible.

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

- The reasons why it was proving difficult to meet the target set for improving the life chances for children in care by increasing the adoption rate were noted.
- That performance against the target for helping older people to live at home could only be improved by allocating more resources. Performance against other indicators in respect of enabling older people to live as independently as possible in the community by providing community services was more encouraging.
- It was suggested that analysis being undertaken by the Deputy Headteacher at Weobley High School might be useful in the context of meeting the targets relating to improving attainment levels in schools.
- It was regretted that changes in collecting methodology had affected several indicators. It was noted that there had been changes in definitions impacting of future performance against the target. Managers had been asked to contact the relevant Government department for clarification and possible adjustment of future targets owing to baseline changes. A lesson learnt for the next LPSA round was that some indicators would require a far tighter definition and a detailed construction of baseline information. Where there were changes or ambiguity, these would need to be notified to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) immediately.

- The Director of Policy and Community informed the Committee that in discussing a new LPSA bid it was planned to consider the scope for working with partners such as the Primary Care Trust and the Learning and Skills Council to submit a proposal.

**RESOLVED: That regular reports be provided for consideration detailing progress against the LPSA targets.**

## 21. HEREFORDSHIRE PLAN AND PARTNERSHIP PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received a report on progress in implementing the Herefordshire Plan.

The report reiterated the Committee's earlier decision in September 2001 that, in order not to lose sight of the breadth of the Plan, the Committee should receive, at least on an annual basis, a report bringing together key activities/themes which were being progressed or emerging. It was also requested at that time that individual Scrutiny Committees should receive six monthly reports setting out progress to date, work in hand and future timetables. Where Cabinet Members were responsible for more than one ambition Scrutiny Committees should examine composite reports.

The report outlined the new Cabinet Member and Scrutiny Committee responsibilities in relation to the ambitions with the Plan and highlighted achievements to date.

The Committee made a number of comments upon individual achievements listed.

In response to a question the Director of Policy and Community commented on the work underway to try to secure the availability of broadband across the County. She advised that a number of complications had arisen and information was now awaited from the European Commission in November. Members would be kept informed.

It was suggested that greater collaboration was required between Departments, the Police, and Health services in relation to anti-social behaviour orders. It would be helpful if a breakdown of those made subject to the orders could be provided.

It was also emphasised that performance in delivering the Plan would be important in the context of the next Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

**RESOLVED: That the report be noted.**

## 22. COMMUNITY SAFETY PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee noted progress made in the work of the Herefordshire Community Safety Partnership, responsible for delivering the ambition in the Herefordshire Plan of reducing crime and disorder and making Herefordshire safer.

The report stated that the targets were being met effectively apart from that for vehicle crime, a target which the Government had acknowledged to be problematic.

In the course of discussion it was suggested that few Anti-social Behaviour Orders had been obtained and that more work needed to be done to involve families in the process. The complexities involved and the implications for and sometimes conflict with other national and local policies were, however, acknowledged.

It was also noted that, in advance of Government requirements, the Community Safety Partnership had already merged with the Drug Action Team and the report referred to actions undertaken to combat drug related problems. Having expressed concern about the significance of drug misuse in Herefordshire the Committee welcomed a proposal that a briefing be held on this subject for all Councillors.

**RESOLVED: That progress be noted.**

### **23. BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CARER SUPPORT - STAGE 3 REPORT**

The Committee considered a report on the stage 3 report on the Best Value Review of Carer Support Services.

It was noted that the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee were satisfied that the Best Value Review process had been rigorously applied. However, that Committee had expressed a number of concerns regarding the recommendations arising from the review to which it wished to give further consideration. Nevertheless, to facilitate the progress of the review the Committee had agreed that the Stage 3 report be submitted to the Strategic Monitoring Committee for their confirmation that the Best Value process had been implemented.

#### **RESOLVED**

- THAT**
- (a) the view of the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee that the process followed in preparing the Stage 3 report of the Best Value Review of Carer Support has been appropriate be endorsed;**
  - and**
  - (b) it be noted that aspects of the recommendations are to be revisited and the Committee be advised accordingly in due course.**

### **24. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

The Committee received an update on progress to date on the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Improvement Plan.

The report reminded the Committee that a Best Value Review of the Service had been started but it had then been concluded that it was not an appropriate time to carry out a full Review. The Review had been removed from the best value review programme and an Improvement Plan prepared. It had been recognised that it would, however, be appropriate to consider the reinstatement of the Review at some point.

The appendix to the report set out progress against the Improvement Plan. It was noted in the report that completion of some areas had been delayed but the aim was to complete the work associated with the Improvement Plan by March 2004. Significant progress had been made in some areas. Particular attention was drawn to the work on a Corporate Information Policy which was being finalised.

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

- The Head of e-Modernisation commented on the complications posed to the service by the number of different locations and the expectation that the establishment of a more corporate approach would lead to improvement,

although significant investment would be required.

- The Cabinet Member (Human Resources and Corporate Support Services) suggested that the Best Value Review should not be reinstated in the Programme. She explained that she was requesting officers to draw together all the work designed to deliver an improved IT service, establish the timeframe and be clear as to the benefits which would be brought to business and the public.
- The Director of Policy and Community advised that a more corporate approach would inevitably mean that individual Departments and Directorates would on occasion be prevented from pursuing some schemes. With regard to whether to reinstate the Best Value Review of ICT she suggested caution should be maintained until a clear view had been received from the Audit Commission.

**RESOLVED: that progress be noted.**

## **25. TRANSPORT CROSS-SERVICE REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT - PROGRESS REPORT**

The Committee considered progress made on implementing the recommendations of the Transport Cross-Service Review.

The report outlined developments since the last report to the Committee in April 2003. It was reported that the project was continuing broadly in accordance with the original programme although it had been necessary to revise some of the target dates. The report contained a commentary on progress towards the targets.

The Director of Environment commented that it had been hoped to obtain software which would both improve co-ordination by sharing operational information and improve the efficiency of scheduling. It had transpired that no single system was available and the procurement of scheduling software was therefore to proceed. The potential for a separate system to co-ordinate other parts of the work of the service would be considered subsequently. Whilst some work had been done on the opportunity to stagger opening times for education and social services establishments to see if this would allow vehicles to be used more efficiently there were a number of complications to consider. The project team had concluded that the scheduling software would be required prior to the implementation of any scheme.

He also reported in relation to the review of discretionary transport provision to schools that the Government had announced a national review of school transport rules and published an action plan for consultation. The Government had also announced new funding for the development of school travel plans and a grant scheme for schools to help implement measures such as new cycle parking. It was indicated that consideration was accordingly being given to whether this element of the Implementation Project should be put on hold until the results of the Government's review were known.

Some concern was expressed at the suggestion that there would be a hiatus in reviewing discretionary transport provision. In the course of discussion the Vice-Chairman of the Education Scrutiny Committee stated that work had been undertaken on the scoping of a Review. It was his expectation that the Committee would receive a report on the Government's proposals and their implications and give further consideration to the Review at its next meeting.

**RESOLVED:** That progress with the implementation of the Transport Cross-Service Review be noted.

**26. PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Director of Policy and Community advised that a report on the Property Management Scrutiny Review would be made to the next meeting.

**27. AUDIT SERVICES ASSURANCE REPORT 2002/03**

The Committee has received a report on Audit Services activity during 2002/03 and the Council's overall level of internal control.

The report drew a number of issues to the Committee's attention. However, it was reported that these were not material issues affecting the Council's overall level of internal control. When problems had been identified immediate management action had been taken to ensure that control mechanisms were in place. There was a positive approach to recommendations, with Managers agreeing to take action on 98% of the recommendations made. It was likely, however, that the Audit Commission's annual management letter would refer to fundamental systems with a marginal or worse opinion.

The Committee emphasised the need to ensure that recommendations made following audits were implemented. It was assured that a robust process was in place to establish that this was the case, although currently compliance would not be confirmed until the report for the subsequent year. It was noted that this point would be borne in mind as part of the continuous development of the audit process.

**RESOLVED:** that the position be noted.

**28. EXTERNAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION PROGRAMME**

The Committee was informed of the Audit Commission's approach to the revised External Audit and Inspection Programme.

It was reported that whilst the focus of Best Value inspections had changed significantly since their first introduction, they had not been abandoned in their entirety. They remained an important focus of the Audit Commission's Programme although there were now other significant elements involved following the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The most significant of those was the Improvement Programme agreed following that Assessment.

The Director of Policy and Community commented that the programme was draft and some inaccuracies and timings still needed to be revised with the Audit Commission. Once finalised the framework could be used to inform the priorities of the Scrutiny Committees.

**RESOLVED:** That the report be noted.

**29. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - CORPORATE HEALTH**

The Committee considered scrutiny arrangements in relation to the National Best Value Performance Indicators and corporate performance from 1 April to 31 July 2003.

The report identified on an exception basis areas above target performance and areas for improvement. Appendix 2 to the report detailed the National Best Value Performance Indicators in terms of the frequency of collection and scrutiny arrangements.

In relation to the areas of improvement identified as needed in relation to housing benefits the County Treasurer explained that the processing of benefits was a national issue. The Council tended to perform within the second or third quartile of Authorities. Shortage of resources, unreliability of software systems and changes required by central government were all factors in the current level of performance. The need for improvement was recognised and some measures had been taken. However, realistically he could not expect these measures to have full effect until the end of the financial year.

The County Treasurer explained the approach to dealing with benefit fraud investigations and reported that the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate had reviewed the Council's processes, had identified no concerns and considered the work of the Council's Benefit Fraud Team to be exemplary.

The County Secretary and Solicitor reported that it was proposed to review the need for local targets on the number of contested parish council elections and the percentage of the electorate from wards affected by content attending Council/Committee meetings.

The Director of Policy and Community acknowledged that in relation to complaints more work needed to be done to resolve more at Complaints Officer level.

**RESOLVED: That the Council's monitoring arrangements for the national Best Value performance Indicators, and corporate performance form 1 April to 31 July 2003 be noted.**

### 30. LAND CHARGES

The Committee reviewed progress in improving Land Charge Response Times.

The report outlined developments since the previous report to the Committee in April, 2003. Extra staff had been employed in the land charges section, and temporary staff employed in the Environment Directorate. However, some of the data in the Environment directorate required to answer search requests was on paper or on systems not easily accessed by the land charges section. The business case for the data collection exercise necessary to resolve this situation was marginal. The number of personal searches continued to increase. It was now not proposed to computerise data prior to 1993 given the cost implications. The service to personal searchers could not be sustained and with effect from 1 December 2003 searchers requiring data prior to 1993 would be referred to the various Registers to extract data personally.

There was no budget provision for the staff considered necessary to process the volume of searches being received. There was also a shortfall in income because of the growing use by Solicitors of local firms to carry out personal searches at the current statutory fee instead of the full search fee. It was intended to request that the true cost of service provision be recognised in preparing the 2004/05 budget.

It was reported that consideration was being given to the scope for unifying the service, currently divided between the Environment Directorate and the County Secretary and Solicitor's department, to see if this would deliver any economies of

scale and address the IT and staffing problems. The approach by other local authorities to the issues relating to personal searches also needed to be examined.

The County Secretary and Solicitor confirmed that due to the commitment of the staff performance had improved but would remain fragile until investment into the IT supporting systems was secured or there was sufficient staffing capability to cope with sustained peaks in demand. This would have implications from the income target the service had to meet each year.

**RESOLVED: That the position be noted and reviewed in six months time.**

### **31. BUDGET MONITORING 2003/04**

The Committee considered the position with regard to revenue budget monitoring for Programme Areas in 2003/04.

The report summarised the position in each programme area. It concluded that the projected net overspending was just on the 1% limit for the Council as a whole set by Financial Regulations. Careful monitoring and appropriate action where necessary would be required to ensure that the overall limit was not exceeded at the year end.

The County Treasurer commented on relatively small but significant issues in the Social Development and leisure areas. He also drew attention to the projected overspend on the property budget caused by a deficit in income from the markets and fairs budget and the Industrial Estate. He advised that the Recovery Plan would generate some improvement but it would take time to redress the position and the matter would need to be considered as part of the budget process.

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

- In response to concerns about the property budget the Director of Environment reminded the Committee that a review of property management was programmed and that in the meantime the immediate position was being considered.
- The County Treasurer confirmed that there was a contingency sum in the budget to deal with the effects of Government policy requiring Councils to make payments in relation to delayed discharges in certain circumstances. The Director of Social Care and Strategic Housing was exploring how to manage the situation proactively.
- Clarification was sought of the financial implications for the Council of the Housing Stock Transfer. Following a short statement by the County Treasurer it was requested that he inform all Members of the Council of the position.

**RESOLVED: That the report be noted.**

### **32. CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2003/04 TO 31 JULY 2003**

The Committee was informed of the Capital Programme forecast for 2003/2004.

The report set out the position by programme area. It concluded that there were no fundamental concerns, the monitoring process was robust, the cross-directorate working group was working well and no conditional resources should be lost.

**RESOLVED: That the position be noted.**



**33. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT**

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

The meeting ended at 12.50 p.m.

**CHAIRMAN**

