

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 28 April 2008 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Councillors: PA Andrews, WU Attfield, KG Grumbley, TM James,
RI Matthews, AT Oliver, SJ Robertson and JK Swinburne

In attendance: Councillors BA Durkin and JP French (Cabinet Member –Corporate and Customer Services and Human Resources)

96. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor RH Smith. Apologies were also received from Councillors H Bramer (Cabinet Member – Resources) and RJ Phillips (Leader of the Council).

The Chairman expressed his disappointment that two Members of the Committee had had appointments arranged for them with the Leadership Centre that clashed with the Committee's meeting.

97. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

98. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2008 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

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

There were no suggestions from members of the public.

100. INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORT

The Committee considered the Council's performance for the operating year 2007-08 against the Annual Operating Plan and national performance indicators used externally to measure the performance of the Council; partnership performance in delivering the Local Public Service Agreement, Local Area Agreement and Herefordshire Community Strategy; and performance against revenue and capital budgets and corporate risks for the period to 29 February 2008.

Performance against Performance Indicators

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager (CPRM) presented this section of the report. He said that much of the end of year data, particularly in respect of the best

value performance indicators, had yet to be reported. This was necessarily the case because the data relied on the closure of accounts or the collation of information from external sources. However, it was important for the Committee to be informed of the expected outcome.

Thirty-one of the 111 Council led indicators from the Annual Operating Plan were currently marked red (missed or unlikely to achieve target), compared to 25 indicators at the end of January.

The largest number of indicators marked red (15) remained those in respect of the Council priority of "maximising the health, safety, economic well being achievements and contribution of every child". Seven of these – related to teenage lifestyles and measured by a periodic survey - had been marked red because of a failure to establish baselines and targets, but action had now been taken to ensure that proxy indicators would be in place to measure progress during 2008-09.

However, taking the indicators for children's services as a whole, the picture was positive, with performance against most of the national indicators showing improvement compared with the previous year. Outcomes from youth work remained a concern; so too, as previously reported, did the time taken to carry out assessments following referrals of children in need.

Five indicators in adult social care were newly marked as red. Current data collection mechanisms continued to make it difficult to predict performance in this service area, underlined by the fact that these five indicators had gone straight from green (on course to achieve target) to red. Work was continuing to confirm the data for 2007-08. Four of these indicators were in respect of helping different groups of vulnerable people to live at home, by means of non-intensive care. There had been a planned in-year shift to do more for the most vulnerable and, particularly, to provide intensive home care for people who would benefit from this rather than, inappropriately, go into residential care. This was reflected in the improvement in performance as regards intensive home care and the reduction in residential care.

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

- Asked whether the indicators allowed the Council to measure the success of preventative measures, the CPRM replied that there was ample evidence nationally that well-conceived preventative measures did have an impact. It wasn't always easy, without special evaluations, to measure the precise contribution made by particular measures, but the outcomes were measurable through a number of the current indicators, such as those in respect of the proportions of people in residential and nursing home care. In respect of both children's and adults' social care, the service plans contained a range of indicators that enabled the success of preventative measures to be assessed.
- That there were a considerable number of indicators marked red. It was asked whether the Council could be more selective in deciding what indicators it used and perhaps set a reduced number of indicators that gave a stronger measure of improving outcomes for people and upon which it would be possible to focus more keenly.

The CPRM replied that the new corporate plan provided greater focus and included significantly fewer indicators. There was a particular emphasis on the Council's five priorities, as set out in the plan, together with a selection of other crucial indicators, including those proposed for the new Local Area Agreement.

He added in response to a further point that a corporate view had been taken that where baselines or targets had not been set for an indicator the targets

should be recorded as having been missed. This had proved effective in securing remedial action

- It was observed that deteriorating performance against a number of indicators relating to crime appeared to be contrary to the national trend. The CPRM said that that was indeed the case, although crime in the county remained comparatively low.
- A question was asked about the indicators relating to child protection, how realistic it was to set such targets and how these could be put in context to get a clear idea of outcomes and what was being achieved. The CPRM said that there were national standards and it was realistic to set targets for this area of work. The Legal Practice Manager commented on the role that the legal service played in this area of work. He highlighted that changes in the way in which the Courts would now administer the system would have financial implications for the Council both in terms of additional work that would need to be carried out and the increased fees payable to the Court.

It was requested that representatives of the Children and Young People's Directorate should be invited when performance against these indicators was next considered.

- In response to a question about the extent to which the Council rather than its partners could influence achievement of targets for some indicators, the CPRM emphasised that the Council was accountable for performance against the targets that it and its partners agreed should be in the Local Area Agreement. This was the case even in respect of those where the direct responsibility for the matter in question, and the ability to take most of the necessary actions, rested with another organisation.
- The Chief Executive was asked to comment on the Direction of Travel, Members noting that whilst 64% of indicators were on course to improve on the last year, 27% were predicted to be worse than last year. He said that performance needed to improve and suggested that a way to make the monitoring of performance more meaningful and to gauge progress would be to examine progress against service improvement plans in conjunction with the performance data.
- The basis for Best Value Performance Indicator 178: the percentage of the total length of rights of way in the local authority area that are easy to use by the general public was queried. It was confirmed in reply that this indicator had been deleted from the new national data set, which had been in operation from the beginning of the month. A key point was that the Council and its partners could choose to focus resources on specific matters based on their assessment of local needs, the wishes of the public and political priorities, rather than attempting to seek success against all the indicators.

Revenue and Capital Budgets and Corporate Risks

The Head of Financial Services (HFS) presented this section of the report.

He highlighted the following points:

- The estimated overspend on the revenue budget as at the end of February 2008 was £578,000, 0.5% of the revenue budget.

- The Council's claim under the Bellwin Scheme for flood related damage had been successful.
- The adult social care projected outturn had reduced by some £700,000 to £3.1 million. Since October the number of nursing and residential care packages had reduced by 34.
- Negotiations with HALO Ltd regarding costs for the implementation of single status and job evaluation had concluded. The final position would result in an overspend of £160,000 for 2007/08 and a further £67,000 relating to backdated amounts.
- The outcome of the Article 10 audit by Government Office of the West Midlands would not be known until 2008/09 and any grant clawback would be applied in the next financial year.
- The risk associated with current waste collection percentages that could mean an additional cost of £300,000, a sum not reflected in the projected outturn.

In the ensuing discussion the following principal points were made:

- Asked about the projected underspend of £600,000 on the waste disposal budget the HFS reported that underspends in previous years had been transferred to reserves. He noted that variations to the waste disposal contract would involve increased cost to the Council and account had been taken of this in the financial planning.
- It was suggested that a reduction of 34 in the number of nursing and residential care packages as reflected in the adult social care budget was substantial. It was asked whether the reduction was a financial measure and concern expressed as to whether this had had an adverse effect on service users. In reply it was stated that those who were eligible for services in accordance with the Council's eligibility criteria received care accordingly. Whilst acknowledging the Council's thresholds for eligibility for services were locally determined the issue of thresholds was a matter of national debate.
- It was noted with regard to risk CR 5: the inability to provide critical services due to the failure of the ICT Networks that the Council was reviewing the Community Network Contract and an update on the outcome was requested.
- In response to a question about progress on the replacement of the current client systems used within both Adult Social Care and the Children and Young People's Directorate the Head of Financial Services advised that the project was on target for the revised completion date of 1 November 2008.

RESOLVED: That note be taken of the issues raised during discussion.

101. OFFICE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY OPTIONS APPRAISAL

The Committee was invited to form a working group to consider the briefing paper on office accommodation strategy options and comment on a proposed process (including joint working with PCT colleagues) and timetable for developing an integrated office accommodation strategy for the Council and Primary Care Trust.

The Director of Resources presented the report. She emphasised the complexity of the rationalisation of accommodation and the need for support across the Council to deliver the project, which was fully reflected in the draft Corporate Plan. She outlined the key milestones and timetable as set out in appendix 1 to the report, noting that after the proposed Working Group reported back to the Committee in June, the next stage envisaged presenting a draft accommodation and business case to the Committee in September 2008.

The status quo for the Council's office accommodation was not an option. Rationalising accommodation would improve productivity. It would also release revenue funding currently tied up in maintaining an historic portfolio of buildings that was not fit for purpose. Significant resources could potentially be released, enabling the Council to repay some of its debt and fund what were currently some of its more aspirational objectives.

Timing was important. Plough Lane was leased until December 2010 and the timetable for the development of the Edgar Street Grid also had implications. It would be desirable to avoid having to develop an interim solution. The aim was to have a solution in place by September 2010.

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

- That the timetable for completing the project appeared to be a very tough challenge.
- It was noted that the company owning Plough Lane was being taken over. It was asked whether Plough Lane was still the preferred site. If it was, it was essential that clarification was obtained from the new owners at the earliest opportunity as to whether or not they were prepared to sell. In reply the Head of Asset Management said that it would be necessary to establish what the new owners were prepared to offer.
- A question was asked about the assessment of the amount of accommodation required, taking account of the scope for flexible working. In response to this and concerns that the Council did not yet appear to have the necessary information to hand the Director of Resources replied that discussions had taken place with Directors about their requirements and information was available on the number of staff to be accommodated and their requirements.
- That it was important that there was sufficient flexibility within the new accommodation to allow the Council to respond to changing circumstances in the years ahead.
- Whilst the formation of a Working Group was supported it was requested that Members of the Committee as a whole needed to be kept fully informed.
- The Chief Executive requested that the Working Group sought to avoid overcomplication.

The Committee did not formally record a view at this stage on the process and timetable.

RESOLVED:

That (a) a Working Group comprising Councillors PA Andrews, WLS Bowen and RH Smith with Councillor PJ Edwards as an observer

be established to consider the briefing paper on office accommodation strategy options as appended to the report, with the PCT Board also being invited to send a representative; and

- (b) the Working Group be requested to present their findings to the Committee on 13 June 2008.

102. REVIEW OF ICT SERVICES

Further to the decision take on 10 March on setting its work programme the Committee considered the scoping statement for a further review of ICT Services.

RESOLVED:

- That (a) the scoping statement as appended to the report be approved;
- (b) the Review Group comprise Councillors WLS Bowen, TM James, PD Price and AM Toon; and
- (c) Councillor WLS Bowen be appointed Chairman of the Review Group.

103. DEFINITION OF SENIOR CITIZENS IN COUNCIL POLICIES

The Committee was asked to note the response to a request from a member of the public that the Committee examine whether there was a lack of consistency in the Council's definition of senior citizens in its policy documents.

The Chairman reported that the member of the public who had submitted the question had expressed dissatisfaction with the report. As Chairman he was aware that requests for information had been made but limited information had been forthcoming in response, as reflected in the report. He proposed that if further information was forthcoming a further report would be made.

The Legal Practice Manager clarified that in terms of age discrimination and service provision where it was specified that a service was available from the statutory retirement age a woman would be eligible at 60 and a man at 65. If this was not specified there was discretion to equalise eligibility at 60 or at 65.

It was advised that the task of establishing eligibility criteria for all services was potentially huge and where the age eligibility criteria were statutory the Council was required to abide by them. On this basis the Chief Executive said that he would be reluctant to commit further officer resource to the issue.

RESOLVED: That should any further information be forthcoming a further report be made to the Committee.

104. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT

The Committee noted the work being undertaken by the scrutiny committees.

105. WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered the Scrutiny Committees' current and future work programmes.

RESOLVED: That the current Work Programmes serve as a basis for further development.

The meeting ended at 11.30 a.m.

CHAIRMAN