

MINUTES of the meeting of Community Services Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday 5 October 2009 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor TM James (Chairman)
Councillor KG Grumbley (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: DJ Benjamin, PGH Cutter, GFM Dawe, JHR Goodwin, KS Guthrie and MAF Hubbard

In attendance: Councillors AJM Blackshaw (Cabinet Member, Economic Development and Community Services), WLS Bowen and PJ Edwards

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor DW Greenow, Mr P Hands, Councillor RH Smith and Mr G Woodman.

19. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor PGH Cutter was present as a substitute for Councillor DW Greenow, and Councillor JHR Goodwin for Councillor RH Smith.

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest.

21. MINUTES

Councillor GFM Dawe registered his objections to the Minutes as Members comments were not attributed.

RESOLVED: That the minutes for the meeting held on 29 June 2009 and 13 July 2009, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

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

A member of the public suggested the Committee should scrutinise the potential impact of the proposed new Link Road in Hereford. It was important that the Committee considered and addressed the economic implications for existing business.

The Committee agreed that a meeting would be held to consider the subject.

23. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2009/10

The Principal Accountant (Environment & Regeneration) presented the Revenue Budget Monitoring Report for the period to 31 July 2009. In her presentation, she highlighted the following points:

- That the total Community Services budget had decreased from £10,184k to £9,680k as a result of transfer of Services between Directorates.

- That Parks & Countryside and Public Rights of Way budgets had been reduced by £244k in relation to the transfer of staff on 1st September 2009 to Amey Wye Valley Limited, following the service delivery review. This budget had transferred to the Management Services budget along with Highways staff budgets and would be managed within the Environment & Culture Directorate as a whole in order to track the £1million savings.
- That there was an addition of £117k in relation to Community Safety which was included in the Community Services Portfolio.
- That the Libraries budget was expected to overspend by £120k as a result of employee costs and the Broad Street Library building running costs and the Self-service booking system ICT Project costs.
- There was also a risk that there would be further overspend on the Bromyard Library and Heritage Centre in relation to the previous year premises costs payable to HALO which have recently come to light. This was currently being discussed with HALO in conjunction with future management fees.
- Tourism was currently expected to overspend by £70k. This was following the disaggregation from Cultural services and due to staffing levels and premises costs – a recovery plan was in place in order to address this overspend in the current year.

In the ensuing discussion the following points were made:

A Member pointed out that cost savings could be made in Ross-on-Wye by moving the Tourist Information Centre, and asked whether these savings could be used to enhance the tourism offer in the town. The Cabinet Member (Economic Development and Community Services) added that the Tourism service was currently being restructured in order to help address the overspend.

In answer to a question from a Member, it was noted that the total budget for the Library Service was £1,852k. Work was currently being carried out to address the budget pressures within Libraries and progress will be reported to the next meeting. The Cabinet Member said that the condition of the library building in Broad Street, Hereford, was proving problematic. Consideration was being given to regenerating the building as either a stand alone museum or a library.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

24. ENVIRONMENT & CULTURE AND REGENERATION DIRECTORATES: PERFORMANCE FOR THE THREE-MONTH PERIOD TO JUNE 2009

The Committee considered the report on the performance indicator position and other performance management information for the Economic and Community Services Division within the Regeneration Directorate and Cultural Services functions within the Environment and Culture Directorate for the three month period to June 2009

The Improvement Manager reported that the format of the performance indicators had been changed in order to bring them into line with the report that went to Cabinet. Only one Local Area Agreement (LAA) indicator was showing red, whilst more than half were showing green. A number of the amber indicators related to targets that had not been reported on by the Council's partners, and discussions would be held with these organisations in order to rectify the situation wherever possible. In the ensuing discussion, the following points were made:

- That the LAA targets were agreed with central Government and shared with all partners in the County. Where an amber target was shown, these were targets that the partners did not regard as priority areas and had not indicated a target. Whilst the data was available by Division, what had not been agreed was what the local targets were.
- That 2008 was the first year of reporting against the national indicators. The Council was reporting against the same indicators in 2009, but now had baseline data to report. The only ones awaiting an out-turn were those where Government Departments provided the data.

In reply to a question from a Member, the Director of Regeneration said that road fatality data was being closely analysed. The Council would be taking up issues relating to the road directly with the Highways Agency. It was possible to directly address issues on other roads under the Council's management, however, and take measures such as changing the road surface and improving visibility.

RESOLVED:

- That: (a) the report on performance be noted,
and;
(b) areas of concern and exception continue to be monitored.**

25. IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

The Committee noted a paper which outlined the way the Council was alleviating the impact of the economic downturn in the County. The Head of Economic and Community Services reported that an action plan had been produced by the Council's Economic and Community Services working with the Economic Development Partnership Group. This action plan had been adopted by the Herefordshire Partnership Board and Area Based Grant (ABG) had been allocated to it. A dedicated website had been set up in order to promulgate information. A number of initiatives had been put together such as the Business Booster Grant, which offered small to medium size businesses grants of between £500 and £5k to provide 50% of match funding for new schemes to diversify product base to enter new markets. The Council had been able to set up a very straightforward application form to facilitate applications. There was also a Training Voucher scheme, which was a new fund offering grants of up to £750 for businesses to upskill their workforce to prepare for future markets. A boost to tourism had been provided, in order to capitalise on the home market, including a new Fishing and Angling package.

She went on to say that additional measures had been taken by the Council itself, such as a change to Supplementary Planning rules which had provided for a reduction in the planning obligation for 106 for developments with fewer than five properties. The Council was also committed to achieving a 20 day payment on undisputed invoices, and was working towards a ten day time scale. In the ensuing discussion, the following points were made:

- A Member pointed out that the green recycling bins that would be introduced across the County in November had been sourced in Cornwall, and asked that more should be done to help local businesses by sourcing contracts locally.
- A Member concurred, and pointed out that Amey staff were now undertaking all tree surgery for the Council where this had previously been undertaken by local contractors. Training and support for local firms would have allowed them to compete for these contracts. It was noted that Amey had a performance target

within their contract to ensure that they spent more than 50% of the contract on local firms.

- In reply to a question from a Member regarding levels of business rates, the Head of Economic and Community Services said that work was being undertaken to look at ways of providing relief to small businesses, but that there were a lot of restrictions regarding what the Council was able to do in this area.
- In reply to a further question, the Head of Economic and Community Services said that the Future Job Fund had been set up in order to help young people into work who had been unemployed for at least 11 months. Local unemployment levels stood at 2.9%.

RESOLVED:

That : (a) the report be noted.

and;

(b) regular reports should be provided to the Committee.

26. REVIEW OF THE HEREFORDSHIRE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2005-25

The Committee received the Review of the Herefordshire Economic Development Strategy 2005- 25. The Chairman of the Review Group reported that the Review had highlighted the different elements of the strategy, and had sought to bring these together.

A Member pointed out the importance of Resolution C in the report, that there 'should be greater emphasis on ICT and particularly actively seeking ways of improving broadband speeds and coverage across the County in order to support existing businesses as well as attracting new ones'. It was important that businesses were supported with adequate broadband provision, and that there were no 'not-spot' areas in the County where small businesses were not able to receive broadband.

In reply to a question from a Member, the Head of Economic and Community Services said that a solution to the broadband issues in Rotherwas would be in place in terms of the bandwidth available to businesses in the area. A combined solution to deal with the twin issues of not spots and slow broadband speeds was required. A paper outlining the interim position would be brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED:

That:

- (a) the report of the Economic Development Scrutiny Review Group, in particular its recommendations should be submitted to Cabinet.**
- (b) subject to the Review being approved, the Executive's response to the Review including an action plan be reported to the first available meeting of the Committee after the Executive has approved its response;**
and;
- (c) 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.**

27. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Work Programme.

RESOLVED: That the work programme be approved and reported to the Strategic Monitoring Committee.

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm

CHAIRMAN