

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 8th December, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.

Present: Councillor T.M. James (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: W.L.S. Bowen, A.C.R. Chappell, J.H.R. Goodwin,
Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J. Stone, J.P. Thomas and W.J.S. Thomas

In attendance: Councillors B.F. Ashton, Mrs. L.O. Barnett, Mrs. J.P. French and D.B. Wilcox

34. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor R.J. Phillips who, whilst not a Member of the Committee, would normally have been present in his capacity as Leader of the Council.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

36. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13th October, 2003 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

37. HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGY - PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee received an update on progress against the Council's Human Resources Strategy.

The Head of Human Resources gave a presentation setting out the background to the Strategy, the link between the Strategy and the third annual staff opinion survey, an interim report on which was appended to the report, progress against targets in the Strategy and the proposed way forward.

He highlighted key findings from the staff opinion survey and reviewed progress against each of the six priorities within the strategy. The survey results were compared with those from previous years and with the local authorities benchmarking group. He noted that the Council compared favourably with the benchmark group on 9 out of eleven comparable questions and had a score on the other two around the average level.

He concluded by explaining how he wanted to reform the human resources strategy group to drive forward improvement; to add milestones and interim targets to the Strategy; to improve performance in key areas identified by the staff opinion survey; and to restructure Human resources in line with the Best Value Review Improvement Plan.

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

- The Head of Human Resources commented on the importance of effective communication. He noted that the survey was only one means of obtaining information and outlined action he had initiated through team meetings to gather information from the workforce on practical solutions to key issues raised in the survey.
- The Principal Research Officer commented that some of the changes in the findings compared with 2002 were sufficiently large to be statistically significant.
- It was noted that the response rate to the survey had been 41%. However, the figure was a percentage of all employees including staff employed on a casual basis. It was thought that the response rate from full time employees had been higher and next year's survey would be prepared in a way that would enable this to be tested. Consideration was continuing to be given to ways of increasing the response rate.
- It was confirmed that an analysis of exit interviews was underway.
- Most of the written comments in survey responses had related to job evaluation. In response to a question the Head of Human Resources explained that the aim was to conclude the job evaluation process by the end of the financial year. The Cabinet Member (Human Resources and Corporate Support Services) advised that briefings for all Members were being arranged. The Chief Executive commented that it was to the credit of staff that work had not suffered as a consequence. However, he cautioned that the outcome of the process and the changes it would bring would almost inevitably be unsettling to the organisation.

RESOLVED: That the progress report on the Human Resources Strategy be noted.

38. LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENT

The County Treasurer reported that the monitoring report on the Local Public Service Agreement included in the agenda papers was the one which the Committee had considered in October and had been published in error. An update was being prepared and would be available for the next meeting.

39. ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered a report on the approved Asset Management Plan which had been submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in July 2003.

The report noted that Plan had been rated as "good" by the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM), the highest rating possible, and had obtained the best score in the West Midlands. The Council accordingly no longer had to submit a Plan to the GOWM. The Asset Management Plan would, however, remain an important tool for the authority and link into the prudential code for local authority finance.

The Property Services Manager informed the Committee of some of the projects in which the service was currently engaged. In response to questions he explained the Council's target for disabled access to buildings and confirmed that energy usage targets would have to be submitted to the Audit Commission by June 2004 and software had been purchased to facilitate this requirement.

RESOLVED: That the report on the Asset Management Plan be noted.

40. PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY REVIEW

Further to the Committee's meeting in December 2002 the Committee considered a revised timetable for the property management scrutiny review and the membership of the review team.

The report noted that the original scoping statement approved in December remained appropriate. A revised timetable for the review was attached to the report at Appendix 2.

RESOLVED:

That (a) the review timetable at Appendix 2 to the report be approved,

and

(b) the Member Review Team comprise Councillors Mrs P.A. Andrews, W.L.S. Bowen, T.M. James and J.P. Thomas.

41. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - CORPORATE HEALTH

The Committee considered a report on progress in relation to the Council's corporate national and local Best Value Performance Indicators from 1 April to 30 September, 2003.

The report identified on an exception basis areas above target performance and areas for improvement.

In response to a question about the percentage of complaints resulting in a change of practice it was noted that a report on the issue was in preparation. An analysis had also been requested by the Cabinet Member (Audit and Performance Management) of what service areas were receiving complaints. An increase in recorded complaints, above target performance, reflected improved collection arrangements and a greater focus on customer service issues across the authority.

RESOLVED: That progress in relation to the Council's Corporate National and Local Best Value Performance Indicators from 1 April to 30 September 2003 be noted.

42. PROGRESS REPORT ON REVENUES AND BENEFITS BEST VALUE IMPROVEMENT PLAN AND HOUSING BENEFITS UPDATE

The Committee considered an update on progress to date with the Revenues and Benefits Improvement Plan, current performance and activity in Benefits, including information on planned areas for improvement and changes having an impact on future service delivery.

The Assistant County Treasurer presented the report. She stated that the service had been involved in a considerable amount of activity with changes having to be made as a result of the implementation of tax and pension credits. Further changes to the way housing and council tax benefits were to be administered had also been announced by the Government for implementation by April 2004.

The report detailed current performance noting that the service had not been able to deliver the expected improvement in performance to date. However, it was expected

that there would be a considerable improvement by the start of 2004.

The report described a number of actions designed to secure improvement in performance as follows.

- Recognising that it was essential to have a full complement of staff, two new posts had been established partly funded by the Department of Work and Pensions: a Training and Development Officer and a System and Support Officer.
- It had also been decided to procure a new fully integrated software system. It was not expected that this could be operational before Autumn 2004. To ensure that the project did not have an adverse effect on processing times it was intended to recruit additional agency staff to assist with claim processing.
- There had been a successful bid for funding to work in partnership with the largest Registered Social Landlords in the County. Benefits from this would include economies of scale.
- Work had also been undertaken with the Service Improvement Team to see how existing processes could be improved. One route involved appointments being made with all customers who wished to make a new claim for benefit so that a benefits specialist could deal with their claim on a face to face basis either in their home or in the office. However, this could not be implemented in full until a number of constraints such as the lack of suitable confidential interview facilities could be overcome. A number of options were currently under consideration.

It was also reported that while details were still to be finalised by the Department of Work and Pensions the further significant changes to the benefit system from April 2004 would have implications for the roles and responsibilities of staff and have an impact on performance in the short term.

Against this background as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate had reassessed the service and a maximum score of 4 had been achieved on the Audit Commission 4 point scale compared to 2 in 2002. This was considered encouraging confirming the service's ability to make improvements to the service whilst implementing significant changes to systems and procedures. The County Treasurer added that although it was recognised that the service was not reaching the performance standards it wanted to achieve the assessment showed that the correct processes were in place.

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

- The County Treasurer emphasised that part of the difficulty was the number of renewal claims. He reminded the Committee that the policy was to deal with new claimants first because those seeking renewal of their claims continued to receive their existing level of benefit pending a reassessment and were therefore less vulnerable than new claimants.
- That staff turnover remained a difficulty. Moreover, there was no single contributory factor.
- The lack of suitable confidential interview facilities was noted together with some of the options being explored to overcome the problem.
- It was expected that the DWP's funding for the posts of Training and

Development Officer and a System and Support Officer would continue beyond 2004/05 but, if not, savings would have to be found to continue the posts.

- That mindful of staffing difficulties home working was being investigated but was not possible with the present IT infrastructure.
- Noting that Welfare Rights Officers and Supporting People staff offered some benefits advice, and in some cases were former Benefits Staff, it was confirmed that the Service already worked closely with those staff and sought to make the most of the available expertise.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

43. REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Committee considered proposed amendments to the Constitution relating to Local Area Forums and the Regulatory Committee.

The report outlined revisions to the Constitution required to give effect to Cabinet's decisions following a review of the Local Area Forums. It also noted the need to empower the Regulatory Committee to appoint a Sub-Committee to carry out new licensing duties and to refine the scheme of delegation to officers for regulatory matters.

Whilst deciding it was not appropriate to debate the detail of the proposed changes to Local Area Forums some reservations were expressed..

It was noted that because of timing consultation on the budget would not be undertaken through the Forums but it was planned meetings would be held in all the market towns and the City.

RESOLVED:

- THAT**
- (a) the proposals relating to the Local Area Forums as set out in appendix 1 to the report and the Scheme of Allowances for Members be noted and the necessary consequential amendments to the Constitution be recommended to Cabinet and Council for approval;**
 - (b) it be recommended to Cabinet and Council that the Constitution be amended to empower the Regulatory Committee to establish a Sub-Committee;**
- and**
- (c) it be recommended to Cabinet and Council that the Constitution be amended to provide for the County Secretary and Solicitor to be authorised to devise a scheme of delegation for officers for regulatory matters.**

44. CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2003/04 TO 30TH SEPTEMBER, 2003

The Committee considered a report on the capital programme forecast for 2003/04.

It was noted that, subject to the expected acceleration of spending in the second half of the year, no conditional resources would be lost.

RESOLVED: That the position be noted.

45. THE PRUDENTIAL CODE AND ITS IMPACT ON CAPITAL STRATEGY

The Committee considered a report on the implications of the new Prudential Code for Capital Finance for the Council with effect from 2004/05 onwards.

The report noted that Code replaced all current legislation and regulation on capital finance in particular the system of borrowing approvals. The County Treasurer reported that the Council had in place the building blocks to develop its capital strategy in line with the Code's requirements. The Code would afford the Council greater flexibility in seeking to deliver its priorities.

RESOLVED: That the position be noted.

46. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

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. The County Treasurer highlighted the reduction in the projected overspend for the year. He advised that the position on the social care budget had improved. The projected overspend on property had also reduced a little but the position remained serious.

In the course of discussion the County Treasurer acknowledged that the rise in the deficit in income from the cattle and butter markets represented a steady worsening of the position which would need to be addressed. It was noted that the deficit on income from Rotherwas Industrial Estate was also expected to rise. The Chief Executive noted that these would be amongst the issues which the property management scrutiny review should consider.

In response to a question the Director of Policy and Community commented on the overspend on parks and countryside. She noted that this was in part attributable to the Council becoming directly responsible for an increasing number of pieces of adopted land. There had also been difficulties over the costs of contracts which she hoped would be overcome by the partnership agreement with Jarvis

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

47. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT

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

The report drew attention to the Health Scrutiny Committee's work programme. It also invited the Committee to determine which Scrutiny Committee should take the lead role in scrutinising issues resulting from action taken by the executive pursuant to the Green Paper: Every Child Matters. The Chief Executive advised that the issues should be co-ordinated by the Strategic Monitoring Committee.

The Chairman proposed that the Committee should add to its work programme reviews of the Council's funding support for Community First and the operation of the Herefordshire Partnership and that this work be scoped in consultation with him.

RESOLVED:

- That (a) the work programme of the Health Scrutiny Committee be noted;**
- (b) the lead role in scrutinising issues resulting from action taken by the executive pursuant to the Green Paper: Every Child Matters be taken by the Strategic Monitoring Committee;**
- and**
- (c) that work be undertaken to scope reviews of the Council's funding support for Community First and the operation of the Herefordshire Partnership in consultation with the Chairman.**

The meeting ended at 12.45 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

