

MINUTES of the meeting of Social and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee held at Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 17th March, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.

Present: Councillor R.V. Stockton (Chairman)

Councillors B.C. Baldwin, M.R. Cunningham, J.G.S. Guthrie, T.W. Hunt, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J.P. Thomas.

Non-voting Members: Mr D Stevens (Chamber of Commerce)

In attendance: Councillors A.C.R Chappell, (Cabinet Member – Economic Development) M.J. Kimbery (Cabinet Member – Social Development).

57. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no named substitutes.

58. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors P.D. Evans and R.I. Matthews.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Mr D. Stevens declared a personal interest in agenda item 6: Review of Council Support to the Voluntary Sector because of his role as Chairman of Young enterprise.

Councillor Mrs M.D. Lloyd-Hayes declared a personal interest in agenda item 6: Review of Council Support to the Voluntary Sector.

60. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 27th November, 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to recording Councillor J.G.S. Guthrie amongst those present.

61. POLICY AND COMMUNITY DIRECTORATE BUSINESS PLANNING PROCESS 2003/2004

The Committee was advised of progress in completing Business Plans for the Policy and Community Directorate for 2003/2004.

The Director of Policy and Community explained the basis upon which the Business Plans had been prepared. The key issues focused on by the Directorate Business Plan were performance management, developing people and managing change, managing resources, communication, delivering and developing the modernisation programme and developing customer focused services. The Plan was underpinned by sixteen individual service business plans.

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

- The Director of Policy and Community confirmed that copies of the business plans would be made available on request to co-opted Members and that an executive summary would appear on the website.
- The importance of encouraging economic development was emphasised. The Cabinet Member (Economic Development) assured the Committee that the Council was striving to play its part in ensuring that Herefordshire was economically viable.
- It was reported that the business community had welcomed the Council's decision to grant planning permission for a new access road to the Rotherwas Industrial Estate and had seen it as a signal of the Council's commitment to economic development. The Cabinet Member (Economic Development) commented that the Council had sought to work in partnership with the business sector and believed there were strong relationships upon which to build.
- The Director explained how the Directorate's Plans linked with those of other Directorates, focusing on the key themes identified in the Improvement Plan arising from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, and the aims of the Herefordshire Plan as translated through the Council's Corporate Plan.
- It was noted that the involvement of Members of the Committee in the business planning process would be pursued.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

62. REVIEW OF COUNCIL SUPPORT TO THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The Committee's view was sought on the scope of the review of the Voluntary Sector.

The Director of Policy and Community reported on the background to the review and the intention that any recommendations would be implemented for 2004/2005. The report set out the scope of the review and the membership of the Review Team. Although it was a cross-cutting review it had been decided that the bulk of the work would be overseen by the Committee with the Stage 3 report then being referred as usual to the Strategic Monitoring Committee.

In response to questions the Director confirmed that the Review was in the Best Value Review Programme. She also explained the circumstances in which the Council considered assisting with accommodation needs of voluntary organisations. She advised that the Council did seek to accommodate as many voluntary sector groups as it could in Info shops, the provision in Leominster being the model which it was intended to follow.

RESOLVED: That the proposed scope of the review be endorsed.

63. STAFFING NUMBERS WITHIN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Committee was advised of the staffing numbers within the Social and Economic Development departments of the Policy and Community Directorate.

The report detailed the numbers of staff within the various sections of the Directorate and the extent to which some posts were externally funded. It was proposed that reports on staffing would be made to the Committee on a half yearly basis.

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

- It was requested that future reports should be prepared in a way which would enable the Committee to see clearly what changes had taken place during the relevant period and the reasons for those changes and any discernible trends.
- The Director of Policy and Community highlighted the external funding which had been secured and the additional work which it had been possible to carry out as a result. She reassured the Committee that the Council sought to ensure that it did not enter into a long-term commitments which could leave the Council exposed once the external funding ceased or was withdrawn. However, she cautioned the Committee that there was a cost involved in submitting bids and that this was increasing as rules governing the process and the application of funds became more stringent with more demanding audit requirements. The Council therefore needed to be careful in its approach to external funding. She also acknowledged that changes to European funding would have an impact. She advised the Committee of action being taken to ensure that funding secured from Europe was being used effectively. The European Commission would claw back funding where it considered it had not been spent on the relevant programme.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

64. ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING INSPECTION PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee was advised of the position in respect of the recent inspection of the Council's Adult and Community Learning service by the Adult and Community Learning Inspectorate.

The report stated that the conclusions of the inspection were not yet public. The initial feedback had been very positive in respect of the quality of the learning opportunities provided whilst identifying a number of areas where further work was required to improve the management and monitoring of the service. Once the final report was published a further report would be made to the Committee to assess the findings and the implications for the service.

The Director reported that the service was very small and the Council's strength was in supporting and developing activity rather than direct service provision. The findings and the Council's future approach would need to be considered in this context.

Some concern was expressed at the lack of Member involvement in the inspection and the scale of the inspection in relation to the size of the service. The Director noted that the latter point seemed to have been recognised by the Inspectorate and it was understood that in future, wider, area based inspections would be undertaken.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

65. PAYMENT OF INVOICES WITHIN 30 DAYS

The Committee considered performance against the national Best Value Performance Indicator for the payment of undisputed invoices within 30 days, for the period 1st September, 2002 – 31st January, 2003.

The report stated that the performance figures for the last three months had exceeded 90%. The Committee welcomed the improved performance and noted that further improvement was being sought.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

66. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered a new work programme.

It was noted that the programme formed a basis for the Committee's work and that items would be added in response to developments as circumstances required.

RESOLVED: That the framework of the 2003 work programme, as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, be adopted subject to the inclusion of two reports each year on staffing.

67. SCOPE AND REMIT FOR LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION SERVICE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The Committee considered a report outlining the scope and remit of the strategic framework for Herefordshire Libraries & Information Service for the next ten years.

The report stated that the Audit Commission Inspection had described the service as fair with uncertain prospects for improvement. A strategic framework for longer-term delivery of services was lacking. The Government had recently published a document entitled: "Framework for the Future – Libraries Learning and Information in the next Decade". This set out its long-term strategic vision for the public library service and varied role it saw for library services at a local level. Together with other key documents published in the past three years there were a number of significant issues which had yet to be addressed in the County. The report identified a number of issues which the Council needed to consider in developing a strategic framework.

In response to questions the Libraries Operations Manager commented on proposals to develop the way in which mobile libraries were used, the awareness of the e-government agenda, and the potential for development as demonstrated by a scheme in Colwall which had raised the profile of the library and demonstrated the scope for working with the community.

RESOLVED: that the scope and remit of the strategic framework for the Libraries and Information Services be noted.

As the meeting concluded the Cabinet Member (Social Development) thanked the Chairman for the way in which the Committee's meetings had been conducted over the past three years and expressed appreciation for the way in which the Committee had worked with the Executive.

Mr D. Stevens commented that the Chamber of Commerce welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the work of the Committee and expressed the hope that this would continue.

The Chairman responded and commented on the way in which he considered the Committee had developed and improved its effectiveness. He stated that it was important to operate in a way which maintained trust and meant that scrutiny was regarded as an asset to the Council, using the Committee's powers to improve services to the public. He thanked the staff who had supported him in his role as Chairman.

The meeting ended at 12.10 p.m.

CHAIRMAN