

**MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 26th April, 2004 at 2.00 p.m.**

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

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

**In attendance:** Councillor Mrs. J.P. French

**64. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor J.H.R. Goodwin.

**65. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors W.L.S. Bowen and J.P. Thomas declared personal interests as the Council's representatives on the Marches Housing Association.

**66. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 9th February 2004 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**67. PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Committee was updated on the progress of the Property Management Scrutiny Review against the agreed timetable.

The Lead Officer for the Review reported that progress was broadly on target.

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

**68. TRANSPORT CROSS-SERVICE REVIEW IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT - PROGRESS REPORT**

The Committee was notified of the further progress that had been made on implementing the recommendations of the Transport Cross-Service review.

The Director of Environment drew attention to the progress being made in installing scheduling software and the pilot projects on staggered opening times for education and social care establishments. He added that the conclusions of any work being undertaken by the Education Scrutiny Committee on discretionary school transport provision would be fed back into the rest of the review depending on any further action required.

In response to questions the Lead Planner (Transportation) commented that a desk top study had been undertaken of opening hours of Education and Social Care establishments in Hereford City which had included surveys of users and parents. However, before commencing any trial those groups would be consulted and informed of any changes. He added that the scheduling software had been acquired within budget. Evidence from other authorities suggested that savings should be generated, perhaps of 10%, but the actual amount depended on the outcome of the necessary tendering exercise.

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

**69. BEST VALUE REVIEW OF THE INSPECTION, ADVICE AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SERVICE - STAGE 3 REPORT**

The Committee were asked to consider and approve the Stage 3 report and outcomes of the Best Value Review of the Inspection Advice and School Performance Service (IASPS).

The detailed Stage 3 report had been circulated separately to Members of the Committee.

The Head of IASPS highlighted section 11 of the detailed report which set out the Best Value Team's conclusions and section 12 which set out the options appraisal. He explained the reasoning behind the preferred option, which involved retaining the service within the Council but managing it through a Local Partnership Board, composed of Councillors, headteachers, governors, parents and other local partners.

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

- One of the Councillors who had served on the Best Value Review Team expressed the view that the review had been conducted rigorously and reiterated support for the recommended option. He observed that a similar model operated effectively in Nottinghamshire.
- Some concern was expressed that the proposal might undermine the independence of the Inspection Service and constrain the Council's powers to intervene. The Head of IASPS advised that whilst the proposal was not entirely risk free he did not consider that this would be the case. He explained the benefits of the proposal which he thought far outweighed any concerns. Notwithstanding these comments Members proposed that further consideration should be given to how best to ensure that the Council's and the Executive's authority over the running of the Service and the Service's independence could be maintained.
- It was also suggested that it needed to be demonstrated that consideration had been given to the Gershon efficiency review of Government Services.

**RESOLVED:**

**That (a) the recommendation of the Education Scrutiny Committee on the Stage 3 report of the Best Value Review of the Inspection Advice and School Performance Service that the Service be retained within the Council but restructured and managed through a Local Partnership Board be endorsed;**

and

- (b) that the Cabinet Member (Education) be asked to consider how best to ensure that the Council's and Executive's authority over the running of the Inspection Advice and School Performance Service and the Service's independence is maintained, with consideration also to be given to the Gershon efficiency review of Government Services.

## 70. PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENT

The Committee was informed of the position regarding the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) targets.

The report considered by Cabinet on 18th March, 2004 was appended to the report. This provided an update on performance against the current LPSA and progress made in negotiations for the second round of LPSAs.

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

- In relation to target 7.2, involving surveying the views of young people, it was asked whether views of young people were being sought through schools and if so how those not of school age were being reached. In reply it was advised that it was believed mechanisms were in place.
- A number of questions were asked about performance against service specific targets. The Committee had previously agreed it would be the responsibility of individual Scrutiny Committees to monitor these in detail and the need for individual Scrutiny Committees to do so was re-emphasised.
- In reply to a question about the amount of performance reward grant which might be obtained the County Treasurer advised that out of a total sum available of £3.5 million he thought that the Council could expect to receive between £1-2 million. It was difficult to forecast the likely overall financial benefit to the Authority as the majority of the targets were only measurable in the final year of the LPSA. Officer time allocated to pursuit of the targets had not been costed, but it had to be borne in mind that a pump-priming grant had been received. However, it was important to recognise that in providing a focus for successful partnership working leading to real performance improvement the LPSA process had generated some significant gains for the Council.
- Replying to questions about some of the targets the Chief Executive reiterated that there had been difficulties in negotiating the targets in the first round of LPSAs. In relation to the second round the Council was one of two authorities invited to submit a framework bid exploring the possibility of formulating a different type of LPSA. This might consider only a few targets relating to some major themes or targets which had outcomes of a longer-term nature.

**RESOLVED: That the contents of the Cabinet report dated 18th March 2004 be noted.**

**71. PERFORMANCE MONITORING - CORPORATE HEALTH**

The Committee received an update on the Council's corporate performance in relation to the National and Local Best Value Performance Indicators from 1st April 2003 to 31st January 2004.

The report to Cabinet on 18th March, 2004 was appended to the report.

**RESOLVED: That performance in relation to the Council's National and Local Best Value Indicators, from 1st April 2003 to 31st January 2004, be noted.**

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

*(Councillors W.L.S. Bowen and J.P. Thomas declared personal interests as the Council's representatives on the Marches Housing Association.)*

The Committee was informed of current performance and activity in the Benefits Section and on progress to date with the Revenues and Benefits Improvement Plan.

The report set out developments since the last report to the Committee in December 2003. The Assistant County Treasurer commented on the developments and reported that whilst performance had improved in the previous few months it had not done so significantly enough to show an overall improvement for the year. More work was being undertaken on the way in which authorities in the top quartile operated to see what lessons could be learned. The Committee would be informed of any significant findings.

She also drew attention to the work continuing to implement the recommendations of the Service Improvement Project Team aimed at improving the processing times for new claims. A pilot project had shown an impressive improvement. However, this had involved a limited sample and once all new claims were being processed in that way it was thought that, whilst performance would be improved, the level of performance achieved in the pilot project would be unlikely to be sustained.

The report concluded by noting that ongoing changes at national level to the way benefits had to be administered were having an impact on performance in the short term. Steps had been taken to minimise these effects. Action was also being taken to improve performance in the long term through the purchase of a new computer system. This together with other changes would provide a framework for continuous improved service delivery.

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

- The Assistant County Treasurer explained how the changes being introduced by the Department of Work and Pensions from April 2004, replacing the requirement to obtain renewal applications from claimants with an intervention regime, would operate.
- In relation to training being given to staff of the Elgar Housing Association and the Herefordshire Housing Association to enable them to verify claims on behalf of their tenants the Assistant County Treasurer confirmed that the Marches Housing Association had also been approached and it was hoped that they too would participate. She undertook to pursue the matter.

- Extra steps taken to promote the availability of council tax benefits were noted.
- That targets for prosecuting those making fraudulent claims was being met.
- That the Benefits Service did liaise with the Welfare Rights Officer where appropriate.
- That where it was considered a debt was unrecoverable it was written-off.
- That the new computer system would be of benefit to performance management.

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

### **73. LAND CHARGES**

The Committee reviewed progress in improving Land Charge response times.

The report set out progress since the report to the Committee in October 2003. The County Secretary and Solicitor advised that productivity in the Land Charges Section had improved greatly over the last twelve months with the establishment of a permanent, well trained team. The fact that much of the data within the Council was in paper format continued to be a hindrance. A business case for a computerised system could not be made at the moment but the matter would be kept under review. Action had, however, been taken to address the problems being caused by the activities of personal search companies.

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

### **74. RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**

The Committee was informed of the position with regard to the Risk Management Strategy.

The report considered by Cabinet on 15th April 2004 was appended to the report. The County Treasurer explained that the Strategy aimed to introduce a framework for the development, promotion and monitoring of Risk Management within the Authority.

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

### **75. BUDGET MONITORING 2003/04 TO 31 JANUARY 2004**

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

The report to Cabinet on 18th March, 2004 was appended to the report. This showed an estimated underspending of £143,000. The County Treasurer informed the Committee that the latest indications were that the position was better than had been estimated.

In relation to expenditure on the 2003 Election some Members reported that concern had been expressed by Parish Councils about the amount they had been charged, which had been higher than they had expected. In response it was explained that the increased charges had been caused by extra turn out. It was acknowledged that there had been some delay in notifying the Parish Councils of the charges.

However, the Council had now offered them the opportunity to pay the charges in instalments if they wished. In future consideration would be given to providing some guidance on the range of charges which might be levied depending on turn out.

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

**76. CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING 2003/2004 TO 31 JANUARY 2004**

The Committee received a report on the Capital Programme forecast for 2003/04.

The County Treasurer commented that it was expected that no resources available to the Council on the condition that they were spent in the current year would be lost. Expenditure had, however, been a little slower than considered desirable and that would be reviewed.

**RESOLVED: That the contents of the Cabinet report dated 18th March be noted.**

**77. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT**

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

**78. WORK PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered the updated work programmes adopted by the Social Care and Housing and Social and Economic Development Scrutiny Committees and was also reminded of the status of the work programmes of the other Scrutiny Committees.

In discussing the work programmes it was suggested that there would be benefit to the Council as a whole in having a seminar on the Council's emergency planning arrangements in the Autumn once the new Emergency Planning Officer was in post and the Civil Contingencies Bill, currently under consideration by Parliament, enacted.

**RESOLVED: That the position on the work programmes on the other Scrutiny Committees be noted.**

The meeting ended at 4.15 p.m.

**CHAIRMAN**