

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Thursday, 28th April, 2005 at 3.55 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: Councillors D.J. Fleet, Mrs. J.P. French and P.E. Harling.

74. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor J.H.R Goodwin and Councillor R.J. Phillips (Leader of the Council).

75. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

76. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 15th April, 2005 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

77. THE ANNUAL OPERATING PLAN 2005-2006

The Committee considered the Authority's Annual Operating Plan.

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager presented the report advising that Cabinet had approved the Annual Operating Plan (AOP). The Plan was designed to secure implementation of the Corporate Plan, as approved by Council in March, 2005. It provided a basis for monitoring performance throughout the year and was of direct relevance to the Committee. He suggested that the Committee should have regard to both the AOP, and the Corporate Plan it was designed to deliver, in formulating its Work Programme. The Corporate Plan set out what the Council wished to achieve over the next three years and the risks it faced in seeking to achieve its ambitious programme. There was clearly an important role for the Committee in scrutinising progress towards the stated ambitions.

In the ensuing discussion the following principal points were made:

- Concern was expressed that whilst the aims set out in the AOP were admirable it was not clear how they were to be achieved. It was also suggested that some of the targets were simply unachievable.

In response the Corporate Policy and Research Manager explained that the action plan forming part of the AOP set out the individual targets, the action

considered necessary to meet the targets and milestones to monitor progress. More detail on the necessary action was included in Directorate, Service and Team Plans, translating eventually into actions that individual Members of staff should take to achieve the relevant targets. Some of the targets were challenging but it was through that approach that improvements could be made.

He emphasised that the targets had been set following extensive discussions with Directorates before finally being agreed by the relevant Cabinet Members. The effectiveness and soundness of the Plan would be judged at the end of the year when the final assessment of performance against the targets would be made.

The Director of Policy and Community reinforced the point that the process for selecting targets had been rigorous and highlighted the development of a new performance reporting framework which would integrate reporting on service and corporate performance indicators, targets and milestones, financial performance and the management of risk. She added that more comprehensive performance reports based on the AOP would be made regularly to Members and there would be a key role for the Committee in highlighting any concerns it may have.

A Member commented that this was a further demand upon the scrutiny function and again raised the question of the level of support the function required to perform its role effectively.

- It was noted that a number of targets were still to be finalised as part of the negotiations for the Council's second Local Public Service Agreement.
- It was suggested that whilst, unlike the Corporate Plan itself, the AOP was not a document requiring Council approval there would be advantage in future years in seeking comments from all Members upon it.
- There were further suggestions that some of the targets looked modest whilst others seemed over-ambitious. In response the Corporate Policy and Research Manager reiterated that the targets had been subject to rigorous discussion and the targets in the AOP were considered realistically achievable within 2005/2006.

There was discussion of the following specific targets in the AOP:

- (AOP page 10) - target relating to reducing the number of absences from school. Clarification was provided on the reasoning behind setting a target for reducing absences overall and not simply focusing on unauthorised absences.
- (AOP page 13) - targets relating to reducing below standard roads. There was concern that achievement was too dependent on Government finance and there was no certainty as to what level of resources the Council would receive in future years. In response the Corporate Policy and Research Manager noted that the Corporate Plan would be updated each year and if circumstances changed, such as the level of Government funding, the Plan and if necessary the AOP would change to reflect the new position. The County Treasurer confirmed that resources had been identified in 2005/06 to deliver the target. The Corporate Plan identified the level of resources available to the Council as one of the major risks to be taken into account in formulating its plans.
- A concern was registered that, whatever the Council might do, the increasing accidents on Trunk Roads, managed by the Highways Agency, could potentially adversely influence public perception of the Council's performance.

- (AOP page 15) - provision of 100 affordable homes. Concern was expressed that achieving the target would do little to address the level of need within the County.
- (AOP page 19) The appropriateness of the target relating to recorded incidents of nuisance was questioned. It was suggested that setting a target related to arrests for nuisance could be more appropriate.
- (AOP page 25) - reduction in staff sickness absence. In response to questions about this target the Cabinet Member (Human Resources and Corporate Support Services) commented that the public sector had been criticised for the level of sickness absence. The Council had consistently sought to manage sickness absence and the present system was robust but supportive where appropriate. The Council's sickness absence rate was now below the national average, which was why the target sought a comparatively modest further reduction.

The Committee's view on the Annual Operating Plan, in conclusion, was that there were concerns as to whether the targets in the Plan could be delivered.

RESOLVED:

That (a) the Annual Operating Plan be noted and Cabinet advised of the Committee's concerns as to whether the targets in the Plan could be delivered;

and

(b) regard be had to the Annual Operating Plan in determining the future scrutiny programme

78. REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Committee considered a report proposing updates to the Constitution to reflect changing legislative and Council requirements.

The report identified the significant legislative changes and proposed changes to: Cabinet portfolios, overview and scrutiny arrangements, the remit of the Planning Committee and question time at Council, and also recommended a number of other amendments.

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

- The report proposed to transfer the power to determine planning applications submitted by the Council for its own schemes from the Area Planning Sub-Committees to the Planning Committee. It was proposed that the Local Member should have a right to speak at the Planning Committee on such Schemes rather than having to rely on the discretion of the Chairman and that this should be explicitly set out in the Constitution.
- There was consensus that the Council meeting was not at present a lively debating forum. The proposed amendment to question time at Council was supported. There was, however, discussion about the rights of Members to ask supplementary questions and for other Members to ask follow-up questions in response to replies given to the original questioner, the suggestion being that this might enliven debate. It was suggested in response that the existing provisions

did provide wide-ranging opportunities for Members to ask questions and that the Notice of Motion mechanism was there to facilitate a more formal debate.

- A Member expressed concern that the proposed Cabinet Support Members would automatically be drawn from the administration. It was noted in reply that the legislation prohibited members of the Executive serving on Scrutiny Committees and it was important to maintain the separation of roles and political accountability.
- The Chairman of the Health Scrutiny Committee commented that he needed to give careful consideration to the implications of the proposal to allocate responsibility for scrutinising public health to the Adult Social Care and Strategic Housing Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted, subject to recommending to Council that the right of the Local Member to speak at the Planning Committee on planning applications submitted by the Council for its own schemes should be explicitly set out in the Constitution.

The meeting ended at 4.55 p.m.

CHAIRMAN