

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC MONITORING COMMITTEE

Meetings Held on 26th September, 2005 and 14th October, 2005

Membership:

Councillors: T.M. James (Chairman), Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews (Vice-Chairman), H. Bramer, W.L.S. Bowen, A.C.R. Chappell, J.H.R. Goodwin, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes, J.P. Thomas, W.J.S. Thomas.

BUDGET PREPARATION

1. It was reported to Council in July that the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Scrutiny Committees had held a seminar with Directors to look at how to improve scrutiny in Herefordshire using the Centre for Public Scrutiny self-evaluation framework. An improvement plan agreed as a result was circulated to all Members of the Scrutiny Committees in September.
2. One part of that exercise focused on how scrutiny could effectively challenge the Authority's corporate strategy and budget. The Committee has now received a report on the preparation of the annual revenue and capital budgets. This set out the role of the Budget Panel in undertaking the detailed analysis of the budget and budget pressures before reporting on its findings and making initial recommendations to Cabinet and the acceptance to date that the Budget Panel should be representative of the political groups the executive and the scrutiny function.
3. The Committee was advised that it was important to review the effectiveness of the Budget Panel process and it was suggested that the appointment of the new Director of Resources provided an opportunity to do so. However, it was thought that it would not be practical to complete a review in time to contribute to the preparation of the 2006/07 budget and that the Director of Resources should therefore be asked to make recommendations to both the Committee and Cabinet on the process for the preparation of the 2007/08 budget.
4. The Committee has accepted the advice that a review of the process should take place with a view to any changes being implemented for the 2007/08 process. It has, however, also made the general observation that it would be helpful if provision could be made in the budget preparation timetable for a slightly longer period between the executive making a firm proposal and the recommendation of the budget to Council for adoption.
5. The Leader of the Council indicated his intention to re-emphasise to all Members the opportunity to make representations to Cabinet Members on their priorities as part of the 2006/07 process.

CAPITAL STRATEGY

6. The Committee has noted the position regarding the Council's revised Capital Strategy.
7. In discussing the Strategy it was suggested that Members of the Council were not sufficiently well informed about the Strategy and were unaware, for example, of the detail of the planned disposals of surplus Council properties consequent upon the Council's rationalisation of its accommodation in accordance with its Accommodation Strategy. The Leader of the Council has agreed to review current arrangements with the Group Leaders.

STAFF OPINION SURVEY

8. The Committee has received an update on the findings of the Staff Opinion Survey 2005, noting the advice that the overall message from the survey was a positive one, although progress needed to be sustained.
9. The Committee acknowledged that there were sound reasons why it had been the practice in recent years not to include school based staff in the survey. However, given the developing agenda for Children's Services it has suggested that it might be timely to consider whether some form of survey of school based staff might be helpful.

REVIEW OF THE HEREFORDSHIRE PLAN

10. The Committee has been informed of the work undertaken to date on the review of the Herefordshire Plan and the next steps in the review process.
11. It has noted that the Plan's new vision is that contained in the new Local Area Agreement ("*Herefordshire is a place where people, business and an outstanding natural environment will together bring about sustainable prosperity and well being for all*") and the new Plan is to be structured around the Agreement's four themes: economic development and enterprise, safer and stronger communities, children and young people and healthier communities and older people. The outcomes agreed within the Agreement are to form the major part of the Partnership's work plan.
12. The timetable presented to the Committee envisages a draft Herefordshire Plan and a first proposal for a new Herefordshire Partnership structure being circulated for consultation in November 2005. Consultees will involve those already involved in the first stage, and any other group or organisation who may be affected by the changes. Specific consultation meetings will be held with Ambition Groups and other Groups, and a specific Members briefing will be held on 22nd November 2005. After the consultation period the feedback will be analysed and changes made as appropriate. New ways of working in the Herefordshire Partnership will also be confirmed. It is intended that the new Herefordshire Plan will be launched in early 2006
13. The Committee has noted the position and requested that as part of the process consideration is given to ensuring that reporting on the work of the Partnership is improved, with future reports being standardised and providing clear evidence of progress against the Plan's objectives.

BEST VALUE REVIEWS

14. It was reported to Council in July that given the resources involved in Best Value Reviews and the changes which had taken place since the introduction of the Best Value regime the Committee had called for a report on the future approach to the Best Value review process.
15. The Committee has been advised that whilst the original prescriptive Best Value Regime has been modified the broad principles for Best Value reviews remain. The Council's Corporate Plan is now its Best Value and Improvement Plan providing the basis for Best Value review.
16. The Committee has noted that it was for both it and the other scrutiny committees to consider which areas of the Corporate Plan should be made the subject of review as part of their work programmes.

ISSUES CONSIDERED BY THE INDIVIDUAL SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

17. The work of the Committees is analysed below as far as practicable under the following five roles for overview and scrutiny: holding the executive to account, best value reviews, policy development and review, external scrutiny, and improvement (performance management and review), the first four of which are identified as key roles in the report on "The Development of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister". Issues considered by the Strategic Monitoring Committee not all of which are dealt with above because they arise from its role in fulfilling its remit to scrutinise corporate matters, rather than being of Council-wide significance, are listed for completeness.
18. **The Adult Social Care and Strategic Housing Scrutiny Committee** held a short, formal meeting on 17th October, 2005 to consider performance information and the budget. The Committee has noted the increase in the projected overspends on both adult social care and the strategic housing budget. It has recommended that the Cabinet Member
19. The meeting was followed by an informal homelessness scrutiny event for Members of the Committee and key stakeholders. The outcomes will inform the Committee's ongoing work on the major issue of homelessness in the County.
20. **The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee** met on 3 October 2005 and considered the following issues:

Theme	Reports
Holding the Executive to Account	
Best Value Reviews	
Policy Development and Review	Briefing on School Support
External Scrutiny	
Improvement (Performance Management and Review)	Inspection of Fostering Service
Other	Review of Co-opted Membership

21. **The Community Services Scrutiny Committee** met on 5 October 2005 in the evening in Ledbury and considered the following issues:

Theme	Reports
Holding the Executive to Account	Presentation by Cabinet Members (Rural Regeneration and Strategy) and (Community Services).
Best Value Reviews	
Policy Development and Review	Herefordshire Festivals 2004/05 Youth Matters – Green Paper Ledbury Library and Tourist Information Service Review of The Courtyard Centre for the Arts
External Scrutiny	
Improvement (Performance Management and Review)	Community Services Performance Report
Other	-

22. The meeting attracted about 35 members of the public and generated some lively debate on both the relocation of the Ledbury library and tourist information centre and the development of festivals in Herefordshire. It also provided a public forum for

the Cabinet Members (Rural Regeneration and Strategy) and (Community Services) to comment on policy issues affecting their programme areas, their main priorities and answer questions.

23. The Committee's scrutiny review of how to retain 18-35 year olds within Herefordshire or attract them to the County is progressing.
24. **The Environment Scrutiny Committee** met on 26th September 2005 to consider the Environment Agency's management of flood risk on main rivers in Herefordshire, highlighting to the Agency a range of issues affecting the County. The meeting was productive with the Agency explaining their role and responsibilities in relation to flood management rather than defence and how their management in the region had changed since the reorganisation of the Agency. The Committee questioned the Agency on a number of strategic issues of importance to the County including the future funding of schemes, the accuracy of flood maps, and progress being made on the flood defence scheme near Belmont roundabout in Hereford. This was a further example of the Committee's work in scrutinising external agencies following its scrutiny of the Highways Agency's management of trunk roads in Herefordshire earlier in the year.
25. The Committee held a further meeting on 24 October to consider progress on the voluntary code of practice for the use of polytunnels in Herefordshire, the biodiversity conservation strategic framework and budget and performance monitoring reports. The update on the voluntary code of practice for the use of polytunnels in the light of experience of the 2005 growing season attracted 25 members of the public to the meeting. A number of questions were also submitted in accordance with the enhanced provisions for public involvement in scrutiny committee meetings. A review of the Code's operation is scheduled to be undertaken in 2006.
26. **The Health Scrutiny Committee** met on 22 September, 2005 and considered the following issues:

Theme	Reports
Holding the Executive to Account	
Best Value Reviews	
Policy Development and Review	Follow up to Review of The Management of the outbreak of Legionnaires Disease in Herefordshire
External Scrutiny	Presentations by the Chief Executives of the Herefordshire Primary Care Trust and the Hereford Hospitals NHS Trust. Update on Reviews of Communication and GP Out of Hours Services
Improvement (Performance Management and Review)	
Other	Response to National Health Service Organisational Change Presentation on Health Commission Health Check

27. The Committee is making progress on its reviews of Communication and the GP out of hours service and the Council will be advised of the findings.

28. The business conducted by the **Strategic Monitoring Committee** at its meetings on 26th September and 14th October, 2005 is summarised below.

Theme	Reports
Holding the Executive to Account	Call in of Cabinet Decision to relocate the livestock market Budget Consideration
Best Value Reviews	Best Value Review Process
Policy Development and Review	Capital Strategy Review of the Herefordshire Plan Review of the Strategic Service Delivery Partnership Review of ICT services
External Scrutiny	
Improvement (Performance Management and Review)	Staff Opinion Survey
Other	

29. As referred to in the Cabinet report to Council the Committee called-in Cabinet's decision to identify a preferred site for a new rural business park which would incorporate a new livestock market in a location at Stretton Sugwas. The Cabinet Member (Rural Regeneration and Strategy) informed the Committee that he proposed to recommend to Cabinet that all options for a site to the north west of Hereford City (the north west quadrant) should be examined with full public consultation. The Committee recommended that the Cabinet should start again as the Cabinet Member proposed. It added that in considering alternative sites Cabinet needed to be mindful of environmental issues such as flooding, and terrain and consider carefully whether it was realistic to seek to link a livestock market to a rural business park and ensure that the report to Cabinet on options would be detailed and robust including a clear assessment of the costs of each of the options and in particular the cost to the Council of developing a site outside its ownership
30. Cabinet subsequently amended its original decision and consideration of the options is now underway.
31. The Committee has also commenced its review of the Council's Strategic Service Delivery Partnership with a review of ICT services to follow later in the year.

T.M. JAMES
CHAIRMAN
STRATEGIC MONITORING COMMITTEE

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Agenda Papers of the Meeting of the Strategic Monitoring Committee held on 26th September and 14th October, 2005.