

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Friday, 14th October, 2005 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Councillors: B.F. Ashton, J.H.R. Goodwin, Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes and W.J.S. Thomas

In attendance: Councillors R.J. Phillips (Leader of the Council) and R.M. Wilson (Cabinet Member (Resources))

23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors W.L.S. Bowen, H. Bramer, A.C.R. Chappell and J.P. Thomas.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

25. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 26th September, 2005 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to correcting the list of Members present which listed Councillor Mrs Andrews, who was present, twice.

26. SUGGESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON ISSUES FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY

No suggestions were made.

27. STAFF OPINION SURVEY 2005

The Committee received an update on the initial findings of the Staff Opinion Survey 2005.

The Head of Human Resources presented the report, commenting that the work that the Council had already done, and was doing, to improve had made a difference to what employees thought. In many areas of the survey the message from employees was that things were getting better.

The report described some of the improvements which had been made, areas where responses had been significantly more positive than in either of the last two years and the two main areas where employees had said that things had not improved. It also set out how the results compared with other local authorities identifying areas both where it compared well and where it appeared not to compare so well.

In the ensuing discussion the following principal points were made:

- In response to a question the Head of Human Resources reaffirmed his view that the overall message from the survey was a positive one.
- In line with the practice adopted in recent years the survey had not included school based staff. The difficulty in seeking comments from school based staff on aspects of the Council's management when the management of individual schools was outside the Council's control was acknowledged. However, it was suggested that given the developing agenda for Children's Services it might be timely to consider whether some form of survey of school based staff might be helpful.
- The Head of Human Resources was questioned on the two main areas where employees had said things had not improved: the findings that fewer employees felt that they could meet job requirements without working long hours; and that fewer employees were satisfied with their work environment. He advised that these findings would be examined in more detail once the analysis of the responses was broken down on a departmental basis.
- The Leader of the Council commented that the progress shown by the survey needed to be sustained.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted with the suggestion that consideration be given to some form of survey of school based staff.

28. BUDGET CONSIDERATION 2006/07

The Committee received a report on clarifying the role of the scrutiny function in the preparation of the annual revenue and capital budgets.

The report explained how the consideration of the annual revenue and capital budgets needed to be seen in the context of the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan 2004/05 to 2007/08. The clear pressures on the budget over the remainder of this period made the alignment of resources to the Council's objectives essential and a review of base budget provision would be required.

It described 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. It also noted the acceptance to date that the Budget Panel should be representative of the political groups, the executive and the scrutiny function.

In conclusion the report recognised that it was important to review the effectiveness of the Budget Panel process and 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.

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

- That providing individual scrutiny committees with the opportunity to contribute to the budget process had not proved productive in the past.

- 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.
- In response to concern expressed about the involvement of other Councillors in the process the Leader of the Council indicated his intention to re-emphasise to Members the opportunity to make representations to Cabinet Members on their priorities.

RESOLVED:

That (a) the Director of Resources be asked to undertake a prompt review of the budget process and make recommendations to both the Committee and Cabinet on the process for the preparation of the 2007/08 budget;

and

(b) 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.

29. CAPITAL STRATEGY

The Committee was invited to note the position on the Council's revised Capital Strategy.

The report to Cabinet on 29th September, 2005 was appended to the report, with the detailed Strategy enclosed separately.

The Assistant County Treasurer presented the report, highlighting key issues within the Strategy. He advised that the Strategy represented best practice and that capital resources were being used effectively.

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

- In reply to a question in relation to page 41 of the Strategy which set out the Property Strategy and referred to the consolidation of offices in Hereford in a non-city centre location the Leader of the Council agreed that the decision taken by Cabinet following a call-in of the decision on office by the Strategic Monitoring Committee had provided for consideration of options other than Plough Lane but advised that no other options had yet been forthcoming.
- In relation to page 51 of the Capital Strategy, which set out the Accommodation Strategy, it was asked when the disposal of freehold property, consequent upon the Council's rationalisation of its accommodation would be discussed. It was suggested that Members of the Council were not sufficiently well informed about the Strategy and were unaware of the detail of the planned disposals, which had been contained in a confidential Cabinet report.

The Leader of the Council replied that there would be a phased disposal of surplus property. As far as the provision of information to Members was concerned he considered that Members were kept informed about the business being conducted at Cabinet meetings. Some reports had to be treated as confidential to protect the Council's position but these were few in number.

Members had access to both public and confidential Cabinet reports, except in very particular circumstances. It was, however, to an extent incumbent upon Members themselves to request information if they wanted it. He was not aware of any Member having been refused access to information to which they were entitled. However, as it appeared that there was some concern about the matter he proposed to discuss the position with Group Leaders to see whether any further measures needed to be taken to strengthen communication.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

30. BEST VALUE REVIEWS

The Committee was invited to note the position in relation to Best Value Reviews, having asked for clarification of the approach at its meeting in July.

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager presented the report. He noted that the original prescriptive Best Value Regime had been modified, the Government guidance stating that this was to enable authorities "to focus on priority areas arising from their Comprehensive Performance Assessments and other considerations." However, the broad principles for Best Value reviews remained.

The Council's Corporate Plan was now its Best Value and Improvement Plan providing the basis for Best Value review.

The Committee 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.

31. REVIEW OF THE HEREFORDSHIRE PLAN

The Committee was informed of the work undertaken to date on the review of the Herefordshire Plan and the next steps in the review process.

The report noted that in developing the Plan in 1999, with a 10 year vision, it had been agreed that following an update in 2003 there would be a wider review in 2005 to test that the vision and ambitions were still appropriate.

The Herefordshire Partnership Manager explained that the first stage of the review had now been completed. The Partnership Board had agreed that there was a need for a simpler Plan which was easier to read and implement and more action orientated. The new vision was that contained in the new Local Area Agreement and the new Plan was to be structured around the Agreement's four themes. The outcomes agreed within the Agreement were to form the major part of the Partnership's work plan.

A draft plan and proposal for a new partnership structure was to be circulated for consultation in November 2005. It was intended to launch a new Plan in early 2006

A request was made that reporting on the work of the Partnership needed to be improved with future reports being standardised and providing clear evidence of progress against the Plan's objectives. The Herefordshire Partnership Manager reported that the ODPM would require reports on performance against the objectives in the Local Area Agreement and these could be readily adapted to report on the work of the Partnership.

RESOLVED

That (a) work undertaken and the consultation proposals be noted;

and

(b) future reports on the work of the Partnership should be standardised and provide clear evidence of progress against the Herefordshire Plan's objectives.

32. SCRUTINY REVIEW WORK

The Committee noted the terms of reference of the planned reviews of the Council's Strategic Service Delivery Partnership and ICT services.

33. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT

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

In closing the meeting the Chairman reminded the Committee that this would be the last meeting attended by Marie Rosenthal, County Secretary and Solicitor, before taking up a new appointment with another authority. He formally thanked her on the Committee's behalf and wished her well for the future.

The meeting ended at 11.02 a.m.

CHAIRMAN

