

MINUTES of the meeting of Strategic Monitoring Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Thursday, 26th January, 2006 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Councillors: H. Bramer, J.H.R. Goodwin, J.P. Thomas and W.J.S. Thomas

34. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors B.F. Ashton, W.L.S. Bowen, A.C.R. Chappell and Mrs M.D. Lloyd-Hayes.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

36. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 14th October, 2005 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

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

No suggestions were made.

38. COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT: CORPORATE ASSESSMENT AND JOINT AREA REVIEW

The Committee was informed of the receipt of the Corporate Assessment and Joint Area Review undertaken in 2005 and the timetable for preparing an Improvement Plan.

The report outlined the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process noting that the Council was one of the first eight authorities to experience the new process of assessment. The process involved a Corporate Assessment and a Joint Area Review of services for Children and Young People and contained a new assessment on Direction of Travel, expressed in terms of the capacity of the organisation to improve.

He explained that in overall terms the Council had been assessed as being a 3 star authority and that its capacity to improve had been rated as Improving Adequately. He wanted to place the Improving Adequately judgement in context because the Council was one of only 30 per cent of local authorities improving at or below that level. That was significantly below the level of improvement to which the Council should aspire.

He then referred to the Joint Area Review (JAR). The headline here was in relation to the Staying Safe judgement where the overall contribution of services to keeping

children and young people safe was ranked as Inadequate, scoring a grade of 1.

This fed into the separate star rating judgements given by the Commission for Social Care Inspection where overall the Council had received a zero star rating.

This was a serious position for the authority and the overall Inspection results and the process for developing an Improvement Plan in response to the findings were described in the report. The Chief Executive commented specifically on the Staying Safe judgement and to the following summary of the issue drawn from the report.

“On the evidence gathered most children and young people appear to be safe. However not all those at the greatest risk of abuse and neglect get the help they need.”

The report had concluded that there were serious weaknesses in the system overall and that the implementation of the Child Concern Model (which is central to both), the assessment of need, and the planning of provision for children in need had been poorly planned and was giving rise to continuing problems in practice. There was concern that the criteria governing the involvement of local authorities' professional social workers were set too high.

He emphasised the importance of addressing the issue immediately and directly.

There followed a discussion on the thresholds for intervention and, in response to Councillor W.J.S. Thomas, the Chief Executive outlined the risks of drawing conclusions from individual cases without a thorough examination of the circumstances of such cases. The issue was whether the Child Concern Model as currently operated by the Council was effective in managing the risks in such cases. The Committee noted the broadly positive assessments in relation to the other service blocks and noted in particular the issues highlighted by the JAR in relation to the number of 16 year olds taking jobs without training and the provision of housing for young single people. In response to a question about the results for the first eight authorities the Chief Executive gave his understanding that, of the first eight authorities to experience a JAR, four had received initial grades in relation to Staying Safe of Inadequate. Some of those grades were subject to appeal. In making that statement, the Chief Executive emphasised that that should not detract from the serious attention that needed to be paid to that judgement.

It was noted that the issues raised in the JAR crossed the remits of a number of Scrutiny Committees. The relevant Chairmen would therefore need to discuss how the Scrutiny function would continue to contribute to the development of the Improvement Plan and its implementation.

In relation to the Corporate Assessment, the Committee noted the specific finding in relation to the Scrutiny function and accepted that a response to that issue would need to be made as part of the Improvement Plan.

39. INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Committee has received a progress report on the performance and other management activity necessary to successfully implement the Corporate Plan.

The covering report to Cabinet on 12th January, 2006 was appended to the report, with the detailed Integrated Performance Report itself having been made available separately.

The Chief Executive commented that the recent Corporate Assessment of the Council had identified the need for the scrutiny function to have an increased focus

on Performance Management. Further discussion of how best Scrutiny Committees might fulfil this role and what aspects they should focus upon needed to take place as part of developing the Council's Improvement Plan. It was important to avoid unnecessary duplication and to ensure that the Scrutiny Committees received up to date performance information.

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager informed the Committee that there were currently 18 areas highlighted as "red flags" where performance was not yet going to plan. These were grouped into three main areas of concern. The largest number related to the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA2G), where the identification of the year by year targets, milestones and actions needed to achieve the 2007-08 ultimate targets was substantially behind schedule; confirmation of previously identified significant under-performance against targets in respect of older people's social care and the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless people ; and a number of other, miscellaneous items, for example a shortfall against target in respect of the condition of principal roads, which had arisen because Government had changed the performance indicator.

He added that work was continuing to simply the collection and presentation of performance information.

In response to questions he commented that there were various reasons why the detailed work in relation to the LPSA targets had not been completed. The Integrated Performance report clearly identified where that work needed to be carried out.

The Committee noted the report.

40. COMPREHENSIVE EQUALITY POLICY

The Committee received a progress report on the implementation of the Comprehensive Equality Policy.

The report to Cabinet on 12th January, 2006 was appended to the report.

It was noted that the intention was to ensure that the Council met the criteria to reach Level 2 of the Equality Standard by 2007.

The Committee discussed the extent of the consultation to be undertaken in developing the Strategy, the increasing diversity of the community and the implications of this for service delivery and the Council's legal duty to make its services accessible to all.

41. PAY AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Committee received a progress report on the Council's Pay and Workforce Development Strategy operating plan for 2005/06.

The Head of Human Resources presented the report describing progress in implementing the Strategy, last reported to the Committee in July 2005. The report set out numerous areas where significant progress had been made.

The Committee noted the report.

42. CORPORATE PLAN 2006/2009

The Committee received the Corporate Plan noting changes might be needed before the Plan was recommended to Council for approval in March, 2006.

The covering report to Cabinet, meeting on the afternoon of 26th January, 2006, was appended to the report with the detailed Corporate Plan itself having been circulated separately.

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager reported that the development of the Plan was subject to any changes necessary following the approval of the new Herefordshire Plan, the Local Area Agreement and the financial resources available. He drew attention to steps being taken to provide fewer, but more strategic performance indicators and present information in a more helpful way for Members and managers.

The Committee noted the report.

43. LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT

The Committee has noted the current position in relation to the development of a Local Area Agreement for Herefordshire.

The report outlined the purpose of the Agreement, how it was being developed and its potential benefits. These included improved collaboration with partners leading to improved service delivery and reduced bureaucracy. The process for approving the Agreement and submitting it to Central Government were also described.

RESOLVED: That the Local Area Agreement work to date and the proposed submission arrangements be noted.

44. REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Committee considered a number of changes to the Constitution designed to reflect changing legislative and Council requirements.

The report detailed amendments proposed to reflect changes to the Senior Management Structure; arrangements for filling unavoidable vacancies in Cabinet Member posts, Members' access to information and availability of reports, a revision to the Scrutiny rules concerning the process for calling in key decisions, and a review of the Members Allowances Scheme.

The report Cabinet, meeting on the afternoon of 26th January, 2006, was appended to the report

It was suggested that there might be some inconsistency between the proposed wording set out at paragraph 16 and 17 of the Cabinet report in relation to arrangements for the circulation of reports containing a key decision and for giving notification that a key decision was not included in the Forward Plan to ensure that these provisions were consistent with one another.

RESOLVED: the recommendations to be made to Cabinet as set out in the Cabinet report be approved subject to Cabinet clarifying the proposed wording at paragraph 16 and 17 of the report in relation to arrangements for the circulation of reports containing a key decision and for giving notification that a key decision was not included in the Forward Plan to ensure that these provisions

were consistent with one another.

45. WORK PROGRAMMES 2006/07

The Committee considered its Work Programme and those of the other Scrutiny Committees.

Work Programmes for the Children's Services, Community Services and Environment Scrutiny Committee were appended to the report. A position statement was given in relation to the Work Programmes of the Adult Social Care and Strategic Housing Scrutiny Committee and the Health Scrutiny Committee.

The need for the Committee's own work programme and those of the other scrutiny committees to reflect appropriate issues identified in the Council's Improvement Plan, including the need for the scrutiny function to have an increased focus on Performance Management in response to the finding in the recent Corporate Assessment of the Council was noted.

In reply to a suggestion that consideration needed to be given to providing additional resources for scrutiny if the function were to develop the Chief Executive commented that the Committee would have the opportunity to make the case that scrutiny should be a priority at its next meeting when considering the budget for 2006/07. It would, however, be incumbent upon the Committee to identify from where resources should be transferred to fund that increased support.

RESOLVED:

That (a) the Committee's work programme be considered at a future date, reflecting where appropriate issues identified the Council's Improvement Plan, subject to any comments the Committee wishes to make;

and

(b) the Committee note the position on the development of work programmes for the other Scrutiny Committees.

46. SCRUTINY ACTIVITY REPORT

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

