

TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 19th November, 2012

Present:- Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Shenton – in the Chair
Councillors Mrs Burgess, Clarke, Hambleton, Mrs Hambleton,
Mrs Heames, Howells, Mrs Peers, Stringer and Waring

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor White.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Members noted the selection of efficiencies and the Town Centre Manager job description, as referred to in the minutes of the previous meeting, had not been received. A list of vacant posts and the job description were distributed to the Committee with time for them to consider the documents.

Members questioned what the rationale was for offering each of the vacant posts for deletion. A categorical reason could not be given for each post; the positions had been offered as potential savings by the Wider Management Team (WMT), no decision had yet been made and a strategic view could not be given. Members further questioned what brief the Portfolio Holder had received from Officers regarding the posts inclusion on the list. WMT had been given more powers to move the budget forward how they felt best. Members questioned the removal of the Housing Market Renewal Officer post, and it was clarified the post was for the renewal of the housing market and was different to the empty property officer. Renewal funding had supported the Housing Market Renewal Officer position, but this funding was no longer received and Aspire now provided the service. The Committee could expect to be informed of the decision regarding the vacant posts at the meeting on 10 December and were asked to keep the documents that had been distributed for that meeting. There would also be an update regarding recruiting for the Town Centre Manager position at the 10 December meeting.

RESOLVED: (a) The minutes of the meeting held on 30 October 2012 be agreed as a correct record.

(b) That the Committee be informed of the decision regarding vacant posts and receive an update regarding recruiting for the Town Centre Manager position at the 10 December meeting.

4. THE MODERNISATION OF THE POST OFFICE NETWORK

The Committee received a presentation from Richard Lynds, Senior Stakeholder Manager for the Post Office, in order to consider the modernisation of the Post Office

network, in particular the possibility of partnership working, as a potential new scrutiny topic for the Committee.

The modernisation programme would create two types of branches: larger main branches and smaller local models. There would be no branch closures and it was hoped the number of branches would increase as they became more profitable. Half of the Borough's branches would be modernised, with any changes communicated to the Council in advance. Two branches within the Borough had indicated that they wished to be part of the modernisation programme and it was expected that in the next twelve months another ten would be added to them. It was requested that the contact details for all Parish Councils within the Borough be provided to Richard Lynds to allow him to pass communications to them.

The Post Office was looking at how they could work with local government and in the last twelve months had worked with 25 pathfinder councils. They had a good I.T. platform and infrastructure that could work well with both local authority and customer systems. A tender from the Post Office to a Council would depend on the services required by the Council, and could be a single item tender or a framework agreement. Some services could be implemented immediately, whereas others could be developed. In Birmingham, a customer facing computer room had been installed in a Post Office to enable public access to the Council's website and online forms. Members highlighted that some members of the public did not have internet access. The Post Office wished to help the eight million people in the country who were not online, and were encouraging and assisting people to do so.

Members questioned how new services would be incorporated into Post Office franchises; would the Post Office or the franchise fund them. It would depend on the facility, but the Post Office would provide the products, computers, kits etc. There was a transactional link between the Post Office and the franchises, with a small fee based upon the transactions conducted being received from the franchises. The difference between Newcastle-under-Lyme and the London authorities the Post Office was working with was noted by Members. The Borough Council was a two-tier authority with Staffordshire County Council, with different services provided by the two authorities and Members questioned how services delivered by the Post Office would work. It was for the Council to specify what they would like the Post Office to help them with. For example if a bin collection had been missed, the Post Office could provide an online notification. The Post Office was working with county councils and in Warwick there was a branch in a library.

Members noted that if the Post Office was to take on Council work this could have implications for Council employees. Some of the suggestions made would take away frontline staff, but it would be up to the Council to respond to this in a way that they saw fit. Members considered it was a topic the Committee may very well wish to investigate further, but that employees would look on it with trepidation. At other councils there had been a shift from frontline to back office staff to support the digital delivery of services.

The Local Government Association was undertaking a piece of work with around 25 councils regarding the issue, the results of which were expected to be published imminently. The Committee would await the results of this work before moving forward with scrutiny. If it was considered prudent to proceed, then a scrutiny brief would be provided at a future meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED: That the information be received.

5. **TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2013/14**

The Committee considered the Treasury Management Strategy 2013/14. This was an annual strategy that would be considered by Full Council on 27 February 2013, and had been brought to scrutiny for consideration beforehand. It would be for Full Council to take the decision regarding the strategy in February, however any recommendations or suggestions from the committee would be taken on board and the strategy could be amended if necessary.

The strategy set down the parameters for Officers to operate over the coming year and dealt mainly with investments and borrowing. However, as the Council was not currently borrowing funds, the borrowing element had less relevance at the present time. The Council had adopted the CIPFA Treasury Management Code of Practice and there was a requirement to produce the strategy as part of this.

Officers clarified the position with regard to recommendation 'c' of the report. This was for the current contract with Sector Treasury Services Ltd to be extended for a further twelve months. There had been a contract for three years already, with one twelve month extension. If the contract was extended for a further twelve months, it would be the last contract extension and a tendering exercise would then be undertaken.

Members questioned whether the figure of £4.5 million available for investment would alter by the time the strategy was considered by Full Council in February. Officers advised the figure was not expected to change much. It had been proposed that training on treasury management be provided to Members in the new financial year. The Committee were in support of the strategy and all three of the recommendations.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That the Committee were in support of the strategy and the three recommendations provided on the report.

6. **FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT TO END OF QUARTER TWO (SEPTEMBER) 2012**

The Committee received the Financial and Performance Management Report to the end of Quarter Two (September) 2012.

The revenue budget showed a favourable variance of £15,000. Members noted there was a significant shortfall in parking income and Officers advised that areas where this was occurring were being looked at as part of the scale of fees and charges review. Members questioned whether the figures for Jubilee 2 were still in deficit. It was expected that Jubilee 2 would be slightly in surplus, with some additional expenditure due to the facility being used more.

The quarterly performance report was in the process of changing to a new style of measuring and reporting performance, and was now split into the four corporate priorities. There would be a more detailed approach in the next financial year. 75% of indicators were on target with the direction of travel positive overall.

The Leader advised the report was being received by scrutiny prior to Cabinet, and the Committee's contribution would be valued. There were three issues on the report

relating to crime where figures had not been provided by partners, and were therefore showing as not applicable. With regard to anti-social behaviour, 70% of cases were being dealt with satisfactorily. Closure interviews were being conducted, and all of the 70% mentioned were satisfied with the conclusion. The Leader considered that the community safety team were doing a good job and that this should be highlighted.

With regard to cleanliness, the Leader stated that the figures were not satisfactory and the relevant Portfolio Holder had been asked to meet with the Head of Service to establish what had caused the problems. Members considered that there had been a significant percentage increase in littering offences and questioned how the statistics were obtained. It was acknowledged that more clarification regarding the reason for the increase was required. Members questioned whether the figures were due to an increase in littering activity or the same amount of littering activity that was not being dealt with. This would be clarified further for the January meeting of the Committee. Overall, if there were any issues that were not shown positively on the report then these would be reported back to the Committee with a summary of what had been done to address the problems. Further information was not available at the meeting, but the Portfolio Holder had been asked to establish the reason and come back with a plan to tackle the problem. When the report was received in January 2013, the Leader would provide an update regarding the issue, with an explanation of the reasons for the increase in the figures and the result of meetings between the Portfolio Holder and the Head of Service on this subject.

The percentage of major planning applications determined within time had not met its target in quarter two, but was on target for the current quarter. The number of people accessing leisure and recreational facilities had not met its target and this was attributed to Kidsgrove Sports Centre being closed. The sports centre had reopened and it was hoped that a marked improvement and an increase in the number of people using facilities would be seen. The average number of days lost due to staff sickness was over target due to a small number of staff being off with long term illness. This was being managed in the appropriate way and was not a problem throughout the Council.

Members were of the opinion that the figures in the report did not mean very much and questioned when the new format report would be received. The report would be developed further in quarters three and four, with the report completely in the new format in the new financial year.

Members noted the positive performance figures for the number of cases where positive action was successful in preventing homelessness, and considered that the Council were really helping people in the cold weather during the lead up to Christmas. Homelessness was an issue the Leader was acutely aware of due to welfare reform, and it would be necessary to protect what the Council was doing in order to try and avoid a spike in the statistic.

It was also noted by Members that the figures for the number of invoices paid on time were up, which they considered welcome news for small businesses. This issue had been questioned previously by the Committee. Officers advised that there was also a local indicator for invoices being paid within ten days to local businesses, and 60-65% of these invoices were being paid within ten days.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That an update be provided at the 24 January 2013 meeting regarding improvement in street and environment cleanliness, with an explanation of the reasons for the increase in the figures and the result of meetings between the Portfolio Holder and the Head of Service.

7. **REVIEW OF THE CONSTITUTION**

The Committee considered a briefing note regarding the Constitution Working Party's meeting on 7 November 2012. The working group would be looking at the saying of prayers at Full Council meetings. It had been acknowledged that there was an issue, but the working group had progressed no further with the issue. The working group would be looking at best practice and the views of all Members would be sought. It was requested that Members highlight any problems they encountered with the working group.

Members considered the saying of prayers at Full Council was a cross party issue that was about abiding with the law and where the Council sat in comparison to neighbouring authorities. It was suggested Members could have their own time for their beliefs before the Mayor arrived. The Chair concurred the start of the meeting was viewed to be when the Mayor's procession arrived. It was also necessary to be mindful of Officers as well as Members. It was also noted that it was necessary to be in line with the Bideford Case. This was a High Court ruling that Bideford Town Council had acted unlawfully by allowing prayers to be said at meetings. It was ruled that the prayers were not lawful under Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972. However, prayers could be said as long as councillors were not formally summoned to attend a meeting. Members did not want the Council to be in the same position as Bideford and considered that people with different faiths should be allowed to do as they wish.

Other Members did not agree and considered the saying of prayers should remain as it is, with prayers being said with the Mayor and Mayor's Chaplain.

RESOLVED: That the information be received.

8. **WORK PLAN**

It was noted that two items needed to be added to the work programme. The Committee could expect to receive an update regarding Universal Credit at the March meeting. The Asset Management Strategy overlapped the Economic, Development and Enterprise and Transformation and Resources scrutiny committees. This would be received by Transformation and Resources on 10 December.

RESOLVED: (a) That the information be received.

(b) That an updated work plan be distributed to the Committee members.

9. **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business considered.

COUNCILLOR MRS ELIZABETH SHENTON
Chair