

TRANSFORMATION AND RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 20th May, 2013

Present:-	Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Shenton – in the Chair
Councillors	Bannister, Becket, Mrs Burgess, Fear, Hambleton, Mrs Hambleton, Howells, Jones, Taylor.J and Waring
Officers	Kelvin Turner – Executive Director (Resources and Support Services) Mark Bailey – Head of Business Improvement and Partnerships Paul Clisby – Head of Central Services Jeanette Hilton – Head of Customer and ICT Services Phil Jones – Head of Communications Louise Beeby – Property Manager Louise Stevenson – Scrutiny Officer

1. APOLOGIES

The Portfolio Holder had sent his apologies to the Committee.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of Interest.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2013 were confirmed as a correct record subject to Councillor Mrs Hambleton's apologies being recorded.

4. THE REPORTER

The Head of Communications presented a report on the Council's newspaper The Reporter. He stated that it was one of the key forms of communication to the residents of the Borough and Scrutiny had the opportunity to shape the future direction of the newspaper.

A Member stated that The Reporter could do more to promote the good work taking place in the Borough including the great variety of organisations such as amateur dramatics, music and dance. Further work on obtaining advertising needed to be completed. In contrast a Member stated that it was important not to lose sight of the ultimate aims of The Reporter and that it should be about promoting the work of the Council rather than external groups.

A Member commented that the Secretary of State had revised the Code of Conduct on Local Authority publications. The purpose was to keep residents informed about

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the Council and their partners. Its aim was not to replicate The Sentinel. The Reporter was a cost effective way of conveying information to residents and its content stood up against local authority neighbours.

A Member stated that they regretted the Government guidance restricting the amount of issues a Local Authority could issue. It was important to determine how many people actually read The Reporter, which would help determine its effectiveness and whether the money could be better utilised on improving the website. He stated that printing The Reporter in colour added to the cost and questioned whether the front banner could just be in colour. He asked about the level of potential saving that would be achieved.

The Head of Communications stated that it was a Member decision as to whether The Reporter should continue. The website was one ingredient which was already winning awards and the Council was already embracing social media. Not all people wanted to access information online and consequently The Reporter was an important source of information for residents. Many more people contacted the Council about advertising in The Reporter than they did about the website. He would undertake to find out the difference in cost between black and white and colour and report back at a future meeting.

A Member stated that they thought the layout in the 2013 profile of The Reporter had improved. They believed that a move to black and white would be a mistake. The paper was continuing to improve and the people of the Borough did enjoy reading the paper.

A Member commented that there were some people in the Borough not receiving the paper. The Head of Communications in response stated that if postcodes were provided, he could take the matter up with the contractor. In response, Members commented that Crewe postcodes seemed to have particular problems and questioned if electronic despatch could be successful.

The Chair requested the figures for the amount of hits The Reporter received on the Council's website.

Members agreed that a questionnaire should be included in The Reporter, asking a number of multiple choice questions relating to its future direction. The wording could be drawn up by the Head of Communications, with the proposed wording circulated to the Committee by email.

RESOLVED:

- A) That a questionnaire be included in an issue of The Reporter, asking a number of multiple choice questions relating to its future direction.
- B) That the number of hits The Reporter receives on the website be determined.
- C) That the difference in cost between black and white and colour printing of The Reporter be determined.

5. BUDGET PREPARATION, SCRUTINY AND APPROVAL PROCESS 2014/2015

The Chair stated for the benefit of the new Members of the Committee, that the main focus of the work plan was driven by the budget process.

The Head of Communications stated that as part of the budget consultation process there was an opportunity for scrutiny to make comments. Last year there had been 684 responses which had been a significant achievement. The Chair suggested that there should be another meeting of the Committee in July to look at the draft proposals.

A Member asked about the Budget Review Group timetable adding that it would be useful for the Members of the Committee to receive a timetable and information on the particular areas that the group were addressing. In response the Head of Communications advised that the group met every month and every two weeks as the process gathered momentum. The Leader of the Council confirmed that there would have been a few meetings of the group by July and therefore a report on the work of the group could be given.

A Member stated that it was important for the budget consultation to be sufficiently wide ranging for it to be effective. There was a discussion about sample sizes, with an argument made that significant results could be achieved from small numbers.

A Member stated that the previous work completed on budget consultation should be built upon, with further engagement with the public and stakeholders. The Newcastle Partnership Strategic Board last year had given some useful comments. They suggested that a presentation to the Locality Action Partnerships and Parish Councils would be beneficial. Service user panels were also encouraged. The Committee expressed an interest in seeing a list of the people and organisations being consulted. The Leader of the Council, in response, stated that a draft consultation timetable could be drawn up for July. He believed it was the representation of samples that was important rather than the statistical threshold. He stated that he was interested in any comments the scrutiny may have on the proposals which he hoped would be ready for July. He agreed to provide summary reports to the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee after every 2 or 3 meetings of the Budget Review Group.

RESOLVED: That an additional meeting of the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee be held in July to consider the pre-budget consultation process.

6. CONSTITUTION WORKING PARTY

The Chair stated that further amendments to the Constitution had been put forward at the Annual Council meeting in the previous week. There had been no further meeting of the Constitution Working Party since that time. The report provided information on the current status of the group and their remit.

7. MODERNISATION OF THE POST OFFICE NETWORK

The Chair stated that at the meeting of the Transformation and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 19 November 2012, a presentation had been given from Richard Lynds, Senior Stakeholder Manager for the Post Office. The presentation had been on the subject of the modernisation of the Post Office network, and focused in particular on partnership working as a potential item for scrutiny in the future. The Committee had decided to await a piece of work by the Local Government

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Association (LGA) regarding the issue before moving forward with scrutiny. The LGA work had now been published and was considered disappointing as it was felt there was not a lot of weight in the document and more of a steer had been expected.

Officers had provided a report summarising the LGA document from Newcastle Borough Council's perspective. Officers had also found the document disappointing and had expected more detail regarding proposed partnership working with the Post Office. It would appear that local authorities benefitting from working with the Post Office were very large authorities or those that did not provide frontline services. It was also felt that there was no clarity regarding costs.

A Member stated that they were pleased to see the Council was still considering working together with the Post Office. He asked Officers to investigate the possibility further and suggested a partnership between the Borough Council, the Post Office and Staffordshire County Council might be fruitful. A second member was in agreement and suggested that certain services in the areas of Kidsgrove and Madeley could be merged with the post office leading to an ultimate saving. However the matter needed to be explored further with Staffordshire County Council.

The Chair stated that the costs and potential savings needed to be drawn up and Officers of Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council needed to meet with officers of Staffordshire County Council.

RESOLVED:

- A) That Officers meet with Staffordshire County Council to consider a three way working approach with the Post Office.
- B) That the Scrutiny Committee receives a further report in the future when more information is available.

8. KEELE GOLF COURSE - INTERIM MAINTENANCE AND MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS AND LONG TERM OPTIONS

The Executive Director for Resources and Support Services stated that the report before the Scrutiny Committee on Keele Golf Course was going to the Council's Cabinet on 22 May 2013. The report considered the interim maintenance and management arrangements and long term options for the course. Interim contracts for up to 6 months for the maintenance and management of the course had been awarded to Glendale Managed Services Ltd. It was currently the best time of year to be operating the course financially speaking and it was anticipated that the income generated would cover the costs.

A Member asked how much consideration had been given to the PR and marketing of the course as it was important for income to be maintained. The Executive Director for Resources and Support Services stated that there were regular meetings with Glendale and the Council had been trying to convey through communications that it was business as usual with the course remaining open.

A Member suggested that the junior rates should be for under 18s to play at the course, who currently couldn't afford to play. There was a discussion about the costs

to the Council and whether it was appropriate for the Borough to assist in the short-term running of the course.

The Leader stated that publicity was important to keep the level of income up and at the July meeting he would report back as to what had been undertaken. A suitable tender process was being drawn up and the course would soon be handed over to an appropriate operator long-term.

RESOLVED:

A) That Cabinet be asked to consider a junior rate at Keele golf Course.

B) That a further report on Keele Golf Course, with a particular focus on the financial position, be commissioned for the extra meeting of the Scrutiny Committee proposed for July.

9. **COUNCIL PLAN 2013-16**

The Head of Business Improvements and Partnerships apologised for the Scrutiny Committee not having had sight of the Council Plan before the Full Council meeting in April 2013. The comments which had been raised at Council had been incorporated into the new version before the Committee. It was agreed, that for next year, the Scrutiny Committee would suggest revisions to the plan before reaching Full Council.

10. **WORK PLAN**

The Chair confirmed that the current work plan was heavily focused on budget issues. She welcomed Members suggesting additional items to the plan.

11. **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business within the meaning of Section 100B (4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

12. **EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

RESOLVED: That the public be excluded for the consideration of the Financial and Performance Management Report – Quarter 4 2012/13, on the grounds that information is to be discussed which is exempt as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

13. **FINANCIAL AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT, QUARTER 4 2012/13**

The Chair stated that she had asked for an extra briefing note to be prepared on financial matters regarding the Square in Newcastle and the multi-story car park. The briefing was deemed to be confidential and thus the Committee had gone into exempt session. There was a discussion around financial matters concerning Gatedale and the Receivers. After negotiations with the LPA Receiver appointed to act for Gatedale's creditors, it had been agreed that an additional sum was to be paid to the Council for the period 2005 to 2012. There were further discussions concerning the multi-story car park. It was agreed that the Committee should receive

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further reports on financial matters surrounding Gatedale and the Multi-story car park.

A Member stated that he was disappointed to see that the performance on litter and detritus had declined in quarter 4. He requested that the Committee be given a written answer to explain the decline.

There was a discussion about the fall in school visits to museums. It was believed that rules regarding health and safety may have had a contributing factor to the decline. The Leader stated that he was happy to write to the four local MPs on the matter. The Committee noted an increase in staff sickness in the Council which was wholly attributable to a number of long term sickness cases.

The Leader stated that he was pleased that the number of telephone calls being answered was still on target despite the increase in the number of calls on welfare reform and benefit changes.

RESOLVED: That the Committee should receive further reports on financial matters surrounding Gatedale and its Receivers and the Multi-story car park.

COUNCILLOR MRS ELIZABETH SHENTON
Chair