

STRATEGIC (OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY) COMMITTEE

28th NOVEMBER 2011

PRESENT:

Councillors, Tittley (Chairman) Norman (Vice-Chairman) Spruce (Vice-Chairman) Mrs Arnold, Mrs Barnett, Humphreys, Pearce, Powell, D. S. Smith, Thomas and Mrs Woodward.

(In accordance with Council Procedure Rule No.17 Councillors, Cox, Mrs Flowith, Greatorex, Mrs Richards and Wilcox attended the meeting)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Apologies were received from Councillors Isaacs and Wilson. Councillor Roberts also gave his apologies.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

No declarations of interest were made.

MINUTES

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 31st August 2011 were taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

RESOLVED: The Minutes of the Meeting held on 31st August 2011 be approved as a correct record.

HALF YEARLY REPORT ON PERFORMANCE AGAINST STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR 2011/2012

The Committee received a report on the performance at the half year point against the actions set out in the Strategic Action Plan for 2011/12. The report also included performance indicators identified by Cabinet as relevant to the Council in delivering its Strategic Priorities and the Corporate Risk Register.

It was reported that this was the last action plan from the current Strategic Plan 2008/2012.

The Committee firstly scrutinised the performance against the Strategic Action Plan for 2011/12 and the Committee expressed that it was difficult to judge, in the report, if the performance of some of the areas were good or not as reference to benchmarking was not present. The Portfolio Holder for Organisational Development agreed to note this point. An update was requested on the current position of the future Waste Transfer Station. It was reported that there were regular meetings with the Task Group and a possible site had been identified and the relevant Ward Councillors had been consulted. It was then asked if the cost of the new station as stated in the report was a shared cost and it was noted that it would be.

The Committee then reviewed Performance Indicator Charts and it was noted that these charts gave a more visual representation on performance areas and aided comparison with the previous year. It was also noted that benefits related telephone calls had stayed at a constant level over the last 12 months. It was asked what the current collection rate was and it was reported that it was over 98% for revenues and 98% for business rates. It was then asked if there had been an impact from companies ceasing to trade and it was reported that due to the robust collection

policy, it was still fairing well although there could be implications in the future due to the Localism Act 2011.

The Corporate Risk Register was presented and it was reported that Chasewater Reservoir still appeared on it as there was still a reputational and financial risk to the authority.

The Committee asked what the potential secondary financial impact was in terms of the risk to financial resilience and it was reported that the implications of the Localism Act 2011 were not fully known but changes to how Benefits would be budgeted were likely.

In summary, the subjects that were scrutinised by the Committee were the future waste transfer station, collection of National Non Domestic Rates, the foreseen impact of the Localism Act 2011 and the risk still considered with Chasewater Reservoir.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

SHARED SERVICES/SYSTEMS UPDATE:

The Committee received a report updating them on the Shared Services and Systems that the authority have in place or in development.

It was reported that since the last update, the District Council had entered into a new shared service with Staffordshire County Council for them to provide Procurement Support and that the Building Control service was extending to include South Staffordshire District Council. It was also reported that the District Council had started to provide Conservation and Urban Design advice to Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council.

The Committee expressed their concern at the shared print service and felt that it was not being delivered as well as it could and that this was not reflected in the report. It was reported that overall the service provided was performing well although there had been some glitches. It was asked if the print and distribution of reports to Members could be investigated as it was felt there could be further savings to be gained and it was reported that this was already currently happening.

The Committee questioned if Lichfield was getting equal priority in Business Support to that of Tamworth. Members were concerned that there had been no Overview & Scrutiny input into the new Economic Strategy. It was agreed that this would be followed up.

It was asked why that although the District Council deals with Blue Badge on behalf of the County Council, the forms were different and it was reported that when taken to a service user forum, the District form was considered more user friendly than the County one and it was now being copied by other authorities. It was asked if a printable PDF version could also appear on the website for people aiding applicants to fill it in and this was agreed. It was finally noted that there are changes taking place to the scheme nationally which would impact on the way the service is to be delivered.

RESOLVED: That the content of the report be noted and the print service be investigated further.

FINANCE, REVENUE AND BENEFITS SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT 2010/2011:

Before the item was considered, the Leader of the Council, Councillor Wilcox, wished to notify the Committee that the Revenues Manager, Alan Tooth would be retiring in April 2012. The Leader and the Committee thanked Mr Tooth for his long service and congratulated him on all his achievements. Mr Tooth responded with his gratitude and hoped for continued success for the department.

The Committee received a report giving targets and performance levels achieved during 2010/11 for the Finance, Revenues and Benefits Services at the District Council.

It was reported that the economic climate had impacted on the service due to falling revenue but performance had been maintained and targets achieved even with a reduction in resources.

It was noted that with regard to Finance, over the past year they had, amongst others, successfully balanced the budget, completed the Expenditure Review 2010 and closed the accounts under the new IFRS Accounting framework. It was noted that the department was praised by Audit for their handling of the new framework.

It was noted that with regard to Revenues, it was reported and noted that 2010 had been a revaluation year and this was successfully completed. It was reported that the debt recovery policy was working well and other authorities were now following suit. It was questioned why there was a delay in collecting business rates from a specific new company and it was reported that the District Valuer had not given a value in time and unlike domestic households, it was too complex to estimate. It was then asked why 15% of businesses had received enforcement action and it was reported that most were just liability orders and it was not felt that businesses in Lichfield were struggling more than other areas.

It was agreed to provide collection rates for other areas as it would show the resilience of businesses. It was finally noted that national non domestic rates were collected from Ministry of Defence buildings and so there would be an additional income from Whittington Barracks when it is fully operational. It was noted that there was signposting of agencies including the Citizens Advice Bureau and it was asked if any others were used, specifically for the elderly. The Committee were notified that local advice groups were signposted although enforcement proceedings were seldom needed for senior citizens.

COUNCILLOR NORMAN DECLARED A PERSONAL INTEREST AT THIS POINT AS HE IS EMPLOYED BY AGE UK.

It was noted that with regard to Benefits that the Localism Act 2011 will have a great impact. It was questioned if the District Council was too quick in commencing enforcement of corporate debt and it was reported that the robustness of the enforcement was set out in the regulations. It was also noted that collection agencies were not paid by result and there were no fixed contracts with any.

The main areas that were scrutinised were delays in the collection of business rates, the enforcement rates for businesses, signposting and corporate debt enforcement.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the Committee's views considered by the Cabinet.

HALF YEAR REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AGAINST THE FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2011/12

The Committee received a report providing information of the District Council's financial performance up to the 30th September 2011. The report focused on areas that were a higher risk to the authority.

It was questioned why catering performance had improved at Burntwood Leisure Centre and fallen at the Garrick Theatre. It was reported that operational changes at the leisure centre had been made and that costs were reduced whilst maintaining sales levels. It was then reported that the footfall to the Garrick had been affected by the temporary closure of the Multi Storey Car Park along with general trends of people not spending on extra refreshments whilst visiting which had caused the drop in catering income at the venue. It was noted that ticket income from the Garrick were still high.

It was asked why there had been a loss in income from trade waste and was it due to the closure of businesses. It was reported that there had been some loss for that reason but mainly it was due to competitors. It was stated that the District Council did all it could to stay competitive but it was not always possible.

It was noted that monies from the transfer of Chasewater Dam to the County Council had now been received and the Committee thanked Councillor Mrs Richards, the Strategic Director of Democratic, Development & Legal Services, Director of Leisure, Parks and Play and the Solicitor to the Council for their work in securing the successful transfer. The Committee also thanked the Officers involved in producing a high quality and up to date report in a short timescale.

In summary, the catering performance of the Leisure Centres and the Garrick Theatre and loss off income from trade waste were the main areas of scrutiny.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

HALF YEAR REPORT ON TREASURY MANAGEMENT SERVICES AND PROJECTED PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS

The Committee received a report covering the Treasury activity and actual Prudential Indicators for 2011/12. It was noted that the report was a requirement of both CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management and the CIPFA Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities.

It was reported that there had been a downgrade on the long term rating of 12 UK financial institutions and in addition, Fitch downgraded the long term ratings of five of the District Council's Banks and Building Societies. This had meant they were not eligible for new investments.

It was also noted that the downgrades meant consideration had to be given on how to manage the reduction in the number of places available for new investments. A number of options were presented and it was noted that none of them would require a change in the investment strategy. It was reported that the options would be considered by Cabinet with the recommendation that options 1, 3 and 4 were chosen and the Committee agreed with this.

It was asked and noted that the District Council could not invest in foreign currencies or precious metals. It was also noted that investments were monitored on a daily basis and the terms were never over 91 days to ensure the lowest risk possible.

In summary, the subjects that were scrutinised by the Committee were the downgrading of financial institutions, the recommendations to Cabinet of the different options to manage the downgrading and the consequences of that and the possibility of investing in other ways.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2012/16 – A PLAN FOR LICHFIELD DISTRICT

The Committee received a report on the proposed Strategic Plan outcomes. It was reported that four strategic themes of 'Supporting People', 'Shaping Place', 'Boosting Business and our Economy' and 'Being a Well Managed Council' had been identified.

It was noted that long term outcomes had been produced under each theme and the Committee had an opportunity to develop these outcomes at a previous workshop. The Committee was reminded that there was still consultation taking place before a final version would be produced.

It was reported that the draft Strategic Plan had been considered by the Lichfield District Board and that the partners had agreed to all work to this one document in terms of the high level outcomes, so that it becomes a Plan for the District.

It was also noted that the One Year Action Plan would be key in terms of setting out the activities/targets to be achieved to progress the outcomes. It was confirmed that this Plan would come to the Committee for scrutiny in February.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Consideration was given to the Work Programme and Forward Plan. It was noted that scrutiny of Economic Development would be undertaken by the Environment & Development (Overview & Scrutiny) Committee with an invite to this Committee to attend.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted and the Work Programme be noted and amended as necessary.

(The Meeting finished at 8.50pm)

CHAIRMAN