

## **Cherwell District Council**

### **Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board**

Minutes of a meeting of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, OX15 4AA, on 1 March 2011 at 6.45 pm

Present: Councillor Nicholas Mawer (Chairman)  
Councillor David Hughes (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Rick Atkinson  
Councillor Maurice Billington  
Councillor Margaret Cullip  
Councillor Tim Emptage  
Councillor Carol Steward  
Councillor Patricia Tompson  
Councillor Douglas Webb  
Councillor Martin Weir

Apologies  
for  
absence: Councillor Alyas Ahmed  
Councillor Neil Prestidge

Officers: Karen Curtin, Head of Finance  
Claire Taylor, Corporate Strategy and Performance Manager  
Viv Hichens, Corporate Strategic Procurement Manager  
Natasha Clark, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer

#### **36 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **37 Urgent Business**

There was no urgent business.

#### **38 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **39 Engagement of External Consultants By Cherwell District Council**

The Chairman welcomed the Head of Finance, the Community and Corporate Planning Manager and the Corporate Strategic Procurement Manager to the

meeting. He explained that a member of the Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board had queried the use of external consultants during the council's drafting of the Sustainable Community Strategy and suggested the engagement of external consultants by Cherwell District Council as a potential topic for scrutiny. This would be an opportunity for members of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board to question officers about the topic.

The Community and Corporate Planning Manager began by providing a general overview of different types of consultants and why they were used before the Corporate Strategic Procurement Manager focussed on how Cherwell District Council procures consultants. The Board was advised that the same procurement process principles were applied to the procurement of consultants as to any procurement process the council undertakes, including options appraisal, detailed specification, award of contract and monitoring.

The Board was advised that all services could potentially use consultants however they must be procured in the correct manner and the service area must have a budget it could call upon to meet the cost of employing the consultants. The management of consultants was dependent on the specific project and generally incorporated in the contract between the council and the consultant.

The Head of Finance gave an overview of the council's spending on consultancy by service area. She explained that consultancy was a discretionary area of expenditure and could only be budgeted for if there was a business case and it could show value for money. Expenditure on consultancy had reduced by around two-thirds between 2008/09 and 2010/11. The consultancy budget set for 2011/12 forecast a further reduction in expenditure and would represent a very small amount in the council's overall budget. The Head of Finance explained that in contrast to the reduced expenditure on consultants, expenditure on private contractors had increased. This was as a direct result of the decision to outsource the internal audit and revenues and benefits services. These increased were however offset by the reduction in expenditure on salaries and both contracts have shown considerable reductions in the cost of providing these services for the Council at increased quality.

The Community and Corporate Planning Manager addressed the use of consultants during the drafting of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). She explained that the SCS was the long-term vision and plan for a local area. Preparation of SCS's is a requirement for councils. Section 4 of the Local Government Act 2000 requires a principal authority to prepare an SCS for promoting or improving the wellbeing of its area. The Board was advised that Cherwell District Council had historically used consultants when developing plans and strategies as there was no team in place to fulfil the function. As a consequence the Executive approved funding to use consultants to assist with the development of the SCS. In addition to producing the SCS, a further legacy of the process has been the development of a team which, as part of its remit, leads on consultation, and consultation forums which can be used by all service areas.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Finance, the Community and Corporate Planning Manager and the Corporate Strategic Procurement Manager for the

comprehensive briefing on the council's use of external consultants. The Board agreed that the item should be added to their work programme. Members agreed that they should continue to monitor consultancy costs through the Finance Scrutiny Working Group. Additionally, the Board requested that officers provide an overview of the full process of procuring consultants to a future Board meeting.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board continue to monitor consultancy costs through the Finance Scrutiny Working Group.
- (2) That officers be requested to provide additional information on the complete process of procuring consultants giving examples from each directorate to a future meeting of the Board.

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### **Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2010/11**

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which updated Members on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2010/11.

### **Feedback from the Performance Scrutiny Working Group and Finance Scrutiny Working Group meetings**

The Members of the Working Groups reported back to the Board on their respective meetings. The Chairman explained that the Finance Scrutiny Working Group had considered the Project Brief for Planning Fees and Charges. The project was part of the draft Corporate Improvement Plan 2011/12 considered by the Executive on 7 February 2011 and its aim was to develop and introduce a charging policy for development control in line with new flexibilities proposed by the Coalition Government.

The Board agreed that they would like to consider the draft final proposal before it is submitted to the Executive for consideration in May/June. Members noted that the next scheduled Board meeting was late June and agreed that an additional meeting should be arranged to fit in with the timetable for the Planning Fees and Charges project. In considering the additional meeting, Members discussed the feasibility of using the meeting to consider another item on the work programme and agreed that a review of the Council's partnership with Bicester Vision should be included on the agenda for the meeting.

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board element of the work programme for 2010/11 be agreed.
- (2) That the feedback from the Performance Scrutiny Working Group and Finance Scrutiny Working Group meetings be noted.

- (3) That an additional meeting of the Board be arranged in late May/early June to consider the proposals arising from the Planning Fees and Charges project and to consider the Council's partnership with Bicester Vision.

The meeting ended at 8.10 pm

Chairman:

Date: