

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 22 November 2011 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Nicholas Mawer (Chairman)
Councillor Douglas Webb (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Alyas Ahmed
Councillor Maurice Billington
Councillor Patrick Cartledge
Councillor Margaret Cullip
Councillor Andrew Fulljames
Councillor Melanie Magee
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Patricia Tompson
Councillor Martin Weir
Councillor Douglas Williamson

Officers: Karen Curtin, Head of Finance and Procurement
Karen Muir, Corporate System Accountant
Helen Town, Strategic Housing Officer
Natasha Clark, Senior Democratic and Scrutiny Officer

26 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

27 Urgent Business

There was no urgent business.

28 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

29 Budget Scrutiny 2012/13

The Chairman opened the discussion with a brief resume of the work that the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board had undertaken to review the 2012/13 budget. The budget scrutiny process for 2012/13 had involved a review of the current budget for 2011/12 of £15.8m with a detailed review of

discretionary areas of spend, a review of staff savings suggestions and the capital bids received as part of the 2012/13 process. The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board then reflected on the areas considered as part of the budget scrutiny process and the draft recommendations, conclusions and comments based on the outcomes of the budget scrutiny working group meetings.

i. Capital Programme 2011/12

Members were satisfied with the evidence for eight of the seventeen bids: Bid 3 Biomass Heating for Bicester Leisure Centre; Bid 4 Recycling Bank Replacement Programme; Bid 5 Environmental Services Vehicle Replacement Programme; Bid 6 Energy Efficiency Projects; Bid 12 Ferriston Roof Repairs; Bid 13 Thorpe Way Roof Repairs; Bid 14 Discretionary Housing Grants; Bid 15 Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), and agreed that these should be recommended for inclusion in the capital programme 2012/13.

Members agreed that capital Bid 16, Cherwell Community Led Housing Programme, should be recommended for inclusion in the capital programme 2012/13 subject to officers circulating additional information (including the report to Executive in May 2010 and modelling) to Members of the R&PSB and them being satisfied with the additional information. Members agreed that the idea was sound in principle but queried the payback and risks associated with the project. In agreeing to receive supplementary information, the Board agreed not to defer making recommendation on the Bid as they acknowledged that any delay to signing the contract may restrict opportunities for additional funding.

Members agreed that capital Bid 1, Bicester Methodist Church – Redevelopment of Community Treasury Facilities, should not be recommended for inclusion in the capital programme 2012/13. Rather than provide funding through the capital programme, the Board requested that officers investigate other sources of funding that was equitable with the two other churches that have received similar funding.

Members agreed to defer making a recommendation on the remaining bids: Bid 2 Community Intelligence Hub; Bid 7 Disaster Recovery Upgrade – Vmware Site Recovery Manager; Bid 8 Thin Client Rollout Quest Virtual Desktop Infrastructure; Bid 9 IT Core Infrastructure Upgrade – New Virtual Servers, SAN (Storage Area Network) and Network Upgrade; Bid 10 Extension of Microsoft Enterprise Agreement (software licensing); Bid 11 Core Software Architecture; Bid 17 Telephony Development.

With regard to Bids 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11, Members noted that these bids related to ICT and agreed that consideration of these bids should be deferred pending a decision being taken by Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council on the ICT Insource and Shared Services Business Case.

In considering Bid 2, Community Intelligence Hub, the Board had raised queries regarding potential efficiency savings and whether the bid represented an invest to save opportunity. Members also requested further information on whether there may be any other contributions available for the

Hub. The Board requested that officers rescore the bid taking into account their queries and that the bid be re-presented to the Board's January meeting.

Whilst Members acknowledged that Bid 17, Telephony Development, could potentially play an important role for customer contact in the future, Members agreed that they would like further information on the proposal. Members requested that officers present this information to the Board's January meeting for consideration.

ii. Discretionary Spend

The Head of Finance and Procurement reminded Members that discretionary spend for Cherwell District Council in 2011/12 totalled a net expenditure of £3.1m (27% of the Council's net budget).

During the budget scrutiny working group meetings, which had involved relevant Lead Members and officers, the Board had considered in detail the following areas: Street wardens; communications; community transport; economic development; Woodgreen Leisure; Spiceball Sports Centre; Banbury Museum; Council's Administration Function; Tourist Information Centre/Courtyard; Support Cost Trends; Communications – Controllable/Uncontrollable Costs; and, Distribution of Cherwell Link with Electoral Registration forms / Council Tax Bills (linked to communications)

- **Street Wardens**

In considering this item, the Board learnt about the background to the service and the role that Street Wardens played in the community and the service was considered invaluable for residents. Members noted that there had already been reductions in the team 2011/12. The Board agreed that it was difficult to identify the cost benefit of the service, but it was a highly respected and front line service and therefore it was not appropriate to reduce or remove the service. This was also considered as a staff savings suggestion.

- **Community Transport**

The Board noted that savings had already been generated through building block 14 and agreed that no recommendation be made in this area.

- **Economic Development**

The Lead Member for Economic Development and the Economic Development Officer attended a budget scrutiny working group meeting to discuss the Economic Development budget and to provide Members with further information about the Economic Development Team and the service which was provided and projects the Team was involved with.

The Board noted that a Value for Money review of the service had recently been undertaken, which had identified both good practice and savings.

The Board agreed to make no recommendation in this area but requested that a quarterly report be submitted to the relevant scrutiny committee with regard to inward investment projects detailing expenditure / benefits / successes and future plans.

- **Woodgreen Leisure**

The Board noted that a report on this area was currently being drafted and, on account of this, agreed to make no recommendations at this time.

- Spiceball Sports Centre

In considering this area, the Board was advised that the contract would be reviewed in 2012/13. Members agreed to make no recommendation at this time but agreed that the item should be added to their work programme for 2012/13.

- Banbury Museum

The Board noted that this area had been subject to a Value for Money review and implementation of trust status considered and agreed therefore to make no recommendation. Members agreed that they should add this to their 2013/14 work programme to review/monitor.

- The Council's Administration Function

In considering this item, the Board had been advised that the £1m administration budget covered the function for the whole authority. The existing three administration teams no longer corresponded to the Council structure following the implementation of the Joint Management Team and the Head of Transformation was undertaking a review of administration across both Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council. Once this was complete, it would be presented to Members. Members recommended that a 10% saving on controllable costs should be implemented by 1 April 2012.

- Tourist Information Centre/Courtyard

The Board agreed that they would add this to their 2012/13 work programme to undertake a review.

- Support Cost Trends 2007/08 to 2011/12

In considering this item, the Board had noted the reduction in support costs. Members agreed that this should be monitored annually and support model be added to the Board's 2012/13 work programme.

- Communications – Controllable/Uncontrollable Costs

The Head of Transformation and Deputy Leader (whose area of responsibility included communications) met the Board to brief Members on the Communications Team, the work undertaken and the Communications budget, including details of the controllable and uncontrollable costs.

Members were advised that following the appointment of a Joint Communications Manager with South Northamptonshire Council, a full review of the service at both councils was being undertaken. The Board requested that officers bring proposals detailing how the service could save 25% of its controllable budget to the Board's January meeting for consideration.

- Distribution of Cherwell Link with Electoral Registration forms / Council Tax Bills (linked to communications)

The Board had been advised that Electoral Registration forms were sent out by the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) rather than the council and the Council could not compel the ERO to send anything out with them. There

were a number of practical reasons for not sending Electoral Registration forms out with Cherwell Link, notably the timeframe for issuing the forms and that there was an existing external contract for the forms to be printed and mailed.

With regard to Council tax bills, the Board was advised that it would not be cost effective to circulate with Cherwell Link due to the size of the council tax mailing.

The Board had been advised that the distribution of Cherwell Link would be reviewed to feed into the 2013/14. Members suggested that external advertising could generate income for the Council and savings could be found through shared distribution with South Northamptonshire Council. Members requested officers to explore these options further.

iii. Staff Savings Suggestions

The Chairman reminded Members that staff had submitted a list of 44 money saving suggestions which had been considered during the Budget Scrutiny Working Group meetings. Members recognised the value of the suggestions. In considering the suggestions, Members had concluded that whilst there were some staff suggestions that had already been implemented or were being addressed through other forums, there were nine suggestions they considered in detail:

- **Reduce Stationery Spend**

In considering this suggestion, the Board had been advised that the Council's stationery expenditure had reduced by 20% between 2008/09 and 2011/12. Members recommended that the Council's overall stationery spend be reduced by a further 10%.

- **Cease Distributing Free Dog Waste Bags**

In considering this suggestion, the Board had been advised how and where dog waste bags were distributed and the possible alternatives with regard to issuing them to the public. Members agreed that the Council should not stop issuing the bags because the cost of clearing up the mess could potentially increase. The Board agreed that officers should be requested to investigate making dog waste bags available through other outlets (i.e. vets, animal charity shops) which would release the time of Customer Service Representatives who currently dispensed them at the council's offices.

- **Councillors Blackberry Provision**

In considering this suggestion, the Board had been advised that the return of unused Blackberries would only generate savings of £200 and there was therefore little financial benefit in pursuing this. However, the Board had requested that an email be sent to all Members requesting that any unused Blackberries, laptops and PCs be returned, which would generate a saving in licences. The Chairman confirmed that this email had been sent and some appliances had already been returned.

- **Cease Webcasting**

The Board had been advised that webcasting had been considered as part of the Value for Money Review of Democratic Services and Elections and the

proposal to cease webcasting had not been taken up. Members felt that webcasting provided a valuable service for communicating with the public.

- **Staff Holiday / Pay Freeze / Change in Working Week**

There had been a number of suggestions relating to these areas. The Board had been advised that as the Council was about to start local pay negotiations, it was not an appropriate time to consider these areas. Members requested that the Head of Transformation submit a report to the appropriate committee on the potential of changes to the number of hours in the working week, staff pay freezes and buying/selling holiday.

- **Fast Tracking Licensing Applications**

The Board had been advised that licensing fees were regulated by the Licensing Act 2003 and Gambling Act 2005, which do not allow the grant of licences to be a revenue raising measure. Whilst the Council is able to set its own fees in respect of other types of applications, most licence types have a statutory consultation period so the ability to fast-track would not be available. The council generally endeavoured to issue licences within 10 working days.

- **Fast Tracking Planning Applications**

The Board had been advised that fast tracking for planning applications was virtually untested in the UK and in some cases where it had been considered, it had been discounted for fear of the Local Authority being accused of buying planning permission. Additionally, there were imminent national changes to the planning fees regime. Members agreed that it was not the appropriate time to consider this proposal.

- **Remove Street Warden Service**

This suggestion had been considered as part of the discretionary spend review.

- **Review CCTV Operation and Costs**

In considering this suggestion, the Board had learnt about the background to CCTV scheme, how it worked with Oxfordshire County Council and Thames Valley Police and the costs of the service. Members noted that Thames Valley Police was undertaking a review of CCTV and agreed that the Council should await the outcome of this review and then undertake a further review within Cherwell District Council in 2012/13.

- **Review Opening Hours of Link Point**

The Board had been advised that a reduction in the opening hours of Link Point had already been considered and approved by Executive.

iv. Council Tax Comparison Figures

The Board considered the council tax figures for Cherwell District Council and compared them to West Oxfordshire District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Aylesbury Vale District Council and South Northamptonshire Council. The comparative data included a breakdown of the cost of services and the split between statutory services and discretionary services. The Board had noted that each Local Authority structured their accounts and cost centres differently. Members agreed that the comparative figures with other authorities was very important and useful information. The Board requested that when 2012/13 information was available it be circulated to all Members.

The Board thanked the Finance Team for their hard work in providing all information requested and Lead Members and officers for attending the budget scrutiny working group meetings.

Resolved

- (1) That the recommendations, conclusions and comments as set out at appendix 1 to these minutes be submitted to the Executive for consideration as part of draft 1 of the 2012/13 budget at their meeting on 6 December 2011.

30

Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The Board considered a report of the Head of Law and Governance which updated Members on the overview and scrutiny work programme 2011/12.

The Board agreed that the January 2012 meeting would focus on the following outstanding matters arising from the budget scrutiny 2012/13 process where Members had requested additional information: Communications – controllable/uncontrollable costs; Capital bids – Community Intelligence Hub and Telephony Development. Other items scheduled for January 2012 would be deferred to February.

Members noted that a number of items had been added to the work programme following the budget scrutiny 2012/13 process and agreed to request the Democratic, Scrutiny and Elections Manager and the Chairman to liaise with lead officers to agree the appropriate timescale for the issues to be added to the work programme.

Resolved

- (1) That the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board element of the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2011/12 be noted.
- (2) That the update on work programme items be noted.
- (3) That authority be delegated to the Democratic, Scrutiny and Elections Manager, in consultation with the Chairman, to update the Board's work programme to incorporate for consideration items raised during the budget scrutiny process.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm

Chairman:

Date: