

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2013, AT 7.00
PM

PRESENT: Councillor D Andrews (Chairman)
Councillors E Bedford, J Mayes, T Page,
R Sharma, G Williamson and J Wing

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors E Buckmaster, P Ruffles and
S Rutland-Barsby

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Democratic Services Officer
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Ceri Pettit	- Corporate Planning and Performance Manager
Adele Taylor	- Director of Finance and Support Services

377 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors G Jones and M Pope.

378 MINUTES - 27 AUGUST 2013

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 27 August 2013 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

379 MEMBER TRAINING: COUNCIL FUNDING – WHERE DOES THE MONEY COME FROM AND THE BUDGET CYCLE KEY DATES

The Director of Finance and Support Services provided Members with a summary regarding Council Funding and key sources of funding and budget dates, the detail of which was set out in a paper tabled at the meeting. She also reminded Members of the importance of the Council's key strategies in setting the Council's budget and urged Members to familiarise themselves with the documents listed in the paper tabled.

In response to a query from Councillor E Buckmaster, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained sources of Fees and Charges and Council Tax.

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes regarding the use of Reserves figures, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained that this was less than 1% of the Council's overall funding.

In response to a query from Councillor J Wing regarding the NNDR (National Non Domestic Rate) and how it would impact on spending, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained what this was and how the process worked. She explained why it was important to the Council to rigorously collect the NNDR as well as Council Tax.

In response to a query from Councillor G Williamson regarding levels of housing benefit paid in relation to Council Tax collected, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained how the process worked, stating that there was no direct relationship between the two.

In response to a query from Councillor J Wing regarding capital and revenue spending and the recent purchase of blue wheelie bins, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained how the process of "disinvestment" worked.

The Chairman, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the Director of Finance and Support Services for the presentation.

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

380 DRAFT REVISIONS TO THE COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME FOR 2014/15

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report setting out the proposed arrangements around the new Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS), the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and supporting Essential Reference Papers. The report also set out the present financial and equality impact of the recommended CTS scheme for East Herts residents.

The Director of Finance and Support Services summarised the content of the report adding that Officers were recommending that there should be no change to the scheme for another year.

The Director of Finance and Support Services advised that she had consulted with Hertfordshire County Council and the Hertfordshire Constabulary (Police Crime Commissioner). Both consultees were content to support the proposals shown in the report now submitted.

In response to a query from Councillor J Wing regarding calls on the Hardship Fund, the Director of Finance and Support Services advised that there had been no calls on that fund.

The Committee supported a proposal not to change the scheme.

RESOLVED – that (A) the financial implications arising from the recommended scheme for the Council Tax Reduction scheme (CTS) with effect from 1 April 2014, as now submitted, be noted; and

(B) the current scheme as now submitted, continue for another year.

381 WEBCASTING OF FUTURE COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report outlining the options for future webcasting of Council meetings, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and in the supporting Essential Reference Papers. She provided an explanation of the figures representing “views” or “hits” over a period of time.

Councillor G Williamson stated that, although the report gave Members an insight into how many views the webcast meetings achieved, the Council was in the minority in terms of the number of Authorities using webcasting arrangements. He recognised the transparency afforded by the arrangement but felt that this could be an inhibiting factor in terms of debate.

In response to a query from Councillor T Page regarding why Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee was not being webcast, the Chairman stated that he wanted the Council to move forward in a full and frank way, but appreciated that there may be resistance to this. The Chairman stated that what should be borne in mind was that Scrutiny was open to call on Officers and visitors to give evidence and that this might inhibit people in terms of what they might say and how they might be perceived. He referred to the suitability of webcasting for Council and Executive meetings as they were more structured and formal. Councillor E Bedford agreed with this view.

The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that any decision to extend the facility would involve direct additional staff costs and other staff resources might need to be considered that currently supported the process.

Councillor J Wing stated that he had yet to see webcasting inhibiting anyone and that it might make Members choose their words more closely. He stated that he had previously watched Development Management Committee when he could not attend the meeting and had found this to be very useful. Councillor J Wing supported webcasting being

extended to Scrutiny Committees. He referred to the fact that local reporters used the webcast arrangement in reporting their stories. The Chairman stated that the Council helped the press in whatever ways it could, but that their staffing resources were not an issue for the Council to take account of.

Councillors E Buckmaster and J Mayes supported leaving the current arrangements as they were. Councillor E Buckmaster stated that he would be disappointed to lose the arrangement completely.

The Chairman referred to the two services which were responsible for different functions in terms of webcasting and queried whether this was a productive arrangement. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that she was responsible for the two different functions and that the separation was because of their areas of specialism.

In response to a query regarding stopping webcasting and the impact of this on accommodation needs if more independent observers then chose to attend meetings, Members were reminded that there were already instances where overflow accommodation could be provided and the Council would need to follow a similar process. In response to a question, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained that the Council owned the equipment.

The Committee stated that they valued the openness and transparency afforded by the Webcasting facility and considered the current arrangements to be acceptable and had no desire to extend the arrangements beyond the current status quo.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be advised that Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee value the openness and transparency afforded by the Webcasting facility and consider the current arrangements to be acceptable and have no desire to extend the arrangements beyond the current status quo.

382 ANNUAL REVIEW OF PARTNERSHIP REGISTER

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report setting out the results of the annual review of Partnership Registers, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and in the supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that Members' confidence in the governance arrangements of partnerships and internal processes be noted.

383 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman submitted a report setting out the Committee's future work programme for 2013/14, the detail of which was set out in Essential Reference Paper "B" to the report now submitted.

The Scrutiny Officer drew Members' attention to the reporting deadline for the 14 January 2014 meeting of Joint Scrutiny Committee and the budget process, adding that these reports could only be completed following the release of Government data which might not be provided to the Council until very late in December 2013. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that the reports might have to be marked "to follow" on the agenda for that meeting but that every effort would be made to get the information to Members as soon as possible.

Members approved the Work Programme.

RESOLVED – that the Work Programme, as now amended, be approved.

384 EAST HERTS IMPROVEMENT PLAN MONITORING REPORT

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive and

Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report detailing delivery against the improvement plan agreed by the Executive in June 2013 following the Council's Peer Challenge and an "Executive Away-day", the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided Members with a summary of the background to the report and an update on the status of the actions up to September 2013. The Chairman, on behalf of Members, congratulated the Officers in moving forward the actions in the East Herts Improvement Plan, the detail of which was set out in Essential Reference Paper "B" of the report now submitted.

It was noted that while Action 26 (Hold an Open Day in the Planning Department to raise members; awareness of the planning process) did not take place, eight other training events linked to planning had taken place this civic year with more than 121 attendees. The Scrutiny Officer advised that five other events were planned before the end of the civic year and referred to the substantial efforts provided by Planning Officers in supporting the Member training process. Members indicated their support for these additional five events to be included in the evidence for the progress report.

Councillor J Wing expressed his concerns regarding the reporting style of the information and stated what refinements he considered, could be made to make it more user friendly. The Chairman stated that he found the reports to be informative and did not have any problems with the information as submitted. Councillor J Mayes supported the Chairman's comments.

The Chairman, on behalf of the Committee congratulated the Corporate Planning and Performance Manager for the detailed report.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Monitoring Report be

received; and

(B) the Executive be advised that Members support the inclusion of the five training events to be held during the time frame of this progress report and that these be included in the evidence for the action referred to in the report now submitted.

385 MONTHLY CORPORATE HEALTH CHECK - JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2013

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted an exception report on the finance and performance monitoring of East Herts Council for the period to September 2013 (Quarter 2), the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager explained that the Planning Contingency budget still to be used was £487,000 to be applied to unforeseen events. The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided an update in relation to performance indicators generally and those which fell within the remit of Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor T Page expressed concern regarding the variance on social housing and the lack of affordable housing in the area. He stressed the need to apply this urgently and that it was unacceptable that it was not being applied. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that the matter had been discussed recently at Corporate Management Team in the context of Section 106 agreements. She added that the Council was in discussion with Registered Social Landlords to move this matter along and referred to the difficulties in trying to put schemes together within a short period of time.

Councillor J Wing referred to the Council being 25% under spent on the Capital budget stating that, the Council should be ready to move forward with other schemes quickly when it became clear that an under spend was going to occur. Councillor Wing further commented that money should not be

accruing in reserves but should be moved along more vigorously. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that she was keen to see large capital schemes move forward and that she was also keen to ensure that schemes were profiled correctly from the point at which the funding was agreed and the schemes were given the go ahead.

In response to a query from Councillor T Page concerning the use of resources and their application towards affordable housing, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained that there were restrictions on what the Council could and could not do in terms of the provision of social housing.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided an explanation of the proposed new “Dashboard Module” which had also been considered by Community and Environment Scrutiny Committees, the detail of which was set out within Essential Reference Paper “G” of the report now submitted. Members’ comments were sought on the usefulness of the module.

The Chairman felt that the “Best Performing” and “Worst Performing” indicators confused issues and that “Worst Performing” should be omitted from any future module. This was supported.

Councillor J Wing expressed concern at the quality of the print and asked that this be improved.

Clarification was sought and provided in relation to the coloured “bar” at the top of the page and why “unknowns” had been included.

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes regarding complaints to the Council and the subject matter of the complaints, the Director of Finance and Support Services undertook to write to Members with a summary of the complaint issues.

The Committee received the report and asked that, in relation

to the “Dashboard Module”:

- future development of the module should ensure the removal of the “Worst Performing” analysis, as the same information was provided under ‘Best Performing’;
- all Performance Indicators, including those which were “unknown” (because targets had not been established) be shown across the top statistics bar;
- the print quality be enhanced (as this currently resembled a dot matrix printer); and
- supplementary guidance notes be attached for clarity in respect of minimising/ maximising indicators in the Bullet Graphs.

The Committee was also keen to see the Social Housing Scheme variance be spent promptly for the benefit of residents.

The Committee supported the recommendations now detailed.

RESOLVED – that (A) in relation to the “Dashboard Module”, the recommendations as detailed above, be supported; and

(B) the Executive be advised that the Social Housing scheme variance as now detailed, be spent promptly for the benefit of residents.

386 FEEDBACK FROM PERFORMANCE INDICATORS WORKING GROUP

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager submitted a report setting out the findings of the performance indicator review, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and the supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager stated that all three scrutiny committees had reviewed their own performance indicators.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked the Performance Team and Councillors E Bedford and G Williamson for their hard work in reviewing the Performance Indicators.

Members received the report and approved the recommendation as now detailed.

RESOLVED – that the recommendations of the Review Team, as detailed in the report now submitted, be incorporated into the 2013/14 Performance Indicator Estimate and Future Targets report for consideration by the Executive in March 2014 in preparation for 2014/15.

387 SERVICE PLAN APRIL 2013 – SEPTEMBER 2013
MONITORING

The Director of Finance submitted a report setting out a mid-year summary of the Council's achievements against its priorities for 2013/14, the detail of which was set out in the report now submitted and supporting Essential Reference Papers. The report also monitored the outstanding service plan actions from 2012/13 and 2011/12 the detail of which was set out in the supporting Essential Reference Papers.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided a summary of the report now submitted.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the progress made against the Council's priorities and the revised completion dates, suspensions and deletions against the 2013/14 Service Plan actions and the 2012/13 and 2011/12 Service Plan actions be received.

The meeting closed at 9.30 pm