

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2014, AT 7.00
PM

PRESENT: Councillor G Jones (Chairman).
Councillors S Bull, J Mayes, W Mortimer,
T Page, M Pope, J Ranger, G Williamson,
J Wing and J Wyllie.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors E Buckmaster, G Cutting,
P Phillips 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

369 MINUTES – 26 AUGUST 2014

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held
on 26 August 2014 be confirmed as a correct
record and signed by the Chairman.

370 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman stated that with Members' agreement, he

would like to consider agenda item 8 (Scrutiny Work Programme) as the last item on the agenda.

371 **MEMBER TRAINING: FINANCE AND DECISION MAKING –
QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING THE
'BUSINESS CASE' AND PREPARATION FOR BUDGET
SCRUTINY**

The Director of Finance and Support Services provided Members with a summary of the issues which needed to be taken into account when making business case decisions and in scrutinising the work of the Committee. She provided a summary of the issues Officers would take into consideration prior to the submission of a business case to Members. These included financing options (costs / benefits), timelines and milestones, balancing and profiling risk, budgets and outcomes, links with corporate and strategic priorities and whether a proposal offered value for money. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that any proposal needed to be viable, achievable and measurable and within the Council's powers.

Councillor J Ranger stated that it was also important to consider the impact of not taking a particular course of action.

Councillor E Buckmaster referred to resource implications adding that the Council might be asked to take on a role because another provider might be failing in their task. He stated that there was a need to partner with other organisations as much as possible.

The Director Finance and Support Services referred to the information gained from Members following a training event on 21 October 2014. She stated that a "Preparation Clinic" on budget proposals was being planned to be held the week before the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees to take Members through the report formats as there will be some changes this year in response to Member feedback.

The Executive Member for Community and Partnership Liaison stated that new Members in the new civic year would benefit from the Director's presentation. The Director of Finance and Support Services agreed to add the presentation to the Members' Information Bulletin.

The Chairman commented that from the training session in October, he had learnt that underspends could be "good" and "bad" and that the Council had for the most part, underspent on its revenue and capital budget.

Councillor J Wing referred to capital expenditure and that there was always an assumption of slippage.

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

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

372 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report regarding arrangements which would enable the Council to implement a local Council Tax Support scheme (CTS) from April 2015. The report also detailed the financial and equality impacts of the recommended CTS scheme for East Herts' residents.

The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that there were no proposed changes to the scheme from last year and that the Council was supporting the same number of people. She reminded Members of the requirements of the CTS and confirmed that pensioners were protected. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that it was a complex scheme to calculate, there were no "de minimus" arrangements in place and that any kind of change reported by a beneficiary, needed a complete recalculation of entitlement. This made CTS an onerous and resource

intensive scheme to administer. She explained that next year, an Officer would be tasked with undertaking a modelling exercise of the scheme to consider alternative schemes.

Councillor J Wyllie asked whether those in the Armed Forces, suffering from combat stress were provided with help. He also raised the issue of same sex marriages and whether there should be specific mention of the new legal status in the scheme. The Director of Finance and Support Services undertook to clarify the position of the Armed Covenant and provide a written response on both issues.

Councillor T Page sought clarification of the impact of pensioners' claims on the scheme. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained that pensioners were excluded from the scheme so were not included in any calculation.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding resource demands, the Director of Finance and Support Service provided a summary of the peaks and troughs of the work, how staff in revenues and benefits coped, the additional resources now in place to employ more staff and how the Council was supporting the CAB in providing debt advice to help break the cycle of debt.

Councillor J Wing sought clarification on the percentage of Council Tax accounted for by the CTS. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained that as of 1 November 2014, collectible Council Tax was £89.5 million and Council Tax Support awarded was £6.087 million. This was across all bodies on whose behalf the Council collected Council Tax.

Councillor J Wing expressed concern about those people who might be disabled and therefore, unable to increase their income. He referred to the absence of information on approaches taken by other Districts to mitigate the impact of the introduction of the scheme. The Director of

Finance and Support Services assured the Member that the Council did take on board what measures were being used by other Councils. She added that the scheme proposed by East Herts had the least impact possible on Council Tax payers.

The Chairman suggested that Officers should bring a report to an earlier meeting in the cycle next year. This was supported. He stated that he looked forward to seeing the results of the modelling exercise.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the forecasted financial implications arising from the recommended scheme for the Council Tax reduction scheme (CTS) with effect from 1 April 2015 and the risks and assumptions attached to these be received and supported;

(B) the results of the future “modelling” exercise on CTS be presented for Members consideration as soon as possible; and

(C) future reports on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme be presented to Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee earlier in the programmed cycle of meetings.

373 ANNUAL REVIEW OF PARTNERSHIP REGISTER

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report on the annual review of Partnership Registers.

In response to a query from Councillor J Wing concerning any income derived from the CCTV Partnership, the Director of Finance and Support Services advised that the Council had provided cameras and any income derived was ploughed back into running the cameras. She explained that the list of partners comprised those

partnerships which were properly constituted.

The Committee received the report.

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

374 2014/15 SERVICE PLANS – SUMMARY OF PROGRESS AND EXCEPTIONS REPORT

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report which provided a mid-year summary of the Council's achievements against its priorities for 2014/15. The report detailed those service plan actions which required a revised completion date and also monitored the outstanding service plan actions from 2013/14 and 2012/13.

Councillor J Wyllie referred to the absence of an IT Strategy (14-BTS05) and a Customer Services Strategy (14-IPCS07) and sought assurances that these were progressing. The Chairman stated that the Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services had written to all Members giving an explanation as to why the Customer Services Strategy had been removed from the agenda recently. He stated that it was essential that the strategy challenged all services in meeting the needs of residents and customers. The Head of Service had stated that the draft strategy would be available for consultation by the end of December 2014.

The Executive Member for Economic Development assured Members that the IT Strategy was progressing.

The Executive Member for Community and Partnership Liaison explained that it was important that the Customer Service Strategy engaged with all services and worked in a "smarter" way, automating those services where possible. The Chairman expressed concern that so much time had elapsed and that a draft strategy was still not

available for Members' consideration. He referred to the introduction of new Members on the Committee from next May 2015. He stated that he had spoken with the Head of Service who had explained that he had a number of issues taking priority over the strategy, including data protection and parking. The Executive Member for Community and Partnership Liaison commented that Members needed to look forward and gave assurances that the draft would be available by the end of December 2014. She stated that in terms of new Members in May 2015, the issue of customer services was not a political one.

The Chairman acknowledged the fact that he would be consulted on the draft and asked whether all Members would like to see the draft, in which case, he suggested that there should be an additional meeting to consider the strategy. It was acknowledged that given the established programme of meetings that this might have to be convened prior to one of the joint meetings of Scrutiny Committees next year. This was supported.

In response to a question regarding issues being kept under review by relevant Heads of Service, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained the monitoring protocols in place. She stated that at certain points in the civic year, the Head of Service did attend meetings to provide updates on how their actions were progressing.

Councillor M Pope referred to objective 14-PPS06 (Further develop the Help Desk for Facilities Management and Property), the Director of Finance and Support Services stated that a proxy arrangement had been set up and that the initiative was progressing.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that (A) progress against the Council's priorities and the revised completion dates, suspensions and deletions against 2014/15 Service Plan actions and 2013/14 and 2012/13

Service Plan actions be received;

(B) Members' concerns regarding the absence of an IT Strategy and a Customer Services Strategy be noted; and

(C) an additional meeting of Corporate Business Scrutiny be convened to consider the Customer Services Strategy (or added to the agenda of one of the Joint Scrutiny Committee meetings).

375 MONTHLY CORPORATE HEALTHCHECK – JULY 2014 TO SEPTEMBER 2014/QUARTER 2

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted an exception report on finance and performance monitoring for the period July to September 2014/Quarter 2.

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

Councillor J Wyllie referred to on-going services in IT and Microsoft Licenses. He also referred to Parking Services and residents' and businesses' wish to "pay on foot". The Director of Finance and Support Services explained the need to ensure information was secure and that Officers continued to consider any alternatives to Microsoft Licenses if they were appropriate.

Councillor M Pope referred to the time taken to process housing benefit claims. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that the Council had experienced difficulty in employing staff with housing benefit experience and that the service had been allocated additional resources to permanently employ more staff rather than use agency staff during peak periods.

In response to a query from Councillor J Mayes, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained expected variances against forecasted outturn.

Members also sought clarification on what was 'usual/expected/manageable' number of enforcement visits per month. The Chairman stated that they would need to do 38 out of 51 to turn the Performance Indicator "green".

The Chairman queried how the numbers on the Development Management Committee correlated with the healthcheck figures. The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager undertook to discuss this with the Head of Service and provide a written response.

Councillor J Wing raised the issue of the declining number of swims. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained that gym users do not have to swipe their membership cards a second time, to use the pool which could account for the declining figures. She stated that SLM, the leisure providers, would be reporting to the next Community Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor J Ranger raised the issue of missing complaints data and why complaints could not be manually generated in the absence of a working IT system. He stated that this must be a small and simple number to calculate. The Director of Finance and Support Services undertook to write to the Member.

Councillor T Page queried the legal status of Bishop's Stortford Car Park following the sale to Hendersons. He asked for a definition of "consigned" in respect of the Council's and Henderson's responsibilities, particularly in relation to car park repairs.

Councillor T Page queried where the financial figures were reported in relation to enforcement (in terms of legal costs incurred by the Council) when the Council lost on appeal. The Director of Finance and Support Services undertook to provide a written response to the Member.

The Chairman referred again to the level of underspends

(£1.022 million) and queried what this could have been spent on. The Director of Finance and Support Services stated that there had been some recent demands on the underspends figure which had not originally been predicted.

The Committee received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

376 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman submitted a report setting out the Committee’s future work programme for 2014/15. The Scrutiny Officer explained that the next meeting would be part of the Joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees and that the titles of the reports would be confirmed as soon as possible. She stated that it might be possible to consider the Customer Services Strategy as part of the February 2015 joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees. The Scrutiny Officer also referred to the need to include more training once new Members had settled in.

The Committee approved the 2014/15 work programme, as now detailed.

RESOLVED – that the work programme, as now detailed, be approved.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm

Chairman
Date