

**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

**MONDAY, 24TH MARCH 2014 AT 6.00 P.M.**

PRESENT: Councillors P. Lammas (Chairman), R. J. Laight (Vice-Chairman), C. J. Bloore, B. T. Cooper, R. L. Dent, J. M. L. A. Griffiths, H. J. Jones, C. R. Scurrrell (substituting for Councillor C. J. Spencer), S. P. Shannon, C. J. Tidmarsh and L. J. Turner

Observers: Councillors B. Lewis and M. Webb

Officers: Ms. J. Pickering, Ms. J. Bayley and Ms. A. Scarce

96/13 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors K. A. Grant-Pearce, L. C. R. Mallett and C. J. Spencer. Councillor C. R. Scurrrell confirmed that he was attending as a substitute for Councillor Spencer.

97/13 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no declarations of interest or whipping arrangements.

98/13 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 24th February 2014 were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes be approved.

99/13 **QUARTER 3 WRITE OFF OF DEBTS REPORT**

The Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources presented the quarterly monitoring of Write Offs report for the period 1st October – 30th December 2013. During the delivery of this presentation the following items were highlighted for Members' consideration.

- The total current bad debts provision for the Council was £202,743 by 30th December 2013.
- There was more debt outstanding to the Council in December 2013 than at the same time in 2012.
- The higher level of debts than usual accrued in relation to green waste collection was due to the deadline for payments had being later than in previous years.

- The Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates Arrears, recorded in Appendix 2, contained cumulative debt figures for each year since 1999/2000.
- The Council Tax arrears detailed in the report displayed both arrears to the Council and to other bodies in receipt of Council Tax, including West Mercia Police and Worcestershire County Council. Only 14% of the total debt detailed in the tables was owed to Bromsgrove District Council.
- The debts for 2013/14 had not been included in the report as residents had the whole year to pay their Council Tax contributions.

Following the presentation of the report Members discussed a number of points in further detail:

- The extent to which the Council Tax arrears for Bromsgrove in December 2013 were relative to debt levels in previous years.
- The flexibility of the Council's approach to supporting residents struggling to pay both arrears and Council Tax instalments for the current year.
- The value for Members of considering the list of dissolved companies in debt to the Council.
- The deadlines for payments, which Officers confirmed was 30 days and the approach adopted by the Council to issuing reminders to residents and businesses in arrears.
- The legal requirements placing a statutory duty on the Council to collect Council Tax and Non Domestic Rates and the limits these legal requirements placed on the potential to offer incentives to encourage timely payment.

Officers advised that the Council assessed each individual with Council Tax arrears on a case by case basis. Bailiffs would be called upon to recover property in order to cover debts as a last resort as Officers recognised that the costs of involving bailiffs would be passed onto the resident who might not be in a position to afford to pay.

Members expressed some concerns about residents on low incomes who might be struggling to pay their Council Tax and commented that many residents in these circumstances would be anxious about their debts and might not be aware of the different options available to enable them to pay off their debts. In this context the Board suggested that a sensitively phrased press release could be issued by the Council in order to reassure residents in these circumstances and to advise them about the payment options available.

The Board therefore

**RECOMMENDED** that the Council issue a press release to advise residents with Council Tax arrears about the payment options available and the support provided by the Council with this process.

**RESOLVED** that in future reports a breakdown of the categories of businesses be included in the Write Off of Non Domestic Rates.

100/13 **QUARTER 3 FINANCE MONITORING REPORT**

The Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources presented the Finance Monitoring Report for the period 1st April – 30th December 2013. During consideration of this item she highlighted the following points:

- There had been an overspend in the budget for Finance and Resources of £14,000, mainly due to expenditure on benefits.
- Officers were anticipating that this overspend would increase significantly by the end of the year, largely to cover the pension strain and redundancy costs following the management restructure.
- The figures for Business Transformation were in the process of being reviewed by the Director and the relevant Head of Service.
- The comments in relation to the overspends and underspends had been provided by the Heads of Service.
- The £16.5 million short term investments listed for the Council as of 30th December 2013 included both capital investments and any precepts. The Council generally received a small amount of interest on investments as Officers tended to place investments in secure establishments.

After the report had been presented Members discussed the following matters:

- The length of service transformation and the remit of the Head of Business Transformation, which covered a range of services including policy, IT, Human Resources and transformation.
- The extent to which budgets proposed in previous years had represented an accurate assessment of projected spending for the year.
- The changes in approach to budget management in 2014/15 which would involve a line by line analysis of spending informing decisions about budget requirements for the following year.
- The reasons for the high costs associated with the former Head of Service's redundancy package with the needs for significant pension contributions to be made.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

101/13 **REFERRAL OF ITEM FROM FULL COUNCIL**

The Board considered a proposal that had been received from Councillor B. Lewis for Members to investigate the Financial Business Plan in respect of the Council's move to the former Parkside School. The Chairman explained that this topic had originally been proposed by Councillor Lewis in a notice of motion to Council on 26th February 2014.

During consideration of this item Councillor Lewis was invited to speak to the Board. He advised Members that he had requested a copy of the Financial Business Case from senior Officers in early February 2014, though had not received any information to date. He had subsequently submitted the notice of motion to Council.

Officers apologised for the delays that had occurred in responding to Councillor Lewis's initial enquiry. Members were advised that some financial information relating to the move had already been issued to Members. This included; a brief reference to the costs involved in the Medium Term Financial Plan, an assessment of the projected savings at the time of the Council's approval of the agreement to use the site and delivery of a presentation during an informal session of the Board.

The Board discussed the proposal in some detail. On the one hand some concerns were expressed about the timing of the proposal as it was noted that the Council had already signed an agreement with a number of partner organisations to move to Parkside. Furthermore works had already started on the site. On the other hand it was noted that Members had received relatively limited data to date concerning the costs involved in moving to Parkside and no detailed Financial Business Plan had been presented for Members' consideration.

Members concluded their discussions by agreeing that the information requested by Councillor Lewis should be issued to both him and members of the Board as soon as possible.

**RESOLVED** that no further action be taken.

102/13 **INTEGRATED WASTE COLLECTION AND DISPOSAL SERVICE JOINT SCRUTINY PROPOSAL**

The Chairman explained that a proposal to undertake a joint review of the potential need for an integrated waste collection and disposal service in the county had been received from Worcestershire County Council (WCC). The Board was being invited to consider whether a representative of the Overview and Scrutiny Board should participate in the review.

The following issues were highlighted during discussion of this item:

- The county Council would be hosting the review as the Council had proposed the exercise.
- WCC was seeking to receive feedback as soon as possible from district Councils regarding interest in the exercise.
- Participating authorities would need to cover the expenses of their representative on any joint Scrutiny Task Group, including travel expenses.
- It was suggested that some district Councils had already indicated that they would not be participating in the review.
- The existing level of shared services between Bromsgrove District Council and Redditch Borough Council.
- The potential outcomes of the review, including possible proposals to share services across the county and / or to contract services out to an external supplier.

- The reporting route for a joint scrutiny Task Group and the fact that whilst the Cabinet would be invited to consider any recommendations from the group it would not be required to approve those recommendations.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) Bromsgrove District Council should participate in the Joint Integrated Waste Collection and Disposal Services Task Group; and
- (b) Councillor R. J. Laight be nominated to serve on the Task Group on the Council's behalf.

103/13 **LEISURE PROVISION TASK GROUP - TERMS OF REFERENCE AND MEMBERSHIP REPORT**

The Board considered the terms of reference that were being proposed for the Leisure Provision Task Group. Officers explained that these terms of reference had been identified by Councillor Spencer, as Chairman of the Task Group, in consultation with the Head of Leisure and Cultural Services and the Democratic Services Officer.

Members noted that 9 Councillors, including the Chairman, had asked to participate in the review. A request had also been received from Councillor L. J. Turner to participate in the review after the deadline for nominations.

The appropriate number of members to participate in a Task Group was briefly debated. On the one hand it was noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Board's guidelines recommended that there should be a maximum of 7 members, including the Chairman, in any one Task Group. Concerns were expressed that a Task Group comprising 10 Members would be difficult to administer. On the other hand as these were only guidelines the Board had agreed on previous occasions to allow more than 7 Councillors to participate in previous Task Group exercises. It was also suggested that it would be unfortunate to reject any Councillor who had a particular interest in the exercise.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) a maximum of 7 Members be permitted to participate in the Leisure Provision Task Group;
- (b) Officers consult with every Member who has asked to participate in the review to find out whether any are willing to withdraw their names and to report back on the outcomes at the following meeting of the Board;
- (c) the proposed terms of reference for the Leisure Provision Task Group be approved;
- (d) the review be completed within a maximum of 6 months from the date of the first meeting; and
- (e) the Task Group commence its investigation as soon as possible once final membership has been determined.

**104/13 JOINT WRS SCRUTINY TASK GROUP**

The Board was advised that the latest meeting of the Joint WRS Scrutiny Task Group had taken place the previous week. During this meeting Members had reflected on progress with the review to date. A further meeting of the group was due to take place on 26th March during which Members would be interviewing members of the Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee.

The governance structure for Worcestershire Regulatory Services was briefly discussed. Members were advised that there was a Joint Committee, comprising 2 elected Member representatives from each partner, and a Management Board, comprising senior Officer representatives from each Council. The effectiveness of this governance structure and decision making procedures would be addressed in the group's final report.

**105/13 WORCESTERSHIRE HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Councillor B. T. Cooper, the Council's representative on the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) confirmed that the latest meeting of HOSC had taken place on 26th February 2014.

During this meeting Members had scrutinised the draft Urgent Care Strategy for Worcestershire covering a three year period which had been produced by a number of partners in collaboration. The strategy had been the subject of a public consultation process which had concluded on 19th March. Members of HOSC had been particularly keen to ensure that all patients could access good quality care at any time of the day or night.

Councillor Cooper informed Members that the next meeting of HOSC had been cancelled. There would not, therefore, be any update to Members on this subject at the following meeting of the Board.

**106/13 CABINET WORK PROGRAMME 1ST APRIL TO 31ST JULY 2014**

The Board considered the Cabinet Work Programme for the period 1st April – 31st July 2014.

**107/13 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the latest version of the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

During consideration of this item the following updates were provided for Members' consideration:

- The results of the staff survey, which had been scheduled for consideration during the March meeting of the Board, had been deferred until the April meeting. In part the delays had arisen as time was required to consult with staff and union representatives about the appropriate ways in which to respond to confidential feedback.

- The revised CCTV Code of Practice was also due to be considered in April. Officers would circulate a copy of the code of practice in advance of the Board meeting to provide Members with an opportunity to identify any issues that they felt should be discussed in detail during the meeting.
- Consideration of the Summary of the Playing Pitch Strategy by the Cabinet had been postponed until September and it was therefore likely that the Board would not have an opportunity to pre-scrutinise the report until its July 2014 meeting. There were a number of reasons for this delay, though staff shortages in particular had impacted on timeframes.
- The Artrix Task Group's final report would be presented for Members' consideration in April.
- The response that had been received from Cabinet to the Air Quality Task Group's second presentation of their recommendations would also be considered during the meeting of the Board in April.

The meeting closed at 7.13 p.m.

Chairman