

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

17TH NOVEMBER 2014 AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors L. C. R. Mallett (Chairman), H. J. Jones (Vice-Chairman), J. S. Brogan, R. A. Clarke, S. R. Colella, R. J. Laight, P. Lammas, P. M. McDonald, R. J. Shannon, S. P. Shannon, C. J. Spencer and C. J. Tidmarsh

Invitees: Councillor M. Webb

Officers: Ms. J. Pickering, Mr. J. Godwin, Ms. A. De Warr, Ms. A. Scarce and Ms. J. Bayley

64/14 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors C. J. Bloore and B. T. Cooper.

Councillor P. McDonald confirmed that he was attending as a substitute for Councillor Bloore.

65/14 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

Councillor H. J. Jones declared an other disclosable interest in respect of Item No. 8 as a trustee of Amphlett Hall.

66/14 **MINUTES 25TH SEPTEMBER 2014**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 25th September 2014 were submitted.

It was noted that Councillor R. A. Clarke's apologies had been omitted from the minutes.

RESOLVED that, subject to the amendment detailed in the preamble above, the minutes of the meeting held on 25th September 2014 be approved as a correct record.

67/14 **MINUTES 13TH OCTOBER 2014**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 13th October 2014 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 13th October 2014 be approved as a correct record.

68/14

QUARTER 2 WRITE OFF OF DEBTS REPORT

The Head of Customer Access and Financial Support presented the Quarterly Monitoring of Write Offs report for the period 1st July to 30th September 2014. During the presentation of this report the following points were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- The total amount of debt that had been written off during the quarter was £46,935.
- As requested, comparative data had been provided for the previous year.
- The level of debt that had been written off had decreased since the previous year.
- There had been a review of all of the Council's debts and this had resulted in the identification of a number of cases where Officers had concluded there was no possibility of writing off the debt. The outcomes of this review had impacted on the figures recorded for the previous year.
- The Council was collecting debts dating back to 1999/2000. The level of debts owed from previous years continued to fall.
- Colour copies of the graphs included in the report were provided and Officers explained that these graphs had been updated to illustrate both the total write off of debts for 2013/14 and the position for 2014/15 at the time of writing.
- The Council would pursue all options to support people struggling to repay their debts, but would start to pursue repayment of the debt more actively if the individual experienced a change in circumstances.

Following delivery of the report Members discussed a number of matters in further detail:

- Officers explained that incentives could not be offered for the payment of Council Tax or business rates. However, incentives were offered by some Councils to pay off other debts, such as sundry debts, by direct debit.
- The deadline for invoices for debts. The deadline tended to be 30 days, though this varied depending on the type of payment involved.
- The possibility of including debtors personal details in the report. Officers explained that under data protection rules they were unable provide this information for Council Tax and it would only be possible to supply the information in a redacted form for business rates, which would be time consuming to provide.
- The potential to predict the level of write offs in advance. Officers advised that it was not possible to make predictions on a quarterly basis, though the Council had made relatively accurate predictions in previous years about bad debt provision for the year ahead.
- The circumstances that might encourage individuals in debt to approach the Council for support.
- The increasing focus of the local authority on the needs of the individual as a whole, rather than as customers of separate Council services.

- The repeated attempts adopted by the Council to obtain payment of debts. The arrangements for payment of debts from previous years and how the funds returned to the Council were reflected in Council budgets.
- The reasons why the report focused on debts dating back to 1998/1999. Officers clarified that the Council's computer systems had changed at this stage and the data could be obtained from this period for inclusion in the reports.
- The value of outstanding debts that had not been paid for over 30 days or more and how this compared to previous years.
- The use of debt collection agencies. Members were advised that debt collection agencies were involved in collecting outstanding debts when no other action could be taken by the Council and would only be paid a fee in cases where they were able to recover a debt.
- The circumstances where "statute barred" applied. Members were advised that this referred to debts which the Council was not legally permitted to collect.
- The frequency with which the Council reviewed payment plans for bad debtors.
- The amount of debt due to liquidation that had been written off and the extent to which this debt was owed by multiple parties in relatively small sums.
- The increase in the number of invoices that had been dispatched for Lifeline. Officers confirmed that Bromsgrove District council had not had to cover the costs of lifeline services delivered to residents living outside the District.
- The extent to which particular individuals and businesses were more frequently in debt to the Council.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

69/14

LEISURE PROVISION TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT

The Chairman of the Leisure Provision Task Group, Councillor C. J. Spencer, presented the Group's final report. Members were advised that the group had held 6 meetings and had reviewed leisure services in detail. The Group had also used evidence gathered during two previous reviews, the Youth Provision Task Group and the Artrix Outreach Task Group.

Based on the evidence that had been obtained the Task Group had proposed four recommendations. In respect of the second recommendation from the group Councillor Spencer commented that Members already received a detailed list of all the leisure activities that were taking place in the district. Similarly, she acknowledged that a number of Ward Councillors maintained the content of the noticeboards located in their wards. In relation to recommendation 4 Members were advised that the Council was already in negotiations with BAM to use the sports hall facility at North Bromsgrove High School outside school hours. Sports England had confirmed that there was sufficient sports hall facilities within the area and therefore the inclusion of a sports hall within the new Dolphin Centre was not necessary. The Board discussed the proposal and the potential impact on cleaning arrangements at

the school. Officers explained that the cleaning arrangements would be addressed as part of the negotiations.

Councillor R. J. Shannon explained that as one of the local ward Councillors for the town centre he would be happy to endorse the Group's third recommendation. He also explained that he would be willing to fund the installation of a second noticeboard, as detailed in this recommendation, using his Ward Councillor grant funds.

The extent to which Councillors were familiar with the leisure activities that were delivered in their wards was also discussed. It was suggested that many activities were provided by external organisations whilst some activities had been withdrawn following budget reductions. The Board also discussed the launch of the review and noted that the Councillor who had proposed the exercise, Councillor R. Dent, had not been consulted during the review. To some extent it was suggested that it would be useful to determine whether she felt her objectives had been addressed by the review.

The Chairman concluded her remarks by thanking the other members of the Task Group for their hard work as well as the Head of Leisure and Cultural Services and the Sport and Physical Activity Development Manager.

RECOMMENDED that the Leisure Provision Task Group report and recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

70/14

FEES AND CHARGES REPORT

The Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources presented the Fees and Charges 2014/15 report. Members were advised that Cabinet had already considered and resolved on the report, with the fees and charges that had been approved due to be introduced in the new financial year. In future years it was anticipated that the report would be presented for the Board to pre-scrutinise. For 2014/15 the report had been provided to help contextualise the Council's income and assist in constructive budget scrutiny.

During consideration of the report a number of issues were discussed in detail:

- A decision had been taken by Cabinet to reduce the charge for green waste collection from £45 to £38. There would be a shortfall in the estimated income in 2014/15 of £7,000 and in 2015/16 the full year effect of the reduction would be a shortfall of £63,000.
- The garden waste collection service had previously generated a surplus.
- The reduction in the charge for garden waste collection services would not result in other Council Tax payers subsidising the service. The reduction in the charge would reduce the profit generated by the service for the Council.
- The number of customers paying for the garden waste collection service had increased in recent years.
- The surplus generated by the garden waste collection service in recent years had been returned to balances.

- The potential for the surplus funds to be used to finance green energy initiatives was discussed and Members questioned the extent to which the carbon footprint of the green waste collection service had been assessed.
- The impact of the withdrawal of a green waste collection service in the district was also discussed and concerns were raised that this might lead to an increase in fly tipping.
- Members understood there had previously been a policy at the Council which was designed to encourage residents to compost green waste. Concerns were raised that the increase in demand for the green waste collection service ran counter to this policy.
- The Board noted that the green waste collected was processed and sold as soil conditioner.
- An increase in the fees for bulky collections had also been agreed by Cabinet. Officers explained that a new approach to collections had been adopted whereby the Council would remove items in situ. Council staff would also dismantle items if required.
- The fees for strategic housing were briefly discussed and further detail was requested.
- The increase in the fees that were charged for the burial of children and for memorial trees and plaques was debated and Members questioned whether these increases were necessary.

The car parking charges were also discussed. Members noted that these had remained static. Members discussed how parking fees could be reduced during evening hours in order to have a positive impact on the night time economy. Members noted that the subject of parking charges was in the process of being reviewed by the Car Parking Short, Sharp Review and it would be more appropriate to wait until the review had been completed before any decisions were made on this subject. Members were also disappointed to note that a notice of motion on this subject had been proposed for the consideration of Council on 19th November.

RESOLVED:

- (a) that the Head of Environmental Services be invited to attend the following meeting of the Board to present a report on the green waste and bulky waste collection services; and
- (b) that the report be noted.

71/14

OVERVIEW OF BUDGET REPORT

In addition to the report, the Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources delivered a short presentation focusing on expenditure for the period April to September 2014 and projected figures for 2014/15 at the end of the year. The Board was advised that Officers anticipated that there would be an underspend of £1,000 at the end of the financial year.

It was noted that there had been significant change to borrowing costs for the Council for the year when compared to the projected borrowing levels that had been anticipated at the start of the year. This was attributed to delays with the development of the Dolphin Centre and Parkside. As a result of these delays

the costs associated with both initiatives would not, for the time being be met through borrowing but by using capital receipts.

A shortfall of £200,000 was expected in respect of Environmental Services at the end of the year, which could be offset by savings made by other departments. The shortfall related to a decision to investigate the potential to dispose of trade waste in-house rather than to contract this service out to the private sector as originally planned.

Members considered the Medium Term Financial Plan 2015/16 to 2017/18. Officers explained that the report had been designed to list costs in relation to the Council's strategic purposes as part of a new approach to presenting budgetary information for scrutiny.

Whilst considering this report the following matters were discussed:

- Funding for the New Homes Bonus. This had been higher than anticipated and there would be a report to Cabinet in January 2015 on the subject.
- The causes of the delays of the development at Parkside. Officers explained that more lime plaster than had originally been anticipated was required for the building and this would take a number of weeks to dry.
- The inclusion of savings from vacancies in the budget figures. Members were advised that there would always be some unfilled vacancies due to unexpected staff resignations.
- The level of savings that had been accrued following the departure of the former Director of Planning and plans in the long-term to fill this post.
- The figures detailed in relation to the strategic purposes included contributions that had been made by partner authorities involved in shared services with the Council.
- The costs for emergency planning, listed as enabling services. The Board was informed that this figure referred to the Council's contribution to the Emergency Planning Officer for North Worcestershire.
- The proposal to increase Council Tax by 1.9 per cent.
- The increase in business rates. This would be accompanied by an increase in the amount generated by business rates that local authorities would be required to pay to the government.
- The reasons why no income had been recorded for Amphlett Hall. Members were informed that the figures provided covered the Council's costs as a landlord.
- The net expenditure of £1.8 million on ICT and the reasons for these costs. Members were advised that staff wages represented only a small fraction of the costs.
- The overall expenditure on CCTV at £488,869, which needed to cover both staff and licensing costs. Income was provided by partner authorities for use of this service.
- The disabled facilities grants and whether figures for these grants should be included within the report or treated as capital expenditure.
- Income from licenses for taxi drivers and concerns amongst drivers that they were subsidising other services provided by Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS). Officers explained that the charges for

licenses could only be set at a level that covered the costs of providing the service.

- The investment property listed under the strategic purpose “help me run a successful business”.
- The need to pay full business rates for properties, regardless of whether they were vacant. A short period of void rates could apply when a property was empty and business rates could be reduced if a property was partly demolished.
- The lower business rates levied for car parks compared to properties.
- Contingency plans in the event that the site of the existing Council House did not sell following the move to Parkside.
- The listing of transport costs under a number of the strategic purposes. Officers explained that the transport costs listed under enabling services were for MOT testing and those detailed for “keep my place safe and looking good” were for fleet vehicle maintenance.
- The income figures recorded for the museum. Officers clarified that this figure covered income from both the museum and sponsorship of the roundabouts in the district.
- The benefits of presenting comparative figures for each item and the potential for this to be done for the relevant strategic purposes.
- The inclusion of figures for general grants, donations and bequests. This included a grant to the CAB and a donation to the Bromsgrove Festival. Officers confirmed that other events in the district received Council funding from alternative budgets.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

72/14

JOINT WRS SCRUTINY TASK GROUP - UPDATE REPORT

Councillor R. J. Laight, the Chairman of the Joint WRS Scrutiny Task Group and the Council’s representative on the group, provided an update to Members on the outcomes of the Worcestershire Shared Services Joint Committee’s consideration of the scrutiny group’s recommendations. The Board was advised that the Joint Committee had approved the first 5 recommendations. One further recommendation, recommendation 11, had been forwarded to Cabinets at partner authorities for approval and had been agreed by Bromsgrove District Council’s Cabinet on 5th November 2014.

The Joint Committee had not endorsed recommendations 7, 8, 9 or 10. To some extent Members were advised that this had not been surprising, particularly the recommendation on the changes to the governance structure. However, all of the Overview and Scrutiny Boards in the county, apart from the Wyre Forest Scrutiny Committee, had endorsed the recommendations. The Management Board for WRS had been asked to review the findings detailed in relation to those 4 recommendations and to report alternative proposals in due course which it was hoped would address some of the scrutiny group’s concerns.

The Task Group had not discussed proposals for WRS to enter into a strategic partnership with an external organisation in detail. These proposals were still in the process of being reviewed, though Members were aware that the level

of interest in the partnership had been reduced to a single bidder. Officers confirmed that the strategic partnership would only be pursued if it represented the best option for partners and there remained the option for partners to continue to work together without entering into partnership with the private sector if Members did not feel the option represented value for money.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

73/14 **CAR PARKING SHORT SHARP REVIEW**

Councillor S. P. Shannon, Chairman of the Car Parking Short, Sharp Review, provided a verbal update to Members on the work of the group. The Board was informed that the group had held 2 meetings. During which Members had considered information on car parking patterns in the district and interviewed the Environmental Services Manager. Comparative figures, comparing income from car parking charges this year to previous years, had also been reviewed. The group had requested comparative data for car parking charges at similar local authorities for the following meeting.

Members noted that it would be useful for the group to compare car parking patterns prior to and following the redevelopment of the town centre, although it was acknowledged that as the official opening of the town centre had only recently taken place, this data would not yet be available.

74/14 **WCC HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Officers advised Members that Councillor B. T. Cooper, the Council's representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), had hoped that the minutes from the latest meeting of HOSC, which took place on 5th November, would be available for the Board's consideration in his absence. Unfortunately this was not the case and a brief update provided by Councillor Cooper was read out to Members..

The Board was advised that two key issues had been discussed by HOSC. This included:

- Mental Health Liaison.
- The Acute Hospital Services Review. Members were informed that the preferred option required by NHS England was for external scrutiny by the West Midlands Clinical Senate, which was due to report in February 2015. In the meantime existing services would continue to be maintained unless safety or governance issues were identified.

75/14 **ACTION LIST**

Officers explained that additional information had been circulated to Members of the Board that morning. This had been provided in response to a number of questions that had been raised at the previous meeting of the Board.

The Chairman commented that there were a number of outstanding items listed on the Action Sheet. In order for the Board to discuss this item in more

detail the Action Sheet would be considered early on the agenda at the next meeting..

76/14

CABINET WORK PROGRAMME 1ST DECEMBER 2014 - 31ST MARCH 2015

The Board considered the Cabinet Work Programme for the period 1st December 2014 to 31st March 2015. Members expressed an interest in the Environmental Services Transformation and Shared Services Restructure. Officers advised that this report had been presented at a recent meeting of the Shared Services Board, to which all Members had been invited, and a decision would be made on it by Cabinet prior to the next meeting of the Board. However, due to Members' interest in this item it was agreed that the Head of Environmental Services would be invited to attend give a presentation on the shared services and transformation which had been undertaken.

The Chairman informed Members that Cabinet was due to receive an update on the development of the Hanover Street site, though this had been included in the Cabinet Work Programme. Due to the Board's previous interest in this subject he invited the Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Resources to provide the Board with an verbal update on this matter,.

Members were advised that Officers were hoping to prepare a report on this subject for consideration at Cabinet on 3rd December, though it was possible that a special meeting of the Cabinet would need to be convened.

The following areas were discussed in detail:

- The previous development plans for the site were no longer applicable following the withdrawal of the developer.
- There were a number of options available to the Council for development of the site including: marketing the site in its current state, developing the site and selling it in its entirety, developing and retaining the site as a landlord and dividing the site up for sale for various purposes.
- Cabinet would need to decide which option would represent value for money for Bromsgrove District Council and for local residents.
- It was likely that some of the information would be exempt. Wherever possible the Board would consider information in an open and transparent manner, but if necessary could enter into confidential session.

The Board discussed whether there would be a need for an extra meeting to provide Members with an opportunity to pre-scrutinise the report. The option for this meeting to be held prior to Cabinet on 3rd December was considered, but due to the uncertainty as to when the report would be ready it was agreed that Officers would canvass dates once the date for the Cabinet's consideration of the report was finalised.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the Head of Environmental Services be asked to present a summary of the Transformation and Shared Services Restructure at the following meeting of the Board; and
- (b) an additional meeting of the Board be arranged in order to pre-scrutinise the report in respect of the future development of the Hanover Street site.

77/14

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered the latest edition of the Overview and Scrutiny Board's Work Programme. As Members had requested a significant amount of additional information as well as extra items it was agreed that no further items should be requested for the following meeting.

The meeting closed at 8.55 p.m.

Chairman