

**BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD**

**22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE 2015 AT 6.00 P.M.**

PRESENT: Councillors L. C. R. Mallett (Chairman), K.J. May (Vice-Chairman), C. Allen-Jones, S. J. Baxter, C. J. Bloore, B. T. Cooper, M. Glass, R. D. Smith, P.L. Thomas, L. J. Turner and S. A. Webb

Observers: Councillor R. L. Dent

Invitees: Councillor G. N. Denaro

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Ms. A. De Warr, Ms. A. Scarce and Ms. J. Bayley

10/15 **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors S. R. Colella and J. M. L. A. Griffiths with Councillors L. Turner and S. Webb attending as their respective substitutes.

Members noted that during the Overview and Scrutiny training on 15th June 2015 the need to be apolitical had been discussed as a means to achieve effective overview and scrutiny. The Chairman and Vice Chairman had therefore agreed to trial a new, alphabetical seating order at future meetings of the Board and to use white name plates, rather than coloured name plates.

11/15 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no declarations of interest or whipping arrangements.

12/15 **MINUTES - 13TH APRIL 2015**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on Monday 13th April 2015 were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 13th April 2015 be approved as a correct record.

13/15 **MINUTES - 2ND JUNE 2015**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on Tuesday 2nd June were submitted.

The Chairman commented that Councillor Dent's surname had been misspelt in the minutes and needed to be amended.

**RESOLVED** that subject to the amendment detailed in the preamble above the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 2nd June 2015 be approved as a correct record.

14/15

### **WRITE OFF OF DEBTS QUARTER 4 REPORT**

The Head of Customer Access and Financial Support presented the Quarterly Monitoring of Write Offs report covering the period 1st January 2015 to 31st March 2015. During presentation of this report the following points were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- Debt write offs were a last resort and only occurred when the Council had no other recourse.
- Debts that had been written off could subsequently be pursued once again if there was a change in circumstances.
- The majority of debts that were written off had been owed for a number of years; it was rare to write off a debt within the space of a single year.
- The timing of write offs could not be considered indicative of trends in payments or customer behaviour but, rather, as representative of the point in the recovery process that had been reached.
- An incorrect figure had been recorded in the covering report for the total unrecoverable debt that had been written off during the period. This figure should actually have been recorded as £23,188.31.
- There had been a change to the Council's finance system at the start of the new financial year. This had impacted on the potential to obtain data for previous years for comparative purposes.
- It was difficult to assess sundry debts in a quarterly report as the figures recorded varied according to the time of year. For example garden waste charges were issued to all customers at the same time.
- Similarly the total Council Tax due was recorded as due from 1st April. This recording arrangement did not easily recognise that many customers could legitimately pay in instalments over 10 or 12 months.
- Bankruptcy remained the primary reason for writing off debts.
- Cases classified as 'uneconomical to pursue' were usually debts where it could potentially cost the Council more to pursue payment than to write off the debt.
- Only a small proportion of Council debts were written off. For example 0.5 per cent of non domestic rates arrears were written off by the Council in the period.

Following presentation of the report a number of key issues were discussed in further detail:

- The figure that had been recorded in the report for the total cumulative Council tax arrears, for the period 1999/2000 to 2014/15, appeared to be inaccurate and needed to be clarified.

- The Council had to follow a specific process for collecting Council Tax and recording Council Tax arrears in line with legislative requirements.
- The district Council collected Council Tax for other organisations such as the police and Worcestershire County Council. These organisations would be owed some of the Council tax arrears.
- The Council could use bad debts provision to manage risks and protect against any write offs.
- Debts could be secured against the value of a customer's property, though this would not be the first step taken by the Council to recover debts. However, many customers were not property owners and therefore this process could not always be applied.
- Officers confirmed that sundry debtors included both residents and companies.
- Figures were not collected in terms of how the Council's debts compared to other local authorities. However, comparative data was provided in respect of collection rates.
- Concerns were expressed about the total figure owed to the Council and the potential for greater recovery of debts to have a beneficial impact on the Council's finances.
- However, Members were advised that the Council had a good recovery rate, with approximately 97 per cent of debts collected.
- The Council used different methods to recover debts, including credit ratings and bailiffs.
- Debts classified as 'statute barred' had not been included in the report and did not apply to Council Tax or to business rates.
- It would be easier to present a clearer outline of the level of debts owed to the Council and progress made in recovering debts at the end of the financial year.
- In respect of the cumulative debts, Members suggested that changes might need to be made to make it easier to understand the data provided.
- The inclusion of Historic data in future versions of the report in order to compare year on year progress in respect of recovering debts owed to the Council.
- Information about the payment methods used by customers to resolve any debts to the Council was also discussed for inclusion in future reports, Officers advised that whilst this was possible, Members should be mindful that it was also time consuming to prepare.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) The format of the report be revised for future versions of the Write off of Debts report;
- (b) Future monitoring reports be received annually; and
- (c) The report be noted.

15/15

**ACTION LIST**

Officers explained that the Action List provided Members with updates in relation to actions which, although not formal recommendations, had been requested at previous meetings of the Board. Officers circulated updates by

email in advance of meetings of the Board, although sometimes further information was provided during the course of meetings.

Following publication of the agenda two additional updates had been received:

a) Medium Term Financial Plan

Further information had been provided about the opportunity for Members to propose a project in need of capital funding in order to help achieve the Council's strategic purposes with the relevant Head of Service. Any such proposals needed to be considered as part of the Council's budget setting process.

Officers had also confirmed that changes with regard to Redditch CAB would not have an impact on Bromsgrove District Council in terms of financial costs.

b) Making Experiences Count – Quarters 2 and 3 Report

An update provided in respect of payments to the Council had confirmed that there were no Council services which could not now be paid for by direct debit.

The provision of further information about the identity of complainants and those providing compliments about Council services was briefly discussed. It was clarified that this would involve identifying whether the individual was a Councillor or a resident rather than revealing the identity of the person concerned.

16/15

**ITEMS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION**

The Board considered a report which detailed the outcomes of the Overview and Scrutiny training which had been delivered on 15th June 2015. During consideration of this item the following matters were discussed:

- The links between the issues identified during the training session and the demand reported by residents to Councillors.
- The potential to include topics identified during the interactive sessions on the Board's Work Programme.
- The need for the Board to be selective and to consider carefully any suggestions for scrutiny during the year.
- The possibility that the range of subjects discussed during the training did not reflect the full range of strategic issues impacting on the Council and which scrutiny could influence.
- The extent to which Members had been aware that topics discussed during the training would subsequently be discussed at a Board meeting. The Chairman advised Members that explicit reference had been made during the training to the fact that the outcomes would be reported at the subsequent meeting.

- The date when the report had been published. Officers confirmed that the pack had been published and circulated in an electronic form the week before the meeting.
- The costs involved in undertaking Task Group reviews. Members were advised that Chairmen of Task Groups received one off payments of £260 and members of Task Groups received one off payments of £160. These figures were budgeted for in advance and therefore did not require additional expenditure.
- Members were advised that generally a maximum of 4 Task Groups per year were advisable and could be delivered within budget.
- The information provided in biannual Environmental Enforcement reports and the benefits of additional information about proposed action to tackle enforcement problems in future years. Members suggested that any information about future plans should be included in a presentation on the subject of environmental enforcement together with data relating to operational measures.
- An update on the outcomes of the Place team's work, focusing on one of the key locations for a single Place team as a case study, was requested. Members agreed this could form the basis of a presentation to the Board.
- The need for scrutiny to undertake a detailed review of the Council's budget. The Chairman explained that the Board consistently contributed to the Council's budget setting process during meetings between September and February and also considered the Finance Quarterly Monitoring reports throughout the year.
- The potential for a Task Group focusing on specific elements of the budget to make a valuable contribution to the Council's long-term financial position. The Board noted that a review of this subject would need to have a clear scope and would need to be brought before the next meeting of the Board.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) A presentation on the work of the environmental enforcement teams, encompassing future plans, be delivered at a forthcoming meeting of the Board;
- (b) A presentation focusing on the outcomes of the work of the Place Team in a particular location be provided at a future meeting of the Board; and
- (c) The report and items proposed during the Overview and Scrutiny training on 15th June 2015 be noted.

17/15

**CABINET WORK PROGRAMME 1ST JULY TO 31ST OCTOBER 2015**

The Board considered the content of the Cabinet Leader's Work Programme for the period 1st July 2015 to 31st October 2015. During consideration of the Work Programme a number of key points were raised:

July Cabinet meeting

The Chairman commented that a significant number of items were listed for consideration at the July meeting of Cabinet. Unless an additional meeting of

the Board took place it would be difficult for Overview and Scrutiny to make a constructive contribution to decisions made about these items through pre-scrutiny.

### Modifications to the Bromsgrove District Local Plan

The date for Cabinet to consider any modifications to the Bromsgrove District Local Plan was briefly discussed. Officers explained that this item had been postponed on a number of occasions and that no date had been finalised for the presentation of this report to Cabinet. The plan was in the process of being considered by the Planning Inspectorate and any recommendations arising from this stage of the process would be reported to Cabinet.

### New Homes Bonus

Members noted that the recommendations from the New Homes Bonus Grants Panel were scheduled for the consideration of Cabinet on 2nd September. Members were reminded that there had been public interest in the scheme which had evolved following a petition with a significant number of signatures being submitted for the Council's consideration. It had been agreed that the New Homes Bonus Scheme would be reviewed annually from inception.

The Board discussed the appropriate group that could lead a review of the New Homes Bonus. There were some concerns that a review would not be appropriate until a decision had been made following the first round of grants. As this would be taking place in the autumn there would be limited time available for the Board to review the process effectively and to report any recommendations prior to the Council's budget being finalised. It was suggested that the New Homes Bonus Working Group would be in a better position to review the outcomes of the scheme in its first year.

**RECOMMENDED** to the New Homes Bonus Working Group that it review the outcomes of the New Homes Bonus Community Grants Scheme and report any recommendations about the future of the scheme to Cabinet.

18/15

## **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered the content of the Overview and Scrutiny Board's Work Programme. Officers explained that a number of items had been suggested for inclusion on the Work Programme by members of the Board in the previous municipal year. In respect of these items Members expressed particular interest in continuing to receive quarterly updates on the application backlog in the Planning Department.

The focus of the report on the subject of the Staff Survey was briefly discussed. The Chairman explained that the Board had reviewed the outcome of a previous Staff Survey and had identified concerns particularly in relation to bullying and the frequency of staff performance appraisals. The Board had also contributed to the 10 key issues which Members had felt

needed to be tracked and had been keen to provide input into future versions of the survey.

Councillors' laptops had also been the subject of a discussion at a Board meeting in the previous municipal year. The extent to which problems with the laptops had been resolved in recent months was briefly discussed and it was noted that some new Members had encountered practical difficulties in respect of using the equipment. However, Members concurred that until and unless concrete problems were identified it would be more appropriate to list this item for consideration at a later date if required.

Overview and Scrutiny Members had previously undertaken a number of reviews of car parking. Members suggested that the appropriate time for the Board to revisit this subject would be once the trial for free evening car parking in Bromsgrove had come to an end. There was the possibility that a mechanism had already been identified for a review of this trial and that a date had been set for this review. Officers were asked to seek clarification on this point to enable the Board to determine the most appropriate time for scrutiny to contribute to the process.

19/15

### **WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL JOINT SCRUTINY - INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

Members considered a proposal that had been received from Worcestershire County Council (WCC) to participate in a joint scrutiny review of increasing physical activity in Worcestershire. During consideration of the contents of this draft proposal the following points were discussed:

- Joint reviews took place from time to time where Members were tasked with reviewing cross cutting issues.
- Many physical activities were delivered by Leisure Services teams based at the district rather than the County Council level.
- There was the possibility that a joint scrutiny Task Group could propose recommendations which might impact on the Council's services.
- A review of this subject would link to 2 of the Council's strategic purposes: help me live my life independently and provide good things for me to do, see and visit.
- Participation in this review would not count as one of the 2 Task Groups that could take place at any one time in the district because the review would be hosted by WCC.

Based on this information and, in particular, acknowledgement that the Council needed to be able to influence any review that could impact on Council services, the Board agreed that the Council should participate in this exercise. Members went on to discuss a suitable candidate to represent the Council on the joint scrutiny Task Group, taking the following into account when making this appointment:

- Prior knowledge of leisure activities would be useful for the nominated Councillor.

- It would be helpful to appoint a Councillor who was available during the day as the majority of Committee meetings hosted by Worcestershire County Council took place during the day.
- Familiarity with WCC would be useful.
- Preferably a representative of the Board would need to be appointed so that regular verbal updates on the progress of the review could be provided.

Based on these considerations Members provisionally agreed to nominate Councillor J. M. L. A. Griffiths to serve on the review due to; her experience as the former Chair of the Youth Provision Task Group which had reviewed physical activities as part of their remit, her position as a county Councillor and her role as a member of the Board. As Councillor Griffiths was not present during the meeting the Board concurred that this nomination could only be approved subject to her agreement.

**RESOLVED**

- (a) That the Overview & Scrutiny Board participate in the Joint Increasing Physical Activity in Worcestershire Task Group; and
- (b) Subject to her agreement, Councillor J. M. L. A. Griffiths be nominated to represent the Council on this joint scrutiny review.

The meeting closed at 7.27 p.m.

Chairman