

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

25TH APRIL 2016 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,
R. J. Deeming, M. Glass, R. D. Smith and P.L. Thomas

Observers: Councillor G. N. Denaro and Councillor S. A. Webb

Officers: Ms. J. Pickering, Ms. D. Poole, Mrs B. Talbot, Ms. A. Scarce
and Ms. J. Bayley

124/15 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES**

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor S. R. Colella.

125/15 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS**

There were no declarations of interest or whipping arrangements.

126/15 **TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD HELD ON 21ST MARCH 2016**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on Monday 21st March were submitted.

The Chairman thanked Councillor K. J. May for chairing the meeting in his absence.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 21st March 2016 be approved as a correct record.

127/15 **ANNUAL SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE UPDATE 2015/16**

The Head of Business Transformation and Organisational Development and the Human Resources and Development Manager presented an update on the sickness absence statistics for Council staff covering the period April 2015 to March 2016. During the delivery of this update the following points were highlighted for Members' consideration:

- An average of 5.33 days per full time equivalent (FTE) post had been lost due to sickness absence by Bromsgrove staff during the period.
- There had been a decrease in the proportion of days lost due to short-term sickness.
- The Council had worked hard, alongside Redditch Borough Council, to support staff experiencing stress, anxiety and depression.
- Action to support people experiencing difficulties with stress had included the Time to Talk initiative, provision of counselling services and use of the Employee Assistance programme.
- The Council's process for reporting sickness absence was the subject of an ongoing review and a new approach had been trialled in a small number of departments.
- In the trial managers were able to report staff sickness absences directly to the Human Resources team, rather than through Payroll.
- A key finding of the trial had been that the Council's existing Sickness Absence Policy was not supporting managers adequately.
- The trial was due to be extended to other departments over the following months.
- The data arising from the trial would be published on the dashboard and used to help managers to monitor and manage sickness absence levels within their teams more effectively.

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

- The causes of stress and action taken by the Council to identify and address this problem. Members were advised that managers were being provided with training to enable them to identify behaviour which might indicate that a member of staff was suffering from stress.
- The inclusion of statistics for staff employed in Housing, which was solely a Redditch service area.
- The potential for further data to be obtained from the online Employee Assistance programme in order to appreciate the key sources of information required by staff.
- The value of recent initiatives tackling problems with stress in the work place and the extent to which this had helped to address the social stigma associated with mental health difficulties.
- The number of staff absent due to sickness and the size of the teams within which they worked.
- The inclusion of sickness absence statistics for services hosted by Bromsgrove District Council and the extent to which this accurately reflected absences for the local authority in a shared service working environment.
- The potential to reflect sickness absence statistics more accurately for the Council by calculating the proportion of absences in accordance with the division of funding between Councils to support those services.

- The prevalence of musculo-skeletal illnesses within the Environmental Services team as a cause for sickness absence and access within the team to Occupational Health services.
- The level of contact that the Council had with GP practices in cases where managers had concerns about the health of members of staff.
- The potential for comparative figures to be provided for sickness absence levels in previous years.
- The extent to which staff may feel reluctant to explain the causes of stress as it was often considered to be a private and highly sensitive matter.
- The possibility of providing greater clarification in the reports about the causes of stress (e.g. to determine whether this was due to personal issues or working conditions). Concerns were expressed that if additional information was provided on this subject it would need to be presented in an appropriate manner so as to not compromise staff confidentiality.
- The potential for the Board to receive further information about the findings of the review and to scrutinise the Sickness Absence Policy in the event that any amendments were made to this document in response to the trial outcomes.

At the end of these discussions it was

RESOLVED that

- (1) The following amendments should be made to future editions of the Sickness Absence Update report;
 - (a) comparative data should be included in the report;
 - (b) specific information should be provided about absence levels amongst staff delivering services in Bromsgrove district and references to Redditch only services should be removed from future editions of the report;
 - (c) departmental head counts should be provided; and
 - (d) subject to addressing concerns detailed in the preamble above, greater clarification should be provided about the causes of sickness absence due to stress.
- (2) A Sickness Absence Update report be presented to the Board in six months' time.

128/15

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT AND REVENUE OF THE WORK OF THE BOARD

The Chairman presented a draft of the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2015/16. In so doing he highlighted some of the key achievements of the Board and a number of Task Groups during the year and he thanked Members and Officers for their hard work supporting the scrutiny process.

In line with best practice Members were invited to consider action that could be taken to improve the scrutiny process in future years. A number of potential options to enhance the scrutiny process had been identified

by the Chairman and Vice Chairman, in consultation with Officers, during briefings as well as following discussions at Board meetings. These ideas were discussed in turn by the Board:

(a) Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group

Members were advised that a small working group could meet in private to investigate budgetary matters in detail and report their findings back to the Board. Group members would develop expertise which would be helpful when considering the budget. Meetings could be scheduled to take place in a timely manner so as to enable Members to scrutinise both future budget proposals and information about progress in securing efficiency savings as and when the information became available.

Members concurred that a Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group would be useful to establish. There was general consensus that the financial situation for local government would continue to be challenging and under these circumstances detailed consideration by Members of budget proposals would be essential. Furthermore, Officers advised that the external auditors had recommended that there should be greater Member involvement in the budget setting process and this working group would help to achieve this objective.

(b) Performance Dashboard Scrutiny Working Group

Similarly it was proposed that the Board could establish a small working group to review the measures dashboard. To date Members had received limited information about the dashboard, though it had become clear during a presentation on this subject earlier in the year that this would become an increasingly useful tool for the Council. The dashboard contained a vast amount of complex information. A Working Group meeting regularly in private might be in a better position than the Board to develop familiarity with the dashboard and to identify ways in which this could be used to support the scrutiny process. As with the Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group the outcomes of these meetings could be reported to the Board.

Again there was general consensus that a working group dedicated to reviewing the measures dashboard would be a useful addition to the scrutiny process. Members noted that a lot of the content of the dashboard appeared to be focused on service performance. There was the potential that the group could help to widen the scope of the dashboard by suggesting content that would focus more on issues which mattered to local residents. Once familiar with the dashboard Members of the working group might also identify key areas of service performance which might be considered suitable for further scrutiny, whether by the Board or by a Task Group. Members were also reminded that the monitoring and scrutiny of performance came within the remit of Overview and Scrutiny.

As with the budget process Members were advised that the Council's auditors had recommended that Members should be more greatly involved in managing service performance and a working group would help the Council to achieve this aim. The Board was also asked to note that the launch of this Working Group would coincide with the provision of access to the dashboard on Members' iPads which would make it easier for Members to access this tool more regularly.

(c) Member Champions on the Board

A further option that had been identified was the potential for members of the Board to be appointed as champions of particular issues. A Member Champion for Risk Management had been appointed to the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee at the beginning of the year and this role had worked well by enhancing member involvement in the Council's approach to managing risks. Member champions on the Board would have an opportunity to learn about particular subjects in detail which could enable them to gain expertise in those areas.

Members expressed some reservations about this suggestion and it was questioned how this would work in a meaningful fashion. There was general agreement that the concept of a scrutiny Member Champion required further consideration. The Board therefore agreed that this should be discussed further in the new municipal year.

(d) Training

A training session had been delivered to Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and other non-Cabinet Members in June 2015. Officers suggested that the content could be adapted to focus on particular areas of interest to ensure that it remained useful and interesting.

Members concurred that the training which had been delivered in 2015 had been very good, having provided both an introduction to the scrutiny process and an opportunity for Members to consider subjects that might be suitable for scrutiny during the year. Further consideration of the previous list of proposed subjects for scrutiny, in respect of the outcomes that had been achieved, was considered worthwhile. Members also suggested that future training should provide additional opportunities to discuss suitable subjects for scrutiny in 2016/17.

(e) Additional Points

Officers explained that the introduction of Working Groups could impact on the workload of both the Officers who supported the

scrutiny process as well as on the workload of Members. For this reason it was suggested that if the Working Groups were introduced only 1 Task Group or Short, Sharp Review should take place at any one time, rather than the 2 that were currently permitted, to ensure that workloads remained manageable. In 2015/16 there had only ever been 1 Task Group / short sharp review taking place at any point and therefore it was not anticipated that this would have a negative impact on the outcomes of the scrutiny process. The Board would, however, be able to review the impact on the scrutiny process at the end of 2016/17 and could make further amendments to working arrangements then if considered appropriate.

RESOLVED that

- (1) A Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group should be established, with effect from the start of the municipal year in 2016/17.
- (2) A Performance Dashboard Scrutiny Working Group should be established, with effect from the start of the municipal year in 2016/17.
- (3) The membership of both working groups should be determined by the Board at its first meeting in 2016/17.
- (4) Further scrutiny training should be provided to Members early in the new municipal year.
- (5) The concept of scrutiny Member Champions should be considered further by the Board in 2016/17.
- (6) Subject to recording the plans for the future of the scrutiny process, as detailed in the preamble above, the content of the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2015/16 be approved and referred to Council for consideration.

129/15

BUDGET SCRUTINY - LESSONS LEARNT AND ARRANGEMENTS FOR FUTURE YEARS (PRESENTATION)

The Executive Director of Finance and Corporate Resources delivered a presentation on the subject of budget scrutiny arrangements for 2016/17 (attached at Appendix 1). Whilst presenting this report the following points were drawn to the attention of Members:

- Officers were keen to learn from and improve upon previous approaches to budget scrutiny at the Council.
- In recent years there had been difficulties obtaining financial information in a timely manner that would enable scrutiny Members to challenge the Cabinet effectively.
- There had also been limited public consultation about the Council's budget and it was possible that the board and / or Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group could help to address this situation.
- Assessing the extent to which expenditure was achieving value for money was challenging; outcomes could be difficult to quantify.

- Officers were aiming in future to develop a budget covering a 4 year period rather than the traditional 3 years that had been covered in the past.
- There was the potential to improve in year monitoring of budget expenditure.
- In future Scrutiny Members might want to engage more with Heads of Service about expenditure. In recent years finance officers had tended to present budget reports, though did not have the level of familiarity with service delivery that Heads of Service had to explain any variances or to answer particular questions about service expenditure.
- Improvements could be made to the presentation of the Council's Statement of Accounts. The first 10 pages needed be written clearly and easy to comprehend.
- The Council's external auditors had made recommendations about the Council's approach to monitoring the budget and had suggested that this needed to become more robust.
- More detailed information could be provided in future to scrutiny Members about the budget, including a breakdown of the costs of service delivery.
- Budget data needed to be made available to Members in a more timely fashion during the budget scrutiny process. In the past Members had often received updates in the form of presentations at meetings which provided limited time to digest the information and to identify both problems as well as possible opportunities available to the Council.
- The Board was advised that many local authorities had bodies like the Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group and Officers welcomed the positive contribution that this body could make to the budget setting process.
- In future Officers were intending to provide details of expenditure and income for all cost centres per service. This would enable Members to identify patterns where applicable.
- Income levels would also be considered further in future and this would encompass not just fees and charges for Council services but also opportunities to obtain additional income from more creative delivery of services.
- Further information about the capital programme would be provided in future as this had become an important element of Council finances.
- Officers were hoping that the Government would provide more detail about Business Rate assumptions by the end of the year as this would also increasingly be a core element of local government funding.

Once the presentation had been delivered Members discussed the following:

- The use of black and red text in budget spreadsheets and the potential for the way this was presented to cause confusion.

Officers explained that the Council needed to comply with particular requirements on this subject in line with local government accounting principles.

- The potential for an additional column to be added to future budget spreadsheets reflecting variances in expenditure over 10 per cent.
- The time constraints within which any actions needed to be taken in order to set a balanced budget for 2017/18.
- The potential to achieve anticipated efficiency savings for 2016/17.
- The option to use balances to help achieve a balanced budget.
- The level of detail that would be required by the Government in local government efficiency plans by March 2017.

RESOLVED that

- (1) A copy of the presentation should be circulated for Members' consideration.
- (2) The report be noted.

130/15

**PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS IN BROMSGROVE TASK GROUP -
VERBAL UPDATE**

The Chairman of the Preventing Homelessness Task Group, Councillor C. J. Bloore, provided an update on the progress of the review. The Board was advised that the group had interviewed the Chief Executive of Bromsgrove District Housing Trust (BDHT) and Officers from the Council's Benefits team at consecutive meetings. The impact of the welfare changes at the local level and potential action that could be taken to address this had been discussed during these meetings.

The group had recently met to discuss the next steps in their review. It had been agreed that visits to external service providers would be helpful and the group was aiming to visit both St Basils and the Basement Project in May. Members were also hoping to interview Officers and Councillor C. B. Taylor about Planning Policy matters in June.

131/15

QUARTERLY RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

The Board considered the latest update on progress that had been made to implement recommendations which had been made through the scrutiny process. A number of issues were discussed in particular detail during consideration of this update:

(a) Evening and Weekend Car Parking Task Group

The group's recommendations had been added to the tracker in the amended form of wording that had been agreed by Cabinet. A copy of the background report referred to at Cabinet together with the economic priorities for Bromsgrove was requested to enable Members to appreciate the reasons why Cabinet had amended the group's first recommendation.

(b) Leisure Provision Task Group

The majority of the Leisure Provision Task Group's recommendations had been implemented and could be removed from the tracker. However, in respect of recommendation 4 Members noted that the negotiations with BAM remained ongoing. For this reason it was agreed that this recommendation should continue to feature on the tracker document.

(c) Youth Provision Task Group

The majority of the recommendations that had been proposed by the Youth Provision Task Group had also been implemented and could be removed from the tracker. The Chairman requested that the Board's thanks be reported to the former Chairman of the Task Group, Councillor J. M. L. A. Griffiths, who had attended a meeting of CALC to present the group's findings. One final recommendation from the group remained to be implemented; an investigation of services that could be provided to young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). This would remain on the Board's Work Programme.

RESOLVED that, subject to the comments detailed in the preamble above, all implemented recommendations be removed from the tracker and the report be noted.

132/15

WORCESTERSHIRE HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - UPDATE

Councillor B. T. Cooper, the Council's representative on the Worcestershire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC), advised that there had been no meetings of the Committee since the last meeting of the Board.

The next meeting would take place on 27th April. The main items on the agenda for this meeting would be:

- An update on the position of Worcestershire Acute Hospitals.
- The quality of acute hospital services.

Discussions about the outcomes of the acute services review would remain on hold during the purdah period for local elections.

133/15

CABINET WORK PROGRAMME 1ST MAY TO 31ST AUGUST 2016

Officers advised that the following edition of the Cabinet Work Programme would be amended to include the correct title for the Preventing Homelessness Task Group. The group's findings would be reported for the consideration of Cabinet on 5th October 2016.

134/15

**WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman noted that every member of the Board had been sent a link to a survey that had been launched by Worcestershire County Council in order to obtain suggestions for the content of their Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme. No Members of the Board had completed a copy of this survey and the deadline had passed. However, Members concurred that it would be useful for a county Scrutiny Committee to assume responsibility for holding the Health and Wellbeing Board to account. There was general consensus that the Worcestershire HOSC would be in a suitable position to undertake this role. Councillor Cooper, in his capacity as the Council's representative on the Worcestershire HOSC, was therefore asked to report this suggestion for the consideration of partners at the Committee's next meeting.

During consideration of Worcestershire County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme Members questioned progress with the Joint Increasing Physical Activities Task Group. The Board was advised that no date had been set for the group's final report to be presented for Members' consideration. However, Officers reported that the Redditch representative on the review had recently reported at a meeting of the Borough's Overview and Scrutiny Committee that a meeting had been held at the end of March to consider the group's draft recommendations and a date was being investigated for the presentation of their final report to the County Council's Cabinet. Members thanked officers for this update though expressed disappointment in the slow progress that had been made with this review.

135/15

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD WORK PROGRAMME

Officers advised that the deadline for the Preventing Homelessness Task Group would be recorded in the following edition of the Board's Work Programme as 19th September. The work programme would also be amended to reflect discussions at the following meeting of the Board about the membership of the 2 new working groups.

The meeting closed at 7.15 p.m.

Chairman