

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 18TH SEPTEMBER, 2007**

Present: Councillor A. Burnip (Chair)
Councillors Mrs. M. Baird, A. Burnip,
A. Collinson, J. Haggan, D. Maddison,
M. Nicholls, R. Taylor and P.G. Ward

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 3rd August, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.
2. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 4th September, 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no Members of the public present.

4. **FEEDBACK FROM SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

The Chair reported on the following issues, which were considered at the Scrutiny Management Board held on 10th September, 2007.

- (i) The Children's Trust
- (ii) Revised Housing Strategy
- (iii) County Durham Overview and Scrutiny Member Network – Review of Public Transport

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

5. **FORWARD PLAN**

Consideration was given to the current Forward Plan of Key Decisions which covered the period 1st September to 31st December, 2007 a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that the Forward Plan set out Key Decisions which were to be considered by the Executive. The purpose of circulating the Forward Plan was to provide the Scrutiny Committee's with an opportunity to examine and influence issues that were to be considered by Executive and become involved in the decision making process.

The current Forward Plan included the following issue which came under the remit of the Resources Scrutiny Committee:-

New community facilities

RESOLVED that the Head of Asset and Property Management, be invited to attend a future meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to discuss new community facilities.

6. USE OF RESOURCES - VALUE FOR MONEY PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the joint report of the Executive Members for Resources and Service Improvement which sought approval to a programme for managing and improving Value for Money (VFM) within the Council's services.

T Bell, Director of Finance and Corporate Services advised that in January 2007 Executive agreed to develop a three-year VFM programme. The reviews were seen as a necessary element in identifying efficiencies and improving services.

Since that date the Council had received a further assessment under the Use of Resources criteria where it was assessed as performing well, consistently above minimum requirements. In terms of the assessment VFM was measured on how the Council managed VFM and overall current performance

In the assessment the Council had improved its score in the management of VFM but in terms of current performance it was judged as adequate performing at minimum standards. A key factor in the latter was in relation to VFM issues around housing maintenance.

The definition of VFM was the optimum combination of whole life costs and benefits to meet the customer requirements and was traditionally known as the three E's, Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness. VFM was achieved when costs were relatively low, productivity or performance was high, outcomes were successful and satisfaction levels were relatively high.

The report to Executive in January set out the three stages to the process, details of which were outlined in the report. Appendix 2 to the report gave details of a toolkit which had been developed to assist the process. The toolkit was available in booklet form for any Member who required a copy.

In developing the programme the positioning of services was based on crude data. The purpose of the process was to interrogate the data, understand the position and review policies, which may affect costs, performance and customer satisfaction. Details of the principles, applied in finalising the proposal, were explained to Members.

In conjunction with this process a Service Improvement Team considered low performance and customer satisfaction issues. The progress of this team was reported through the Council's performance management framework to report to Executive and Audit Committee.

Details of services that were to be reviewed by the Service Improvement Team in 2007/2008 were outlined in the report and it was noted that costs in respect of these services were not an issue and therefore if performance were increased then VFM would be achieved.

Appendix 1 to the report set out a crude assessment of services based on the data available, services which were not included at this stage and a suggested programme for the next three years for Members consideration.

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J Brindle, Assistant Chief Executive advised that this approach represented an improvement to the Council's VFM approach as it balanced cost, performance and satisfaction. VFM reviews were being led by the relevant Service Heads with help and advice from both Finance and Corporate Development.

Councillor A. Collinson referred to the Council's carbon footprint and queried if any savings could be made in this area. J Brindle advised that the current VFM approach was on a service basis but could be amended and refined in the future.

The Chair made reference to the VFM issues around housing maintenance. T Bell advised that services were improving but housing maintenance was a weak area which had limited the Council's score in the inspection report.

The Chair referred to the Concessionary Fares Scheme and asked if this would be Government funded. T. Bell advised that the Government had allocated money for the additional cost of issuing passes. It was explained that the Government anticipated additional costs of the scheme to be approximately £300M, which would be funded through grant. At this stage the Government was unsure what the true cost would be however, as the Council had been involved in a countywide scheme, it was hoped that the increase in costs would be less than average.

RESOLVED that the programme set out in Appendix 1 be approved and further reports be awaited.

7. **SERVICE UNIT PERFORMANCE REPORTING - DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND ADMINISTRATION**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Democratic Services and Administration which provided an update on the performance of the Democratic Services and Administration Unit, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The report provided an update for the previous six months of the Unit which comprised of the following areas.

- Democratic and Member Services
- Elections and Electoral Registration
- Legal and Administration Services
- Risk Management

Members had previously been advised that temporary staffing arrangements had been put in place to provide additional resources needed to meet the current demands placed upon the unit and to cover vacancies. These arrangements had continued longer than envisaged due to the delay in the Best Value Review of Support Services (BVRSS) which was now complete and had been the subject of a detailed report by the Assistant Chief Executive.

The BVRSS identified that the Council needed to create more capacity to respond to key future needs such as community engagement, improving public participation in democratic and electoral processes, training and development, support for proactive work in risk management, insurance and legal services.

It was recommended that a unit review be undertaken to address these issues and create a clear focus for service delivery by looking at the separation and transfer of specific functions.

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The review would also take account of the requirements contained within the Electoral Administration Act 2006, the Local Government and Involvement in Health Bill, Audit Commission Use of Resources Assessment, Corporate Plan and the Council's review of Community Engagement as well as Local Government Review.

With regard to political management arrangements Members were advised that work had continued in respect of reviewing the Council's political management arrangements, details of which were outlined in the report.

With reference to Member training and development, events continued to be arranged based upon both the needs identified by Members as well as those arising from Council priorities. Details of training and development initiatives, which had been delivered during 2007, were outlined in the report. The Council had hoped to achieve Charter Status for Member development and had also looked into the possibility of a dedicated training officer but Local Government Review had re-focused Member training to deal with Local Government Review and unitary status.

In relation to elections, Members were advised that there were new regulations contained within the Electoral Administration Act which related to postal voting procedures. An exercise which required the collection of signatures and dates of birth from approximately 13,500 existing postal voters and 10,500 new applications resulted in 16,000 confirmed postal voters.

Further applications were confirmed in the run up to the May elections which resulted in 17,158 confirmed postal voters which equated to 23% of the total electorate. New regulations also required postal voter statements to be scanned to match signatures and dates of birth. Ten District wards and five Parish Council wards were contested. This involved verifying 7,956 postal voter statements which equated to a 63% return of eligible postal votes for the wards contested. Overall turnout for the District elections was 30%.

In managing the District and Parish Council elections, the complexities of the legal framework and the electoral timetable created real challenges for electoral staff and placed a great strain on systems and resources. New legislation for postal voting had also increased reliance on external suppliers/contractors.

Members were advised that the annual canvass was again being carried out by post. However, for the first time the Council were undertaking a telephone registration service which enabled householders to confirm "no change" registrations.

This was being undertaken by the Electoral Reform Services and to date 7,500 households (17%) had responded by telephone. Total householder response so far was 52%. The follow up canvass, second reminder stage would be a door-to-door canvass.

It was explained that the review of Polling Districts and Polling Places was ongoing. A report was being prepared for the Returning Officer which would first be put out to consultation, however it was not envisaged that this would result in many changes.

With regard to Land Charges the BVRSS was guided by a Business Process Mapping exercise which recommended that efficiencies could be gained by consolidating the Land Charges function within the Planning and Building Control Service. Consequently the Land Charges function was transferred. The impact of this was that one full time post was transferred from Democratic Services and Administration to Planning and Building Services.

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Reference was made to the Risk Management function, details of which were outlined in the report. A risk management performance work plan was being developed which would be used by the Audit Committee to measure performance and progress on initiatives and actions.

It was pointed out that effective sickness monitoring continued to be carried out in the unit. Sickness figures for April to August 2007 was 2.21 days, overall sickness for the unit for the last twelve months was 6.01 days. The Council's corporate target for 2007/2008 was 8 days.

It was pointed out that resource issues and team leader vacancies had meant that developing work plans and performance improvements had slowed. Tasks and projects which had been identified and work plans which had been affected, included the development of local PI's, benchmarking, customer satisfaction surveys and staff one-to-ones. The unit review would establish a structure which would enable a more clear focus for service delivery to be established with effective performance management arrangements.

Management Team had given consideration to the single unitary decision and its impact on Council priorities and work streams. The Council would be fully involved in shaping a new unitary and in order to do this additional capacity may be required during the next 18 months which would be reviewed as implementation evolved. It may be necessary to "de-prioritise" current objectives within the Service Plan. A copy of the current delivery plan included within the Service Plan was attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

The Executive Member for Resources advised that a lot of work had gone into the recent District Council elections and the new telephone registering service had been a success. It was hoped that the target of 98% response to the electoral canvass would be achieved once again this year.

The Chair reported that in-house Member training had greatly improved and provided a similar or better standard of training than external providers.

A Member referred to the complicated forms that were required to be completed for a postal vote. B Garside advised that the new format was designed around the new regulations to prevent fraud.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

8. **ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEM OF BUSINESS**

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985, Section 100B (4)(b), the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer agreed that the following item of business, not shown on the agenda be considered as a matter of urgency.

9. **CONTACT CENTRE (AOB)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that at the last meeting of the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee, Members had expressed concern with regard to an article in the Sunderland Echo in relation to the Council's performance in the Contact Centre.

Following discussion with the Head of Customer Services a number of solutions were identified which could be implemented to help resolve the problems. The Head of

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Customer Services was scheduled to attend a meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to be held in January 2008 and would discuss the progress of the measures which had been implemented at that meeting.

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that he would report the action taken to the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee who would also be invited to attend the Resources Scrutiny Committee to be held in January.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

JT/PH/COM/RESOURCES/070902
20 September, 2007