

BATH AND NORTH EAST SOMERSET

RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Monday, 16th July, 2012

Present:- Councillors John Bull (Chair), Manda Rigby (Vice-Chair), Colin Barrett, Paul Myers, Charles Gerrish, Barry Macrae, Nigel Roberts and David Bellotti (Cabinet Member)

Also in attendance: Tom McBain (Divisional Director - Property), Andrew Pate (Strategic Director, Resources), Ian Savigar (Divisional Director for Customer Services) and David Trethewey (Divisional Director , Strategy & Performance)

13 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

14 EMERGENCY EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chairman drew attention to the emergency evacuation procedure.

15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS

There were none.

16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST UNDER THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

There were none.

17 TO ANNOUNCE ANY URGENT BUSINESS AGREED BY THE CHAIRMAN

There was none.

18 ITEMS FROM THE PUBLIC OR COUNCILLORS - TO RECEIVE DEPUTATIONS, STATEMENTS, PETITIONS OR QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BUSINESS OF THIS MEETING

The Panel noted that a statement had been sent in by Ms Boater regarding the allocation of resources. A copy of the statement can be found on the Panel's Minute Book.

19 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING - 14TH MAY 2012

The Panel confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting as a true record and they were duly signed by the Chairman.

20 APPROACH TO ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES - BRIEFING NOTE

Andrew Pate – Strategic Director for Resources, introduced the report, he explained that most aspects of resource planning do get considered but not necessarily at the same time. He explained that the big picture is presented in November in the Medium Term Plans, he also explained that there is an aspiration that resource planning is brought to the Panel's only once for next year – i.e. for 2013/14 (rather to each panel than again and in more detail in January).

Councillor Rigby explained that she had asked for this report because she felt at the end of the last budget process, she had a good knowledge of how the money was being spent but little knowledge on how other resources were allocated.

Councillor Gerrish stated that he felt the report was constructive but that PDS (Policy Development and Scrutiny) Panel's look at departmental budgets rather than judging the budget proposals against the corporate priorities. He asked if they could take a more strategic look in November. He added that the next budget would be the most difficult and that there was a need to look at overall priorities.

Councillor Macrae added that the Cabinet should give overarching guidance on priorities and then Panel's scrutinize this. He asked if this Panel could receive its own resource plan information and the corporate information as separate reports in November.

Councillor Roberts stated that the Medium Term Plans (usually brought to Panel's in November) do indicate a direction and there is a corporate plan to refer to and that the advantage for this Panel is that it can have a wider view.

The Strategic Director stated that he would aim to provide as much information as possible in November and separate out the plans for this Panel's services from a report about the picture for the Council as a whole.

21 COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER - PRESENTATION

David Trethewey - Divisional Director, Policy and Partnerships – gave a presentation on 'Community Assets' which covered the following:

- What do we mean by Community Assets?
- Changing Context
- Community Right to Bid
- Community Right to Challenge
- Community Right to Build
- Examples in Bath & North East Somerset
- The Wiltshire Example
- Current discussions

- What assets do we have in B&NES
- Further Assets
- Taking things forward in B&NES
- Key Issues
- Potential roles for the Panel

Panel members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

There was some discussion over the definition of a community asset. Councillor Macrae stated that he would want the Cabinet to have a view on what they defined as an asset. The Divisional Director stated that it would be an issue of prioritisation and that a case would have to be demonstrated each time.

There was some discussion around the need for a sound process. Councillor Macrae stated that the authority should manage it well or a lot of people will be disappointed. Councillor Macrae stated that schools are often a community hub. He stated that there were a lot of issues to overcome.

Councillor Nigel Roberts stated that the Localism Bill should be seen as an opportunity. He stated that there was a key issue in that there may be some communities more able to organise their case than others. Tom McBain, Divisional Director, Property added that the Council has always had a passive role regarding its assets and that this legislation brought a great opportunity to help the authority get the best use out of its assets.

Councillor Gerrish stated that the legislation referred to Council assets and asked officers to look at the issue of other community assets. He stated that it was best to have two approaches, one for Council assets and the line we will take regarding community assets that are not controlled by the Council.

Councillor Roberts stated that there were limited resources to support this. He stated the need for a mapping exercise on communities as some may need more support in the process than others and there would be differences between communities that are parished and those who are not. He added that there should be a mechanism so that one person could not dominate the process. The Council must also consider whether it gives advice on becoming a charity, how to run meetings etc.

The Strategic Director reminded the panel that a key issue to discuss was how they would get involved. He explained that this topic affects many Council Services and many communities. He added that the Panel had a role in trying to shape future policy in their policy development role. He further explained that if this led to substantial policy change, it would be reported to full Council.

Councillor Rigby stated that in the policy development role, green targets and similar commitments should be remembered.

The Chair explained that as there was no available scrutiny support for a review until December 2012, a small group could come together to meet with officers and maybe visit some sites before the formal process began.

It was **agreed** that the group would be:

Councillors Manda Rigby, John Bull, Colin Barrett and Paul Myers (*Councillors would not be involved in discussing matters that they are involved in negotiating on*).

Councillor Macrae registered his discomfort that the working group may discuss sites while there was no policy in place. The Chair assured Councillor Macrae that it would be about policy development and any discussion of individual sites would be for case study purposes.

22 UNIVERSAL CREDIT - UPDATE

Ian Savigar – Divisional Director for Revenues and Benefits – updated the Panel on developments since the presentation they received in their September 2011 meeting and the workshop in March 2012. He explained the following points:

Welfare Reform Change - Update

- The timeline was still as it was previously. Any new claim after October 2013 is planned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to be a Universal Credit;
- The DWP would start communicating with people about starting up their own bank accounts to enable direct payments;
- In the lead up to Universal Credit, a lot of changes were being made to Housing Benefits such as how the rent is calculated and size criteria;
- Roughly 50 families in this area would be affected by 'Capping' (no household should get more than £26k in benefits annually);
- Landlords would in future no longer receive payments direct from the authority, claimants would be paid direct and some pilots are underway elsewhere to test this;
- One of the concerns was the expectation that all claims will have to be made digitally, the officer had been in discussion with the DWP on this and the need for some face to face delivery. Some people would also need help in managing the money now that they would be paid monthly;
- This authority had submitted an application to participate in a pilot for a face to face solution;
- Finally that the Social Fund was being abolished (community care grants/maternity grant/cold weather grants) and that he wanted a policy that would pick people up who will lose out through this.

Panel members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Macrae stated that this authority should be making a stand as changes will affect our residents and our staff. He wished to see changes that are people focused, not process focused.

Councillor Gerrish stated that Councillors on this Panel had raised the above points before. He stated that there was a danger that isolated people get overlooked and the authority should use the knowledge from smaller advice groups who should be

brought up to speed as we progress otherwise the advice sector would not be able to provide support. The Divisional Director explained that he had a meeting with inter-agency groups the following day.

The Cabinet Member, Councillor Bellotti explained that this process is about coming out the other end with a fairer system and that, at present, a small section of families in Bath are drawing enormous amounts in benefits and others are working hard and not drawing such amounts. Councillor Bull disagreed and asked what would happen when they sought accommodation elsewhere and it was not available. Councillor Bellotti agreed that they would need help. He explained that it was about sending a message to people that it is worth going to work.

Councillor Macrae asked why the change to Universal Credit is being done at DWP level and not locally. The Cabinet Member explained that there has to be a national credit system.

Council Tax Benefit

- The Divisional Director explained that the DWP were trying to listen to this authority's concern on the changes being implemented. He explained that the Welfare Reform Act abolishes Council Tax Benefit and that there would be a new Local Council Tax Support Scheme from April 2013. The authority will get less money in the new scheme. He explained that pensioner's council tax support would be protected so the 12-13% reduction would affect working age claimants.
- He explained three options for the authority to fund the shortfall:
 1. Reduce the maximum eligibility to 72% of current amount;
 2. Fully fund the shortfall;
 3. (*preferred by Cabinet*) Reduce the amount of benefit by 22% and make a number of other simplifications.

Panel members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Gerrish asked about parish precepts and how the changes will impact them. The Divisional Director explained that for technical reasons Parishes may need a significant Council Tax increase to offset the adverse impact on their tax base caused by the creation of Council Tax Support. He stated that he would clarify this information to all members and parishes once he had heard more from the government department.

The Divisional Director explained that he should find out on 20th July if the application to participate in the pilot for a face to face solution is shortlisted – members of the panel will be contacted following this.

23 CABINET MEMBER UPDATE

Councillor Bellotti – Cabinet Member for Community Resources - updated the Panel on the following:

- He referred to his recent announcement on the levels of spending on adult social care, he hoped that the Government would address this issue;
- He reported that the Keynsham Regeneration Scheme should be going to the Development Control (Planning) Committee in August and that changes had been made in light of comments received in the consultation;
- He referred to the Council papers which report an underspend for 2011/12 and reported that during the next budget round (2013/14), there would be three road shows rather than the usual one;
- He reported that Victoria Hall was planned to be refurbished and an anchor tenant was sought, with the library was being considered;
- In terms of the workplaces project, he reported that the Bath Street Offices were now closed and the Lewis House One Stop Shop was open, he recommended that members visit;
- He reported that plans were going ahead for the business/co-working hub on the ground floor of the Guildhall;
- On the issue of empty shops, he reported that there was not a problem in Bath.
- Finally, on the issue of growth, the Cabinet Member stated that he thought growth could be about the quality of life in society, not just money. He gave an example of the jubilee where the GDP was down due to the extra bank holiday but the feel good factor was up.

Panel members raised the following points and asked the following questions:

Councillor Gerrish welcomed the announcement on the range of seminars for start-up businesses and hoped there would be good take up on this.

Councillor Myers asked that 'Norton Radstock' not be used but that the Cabinet Member instead refer to Midsomer Norton, Westfield and Radstock.

Councillor Macrae agreed with the Cabinet Member on the quality of life point made above. He reminded the Cabinet Member that, while empty shops were not a problem in Bath, there were still empty shops in Midsomer Norton, Westfield and Radstock and he wished for this area to be put back on the radar.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his update.

24 PANEL WORKPLAN

The Panel noted the future workplan with the following amendments:

- The September meeting of the Panel has been moved from the 10th to 17th and will be held in Keynsham;
- The 'Carbon Management Update' item will move from September to the January 2013 meeting;
- A new item was added to the September agenda 'Implications of Pooling Business Rates in West of England Authorities';

The meeting ended at 8.30 pm

Chair(person)

Date Confirmed and Signed

Prepared by Democratic Services

This page is intentionally left blank

Statement to the 16.7.12 meeting of the Resources Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel

As a member of three generations of a family living in Bath and North East Somerset, and as a business economist and strategist working at the interface of the public, private and voluntary sectors, I am increasingly concerned about the impact of inevitable public expenditure cuts on our local economy and communities. This statement is driven by this concern.

Although I am pleased to see the Panel now scrutinising the Council's approach to the allocation of resources (Item 6 on the 16.7.12 agenda), I wanted to underline just how important and timely this discussion is in the context of the current adverse and highly uncertain economic climate and the role PD&S Panels have as part of a minority administration to democratically underpin the bold and difficult decisions that need to be taken over the next few years.

As an economist, whose job it is to advise on how to maximise the benefits from the allocation of scarce resources, I would also like to remind you, my elected representatives, that we can't have our cake and eat it, for there is only one cake, and how you cut up that cake matters greatly for the long term future of our communities. And although I recognise that economics is not the only discipline of relevance here, it is the reason why I'm so disappointed not to be able to attend tonight's panel meeting* and why I am taking the trouble instead to highlight some aspects that I believe merit the Panel's attention and scrutiny.

Firstly I am delighted to see that prioritisation has been placed in the core of the discussion framework. In the private sector, if you fail to understand and meet the needs of your customers, sooner or later you will go bust. In the public sector, if you fail to understand and meet the needs of the diverse communities you serve, ultimately it costs lives and belittles the economy which nurtures those lives. However, the diagnosis of and targeting of diverse and often complex community needs is a much less developed art than that of uncovering and meeting business need.

Turning now to the process of allocating resources. Although Andrew Pate's image of a complex and challenging jig-saw, with perfectly formed policies arranged with military precision is a beguiling one, it clashes with the impression I got from having observed the scrutiny of Medium Term Resource and Service Plans last winter. Although, much of this was to do with how complex issues and data were presented, and the associated lack of time for a new administration to absorb and reflect on them in the budget timeframe, lurking underneath were some more important issues of substance surrounding how we define resource and whether we bring the same rigour, transparency and evidenced approach to the allocation of human and environmental resource as we do to financial ones.

* At this time of the school year, my reserves of "goodwill" childcare are just too low.

And it is these fundamental issues of substance that I so hope the Panel will take the time to discuss at this and in future meetings, for this is where my confidence for a better future lies. For the economists outlook is less relevant than many economists like to think. Not all resources are scarce. There may be only one cake, but the cake is unbounded. People make things happen, and it the responsibility of all of us whether in the private, public or voluntary sector, and as lead by our unique coalition of politicians, to constantly challenge and push the boundaries further and further out. And I'm delighted to see just a year or so into the work of this administration, that this is beginning to happen.

Nicolette Boater, M.A .(Oxon), M.Phil