



POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON TUESDAY, 10TH NOVEMBER 2009 AT 5.15 PM

PRESENT:

Councillor J. Taylor - Chairman
Councillor Mrs. M.E. Sargent - Vice-Chairman

Councillors:

H.A. Andrews, Mrs. A. Blackman, D. Bolter, J.B. Criddle, D.T. Davies, J.E. Fussell, S. Jenkins, Mrs. V. Jenkins, G. Jones, K. Lloyd, D.V. Poole, K.V. Reynolds, A.S. Williams, T.J. Williams, J.M. Wilson

Cabinet Members: Councillors C.P. Mann and A.J. Pritchard

Together with:

N. Barnett (Director of Corporate Services), M. Headington (Principal Cemeteries and Bereavements Officer), R. Hopkins (Principal Housing and Council Tax Benefits Officer), P.S. Lewis (IT Development Manager), L. Lucas (Head of Procurement), D. Perkins (Head of Legal Services/Monitoring Officer), N. Scammell (Head of Corporate Finance), G. Williams (Deputy Monitoring Officer), J. Jones (Scrutiny and Members' Services Manager) and R. Thomas (Committee Services Officer)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L. Binding, Ms L. Hughes

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made at the beginning or during the meeting.

2. MINUTES - 29TH SEPTEMBER 2009

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee held on 29th September 2009 (minute nos. 1 - 14, on page nos. 1 - 4), be approved as correct record and signed by the Chairman.

3. CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CALL-IN PROCEDURE

There had been no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

4. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

Cabinet Members C.P. Mann and A.J. Pritchard were present and reported orally on the following:

Joint Council for Wales, Llandrindod - at a recent meeting Trade Unions and management held a frank and open discussion on issues facing local authorities over the next five years.

Equal pay - It was the second week of the single status agreement settle offer where staff were receiving their settlement cheques. A high number of staff had received their cheques, with staff working through the weekend to complete the process within the 6-week target. The process had been praised by ACAS. Delays had taken place for a number of staff due to incomplete forms being received from a particular firm of solicitors, but these were being addressed.

Budget – the process was ongoing and it was the largest consultation exercise carried out by the authority. The View Point Panel held a meeting last night, responses from which would be pulled together and presented to the Budget Advisory Group and Cabinet in December. The work of procurement services had been recognised by Andrew Davies, Assembly Member for Finance and Public Service Delivery.

Members thanked the Cabinet Members for their presentations and a brief discussion followed. It was confirmed that all staff would receive their settlement cheques by the end of the 6-week period, with the exception of those who had challenged the settlement. The exact number of staff was unknown at this time. Further advice had been offered to staff whose payments had been delayed.

Members were advised the first instalment of monies recovered from Icelandic banks had been received. A further installment was due in December. It was suggested that this information be disseminated to scrutiny committees, viewport panels and the general public. Officers confirmed a report would be drafted.

5. CABINET REPORTS

None of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda had been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

6. REVIEW OF BROAD RENTAL MARKET SERVICES

The Chairman welcomed Mr. Gary Bartlett (Market Evidence Data Manager) and Mr. Karl Thomas (Operations Manager) of Rent Officers Wales, WAG to the meeting.

The presentation advised Members of the possible impact of the Rent Service Review of Broad Rental Market Areas (BRMA) within Caerphilly County Borough Council, undertaken by WAG, and detailed the methodology used in determining the proposed BRMA.

Members were advised that the need for change had arisen from a court ruling, legislative amendments and judicial reviews. The Rent Officers Wales are consulting on the proposed BRMAs with Welsh local authorities and other stakeholders, until December 2009. Once the consultation period closed, it is anticipated that implementation of the new areas would take place with effect from 1st February 2010, following signoff of the proposals by WAG.

Members were asked to note that although maps detailing the BRMAs had been shown as part of the presentation, these were subject to review. However it was anticipated there would be 23 BRMAs, when previously there were 17, with 5 crossing borders with England. The BRMAs had been considered on a local authority basis, but were not limited to their boundaries. It is proposed that the county borough administrative area will be covered by one BRMA known as "The Caerphilly BRMA", with the centre point being located at Penallta House, Tredomen Park.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Thomas for their informative presentation and sought comments from members. The Scrutiny Committee raised concerns on the impact of the changes to tenants and their ability to afford private rental properties. Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Thomas advised the review had not allowed them to take rental values into account and they indicated that the vast majority of tenants on Local Housing Allowance (LHA) would benefit from the review. Officers advised only a small portion of tenants in the Caerphilly county borough would potentially be adversely affected.

Consultations had taken place with national landlord associations and housing associations with the main concern being raised relating to the fact that the benefit would be paid directly to the tenant, rather than the landlord. Landlords were not under any obligation to reduce or increase rent as a result of the review.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Bartlett and Mr. Thomas for their time in responding to members' questions.

7. EXPANSION OF CITIZEN SERVICE ACCESS CHANNELS

The presentation and accompanying report advised Members of the development of a pilot scheme providing an additional facility to allow residents to access a set of council services via digital television and mobile telephones.

Officers highlighted the different options through which individuals may access Caerphilly County Borough Council services and information in a cost-effective manner. A practical demonstration of the digital TV service was given. Members were asked to note this service would be a cut-down version of existing website services, and it would be maintained in the same way.

Members sought information regarding the costs of supplying the service, the availability of the service to residents and the tie-in period with Kirklees Council for the service contract.

Officers advised Kirklees Council, as the owner and manager of the facility, were investigating the extension of the service to customers with a 'Freeview' TV service, in addition to the existing digital/satellite users. The cost and availability for mobile phone customers was anticipated to improve with advances in technology.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the content of this report.

8. Bereavement Charges

The report responded to a request by Members on the policy of charging for the interment of children ranging from stillborn to thirteen years of age.

Members thanked officers for the report and clarified the costs with officers, in comparison with neighbouring authorities. Members were asked to note that the service and costs had been reviewed and agreed by the Bereavement Task and Finish Group; in addition a report had been presented to Cabinet in July and October 2008. Fees were reviewed every two years and the next review was due in the next financial year.

Members raised concern at any charges being imposed for interment of children under the age of thirteen and asked that this concern be taken into consideration at the next review.

In closing confirmation was received from officers regarding the terms and conditions relating to child plots and the breakdown of costs involved with the issue of permits. Members were asked to note only three cemeteries offered areas designated specifically for children.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the content of this report.

9. REVIEW OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

A report with revised paragraph numbering was circulated at the meeting.

The report sought Members recommend to Council to make changes to the Council's Constitution in order to improve working practices and to ensure the county borough was in line with other local authorities. Officers confirmed the document had been widely circulated as part of the consultation process and all comments had been included within the report, for members to consider. Any additional comments arising from the Scrutiny Committee would be reported to Cabinet and Council.

Members discussed the report in detail, asking questions of officers where necessary. Members gave comments, summarised as follows:

Questions By Members

- (i) several mixed views were voiced as to whether to delete the word 'substantially' in appendix item number 3.5.1.3 (c). However all members agreed on the need to stop repetitive questioning.
- (ii) Members queried whether a question should be disallowed exclusively on the issue of expenditure. However it was acknowledged that this exclusion would be used sparingly.
- (iii) the need to include the word 'inaccurate' in appendix item number 3.5.1.3 (b) was raised.
- (iv) the need for an electronic link with council papers to access both questions and answers was raised.
- (v) agreement was given to the inclusion of the additional rejection reason, "it relates to information that is readily available in a Report submitted to Cabinet or Scrutiny previously, in which case the Member will be advised of the date of the relevant Report"

Motions On Notice

- (vi) no recommendation was made due to a lack of agreement as to the way the process should be streamlined. Some members believed the motion should go to Council as part of the democratic process and remove the Scrutiny Committee completely. However others believed the debate was part of the Scrutiny Committee's role.

Officers asked members to note that executive decisions would require a referral to Cabinet.

Petitions

- (vii) general agreement was voiced that a petition should consist of a minimum of 10 signatories.

Protocol On Elected Members Rights Of Access To Information

- (viii) agreement was given to the proposed changes and a request for an additional amendment to reflect member etiquette when a request for assistance is received by a constituent outside the member's ward boundary.

Scheme Of Delegation

- (ix) general agreement to the proposed changes, subject to the insertion of the phrase "in the absence of" in appendix item number 3.5.5.6.

Members of the Scrutiny Committee agreed that due to the differing views given, that officers were to produce a further detailed report to be presented to Cabinet and Council for consideration.

10. BUDGET MONITORING 2009/10 – MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES

The report gave information relating to the projected outturn on Members' Allowances for 2009/2010, based upon expenditure for the first six months of the year.

Members were reminded of Council's decision at the meeting held on 28th April 2009 where members determined that their scheme of allowances and expenses would not be increased for 2009/10. Officers advised this surplus, if unused before the end of the financial year, would be used to address overspends or returned to the Council's balances.

Members agreed that the money should be used for good causes and a debate regarding which service and/or charity should benefit followed. A member moved that a report be presented to Council, recommending that the money be given to the current Mayor's charity, Cancer Research Wales. By a show of hands, this was agreed. Officers advised members that this was an executive decision that required referral to Cabinet.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the content of the report and recommended to Cabinet that savings made from the members' allowances and expenses budget for 2009/10, be given to the Mayor's charity, Cancer Research Wales.

11. INFORMATION ITEMS

The Committee received and noted the following items for information:

- (1) The Provision of a Parenting Programme;
- (2) The Provision of an Accommodation Officer;
- (3) The Provision of Laundry and Dry Cleaning Services;
- (4) Supply of Air Conditioning Maintenance for IT Services;
- (5) Provision of CCTV Maintenance.

12. REQUESTS FOR REPORTS TO BE INCLUDED ON THE NEXT AVAILABLE AGENDA

The following requests for reports were received:

- (1) Councillor D.T. Davies reminded the Scrutiny Committee that quarterly reports should be tabled on Vacancy Management and Job Evaluation.
- (2) Councillor G. Jones asked for report on the outstanding Outcome Agreements. Officers gave a verbal update and advised a full report will be brought before the Scrutiny Committee in the new year.

The meeting closed at 7.57 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 19th January 2010, they were signed by the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN