



SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP GROUP

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON WEDNESDAY, 29TH OCTOBER 2014 AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor H. David – Chair

Councillors:

Miss L. Ackerman, Mrs E. Aldworth, Mrs P. Cook, D.T. Davies, D. Havard, C. Mann, S. Morgan, and D. Rees.

Together with:

C. Burns (Interim Chief Executive), T. Maher (Assistant Director Planning & Strategy), N. Scammell (Acting Director of Corporate Services and Section 151 Officer), D. Street (Corporate Director of Social Services), A. Price (Interim Deputy Monitoring Officer), J. Jones (Democratic Services Manager) and C. Forbes-Thompson (Scrutiny Research Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors, W. David and J. Pritchard.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

3. MINUTES – 25TH SEPTEMBER 2014

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Scrutiny Leadership Group meeting held on 25th September 2014 (minute nos. 1 - 6) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

4. DRAFT CABINET BUDGET STRATEGY – VERBAL REPORT

The Chair welcomed CMT to their first meeting of Scrutiny Leadership Group and invited Mr C Burns to outline his report. Mr Burns stated that the reason for their attendance was to explore with SLG the consultation on the draft budget following the report to Cabinet this week.

Members were reminded that the budget cuts discussed by scrutiny to date were unpalatable but would be less painful compared to the anticipated budget settlement for the next few years. There is no indication from Welsh Government as to the likely financial settlements after 2015/16 due to next years general election. Regardless, it was important to plan for future years and the assumption was similar budget cuts would continue in the medium term. Therefore, the MTFP assumed annual cuts of 4.5% for 2016/17 and 2017/18 and in the context of continued protection for schools budgets and increasing demand for social services this could result in a 20% reduction in the Council's total budget. Therefore, it was prudent to start planning for the medium term as some budget cuts and service changes need a long lead in time to be achieved.

The Members seminar planned for Monday 3rd November would be an opportunity for members to consider possible strategies for achieving the required savings before individual scrutiny committees explore these options further. Mr Burns paid credit to the consultation carried out this year and the commitment of scrutiny committees in helping to identify £12.5m of possible cuts with £8m not affecting frontline services. The majority of the proposals have already been discussed at scrutiny but some additional proposals were added when the actual level Welsh Government settlement was known. For some scrutiny committees the consultation on the budget cuts can be considered as part of the normal round of meetings and included on the agendas, however, for others such as Regeneration & Environment additional special meetings would be arranged. It was suggested that Directors meet with Chairs to determine issues for forward work programmes and if there is a requirement for special meetings.

Following consideration by scrutiny committees a second seminar will be arranged in the new year in order to find an estimated £25m of savings for 2016/17 and 2017/18. The aim is to find savings by reducing rather than stopping services, reducing administration and back office costs, working with community organisations, considering social enterprise or community trust service delivery models and collaborations with partners. However, the level of cuts mean that some services will be affected, therefore, scrutiny committees are asked to consider all proposals carefully and where members are reluctant to agree to proposals alternatives are suggested as the only other option is to increase council tax, which has already been proposed at 3.9%.

The Chair stated that he had attended Cabinet meeting to observe the report on the draft budget proposals and noted that although the report included comments from scrutiny he was disappointed that this was not reflected on during the meeting by Cabinet Members. Mr Burns stated that this had been a long process and there had been extensive discussion on the proposals, including the issues raised by scrutiny prior to Cabinet. He would ensure that feedback on the comments received would be passed on.

Members asked what the financial outturn was likely to be for this year. Mrs Scammell stated that all budget monitoring reports will go to scrutiny and indications are showing an under spend for the authority and savings already being made for the financial year 2015/16.

A Member asked if scrutiny could be given more savings options than are required in order to make informed choices. Mrs Scammell stated that the special scrutiny meetings were set up with that in mind, the overall proposals that had been taken through the Special Scrutiny Meetings were a higher total than that required for 15/16. The savings proposals agreed by scrutiny did not come close to the £12.8m savings target hence some partly supported savings were used. When this list was exhausted, savings not supported had to be selected.

Members asked what was proposed in respect of public engagement for the draft budget. Mr Burns stated that the second round of public consultation would be more detailed than the summer consultation. There were 1700 responses to the previous consultation, however, it was not known who had responded. That said, the responses were an indicator of public views and the next consultation round would be include the specific proposals agreed with Cabinet.

Members asked if the public would be informed of scrutiny involvement in the consultation on the draft budget proposals as it is important that the public know where scrutiny can have an impact. Mr Burns stated that the next public consultation round will explain what has happened and how the public can be involved further. He explained that there will be drop in sessions arranged across the county borough to get greater engagement.

Members suggested that the responses from the first round of consultation are categorised into themes and these are publicised. Mr Burns suggested that the results from the surveys could be used at the seminar planned on 3 November. Mrs Scammell stated that public responses would be included as Appendices in the final Cabinet report.

SLG asked that any public engagement be conducted in accordance with the public engagement principles.

Members asked how crosscutting issues would be examined, and suggested that task and finish groups be a way to address this. Mr Burns stated that he felt the existing scrutiny arrangements should be sufficient and the seminar approach should help Members understand cross cutting issues. The Chair asked that Members are reminded that this seminar is crucial in terms of the budget consultation in order to ensure that attendance is as high as possible. Mr Burns agreed to circulate another email and background papers in advance of the seminar.

Members asked that sufficient time is allowed when planning the special scrutiny meetings so that additional follow up meetings can be held if the scrutiny committee wishes to have additional information reported back for further discussion.

Members asked that reports would include community impact assessments; Mr Burns confirmed that all proposals will include impact assessments but it would be difficult to find proposals that don't have some impact.

The Chair thanked CMT for their attendance and summarised the importance of Members understanding the impact of budget cuts and outcome of the public consultation process. He also requested the outcome of the public consultation is published. CMT left the meeting at this point.

5. SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT ACTION PLAN UPDATE

Mr Jones reminded members of the work undertaken as a result of the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan in the last 12 months. The SIAP was broken down into three themes, Training and Development, Scrutiny Development and Organisation, Performance Management and Forward Work Programmes.

At the last meeting of SLG Members were asked to consider the legacy of the Gwent Scrutiny Challenge and nominated themselves to take part in the peer evaluation teams. Mrs Forbes-Thompson has since met with Gwent colleagues and Centre for Public Scrutiny to make arrangements and it is planned to carry out the first observations before Christmas.

The majority of the actions are completed, the training for Cabinet Members and the Management Network was carried out as planned and the scrutiny booklet is completed and included with the report for information. Action 14 refers to co-option arrangements and a report has been drafted and will need to be circulated for consultation with stakeholders and CMT. Action 18 refers to performance management scrutiny arrangements and a report has been drafted and will come forward shortly. Finally the final task for action 18 relates to training for Members, which was carried out last week.

The Chair referred to the planned peer review and a recent request by Chair of Audit Committee for an internal observation of his chairing skills by Mrs C Forbes-Thompson. Mr Jones stated that the Chair of Audit had asked for this to help improve his performance and met up afterwards to receive feedback. The Chair of Policy and Resources asked if it would be possible for him to take part as well and Mrs Forbes-Thompson agreed to make arrangements.

A Member referred to the terms of reference for the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee included in the scrutiny booklet, which does not include Communities First as a responsibility of the scrutiny committee. It was clarified that these were the terms of reference from the Council's constitution, Mrs Price agreed to refer to Gail Williams.

Members asked when the reports that have been drafted will come forward for discussion, Mr Jones stated that the co-opted report will require consultation with stakeholders in order to ensure that co-optees who have given their valuable support over many years are able to comment on any proposals. The report on performance management will come forward, hopefully to the next meeting of SLG.

A Member asked how the accountability of co-opted members is ensured and what voting rights they have. Mr Jones clarified the difference between statutory education co-opted members who have voting rights on education matters and non voting co-opted members, he stated that the accountability issue is part of the reason for reviewing non-voting co-optees.

Members noted the report.

6. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMMES

Mrs C Forbes-Thompson updated Members with requested changes to the draft forward work programmes. A Member made reference to a request for a report on school governors and police checks, it was clarified that this was made at Audit committee and the request should be made through the Chair of Education for Life Scrutiny Committee. Members asked for clarity of the role of scrutiny and schools which was raised at the Gwent Scrutiny Challenge, Mrs Price confirmed that a report is being drafted and will come forward giving advice on this issue.

A Member made reference to the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny committee forward work programme and stated that it is possible that the Gwent Trading Standards report will be deferred.

Mrs Forbes-Thompson updated SLG with outstanding and new requests for reports from Members and the public, as follows:

Education for Life

Members noted the request for a report on school uniforms and advice from officers, SLG agreed that this is a school issue, however in view of the absence of the Chair and Vice Chair asked that this be deferred.

Mrs Forbes-Thompson updated Members with a request from a member of the public to discuss a school inspection outcome; SLG did not think it was appropriate for scrutiny committee to examine an individual school, which is the responsibility of the governing body. Members asked that appropriate advice be given on the complaints process. In addition that the member of the public is invited to attend scrutiny committee when school improvement is on the agenda. Members also asked that the contact with the member of the public should be carried out in person if possible.

Health Social Care & Wellbeing

A report on the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has been requested, SLG noted that the Director will discuss with the Member concerned. SLG also noted a report has been requested on Community Mental Health Teams and Officers will prepare and bring forward in due course.

Regeneration and Environment

SLG noted the comments in respect of the town centre car parking report request and asked that a copy of the reports to Bargoed Town Centre Management Group and Cabinet are forwarded to the Member in order to ascertain if this is sufficient or if further information is required.

In respect of Bargoed Cinema, SLG noted the updated information and that the outcome of the procurement process will be known in May 2012, it was confirmed that the outcome will determine the next steps. SLG agreed to await the outcome of the procurement process.

Members noted the current status of the public conveniences report, which is pending awaiting Welsh Government response to consultation. SLG also noted the full response to the request for a report on wildflower planting and asked that the Member is contacted to determine if they are satisfied with the response to delete the request.

Policy and Resources

Members noted that the request for a report on the surveillance policy would be discussed by the Member concerned and the Director of Corporate Services. It was agreed that this was an important issue that needed to be brought to a conclusion.

Officers have made enquiries in respect of the report requested on compulsory purchase orders for empty properties but have not been able to identify the scheme referred to, officers will contact the Member concerned to clarify the details. SLG noted the action taken.

SLG noted that that officers have contacted the Member in respect of the request on derelict and empty buildings, it was noted however that the Council doesn't hold a register of empty properties and it would therefore be difficult to produce a report.

Members noted that a report had been requested following a complaint from a member of the public on housing benefit advice and information. It was noted that the report requested was in relation to the 'bedroom tax'. SLG were informed that the request had been referred to Officers for a response. The complainant has been kept advised of this and the option to submit a request to scrutiny should the response be inadequate.

The meeting closed at 7.42 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 29th October 2014 they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR