

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE AND PARTNERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held at County Hall, Northallerton on 15 November 2010.

PRESENT:-

County Councillor Liz Casling in the Chair.

County Councillors Val Arnold, Karl Arthur, Phillip Barrett, Neville Huxtable, David Ireton, David Jeffels, John McCartney, Stephen Shaw, Brian Simpson and Geoff Webber.

In attendance:-

Executive Member County Councillor Carl Les.

Officers:-

Justine Brooksbank (Assistant Chief Executive (Human Resources & Organisational Development)), Helen Edwards (Head of Communications), Gary Fielding (Assistant Chief Executive (Policy, Performance & Partnerships)), Jackie Harvey (Legal & Democratic Services), Neil Irving (Head of Policy & Performance), John Moore (Corporate Director, Finance & Central Services).

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors Bernard Bateman and Andrew Lee.

COPIES OF ALL DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED ARE IN THE MINUTE BOOK

10. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2010, having been printed and circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

11. PUBLIC QUESTIONS OR STATEMENTS

There were no public questions or statements to be put to the Committee.

12. EXECUTIVE MEMBER'S UPDATE – VERBAL REPORT OF COUNTY COUNCILLOR CARL LES

CONSIDERED –

The verbal report of County Councillor Carl Les, to inform the Corporate & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee of some of the recent issues considered by the Executive since the last meeting of this Committee, and also to highlight some of the key issues and priorities identified for the coming months.

Recent significant issues were reported by Councillor Les as being:

- the reduction in the number of Overview & Scrutiny Committees;

- the reduction in Executive positions;
- the change of government, leading to the Emergency Budget and the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR);
- the demise of the Audit Commission;
- the updated Code of Corporate Governance (19 October 2010);
- the deployment of new software for corporate complaints capture.

Councillor Les also highlighted items contained in the Forward Plan as being:

- Council Plan;
- Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS);
- Q2 out-turn;
- Parish Charter;
- Review of Contract, Financial and Property Procedure Rules.
- Sustainable Communities Strategy.

Future issues were identified by Councillor Les as being:

- CSR in total;
- Front-loading of CSR;
- Localism Bill (and what it might contain);
- 25% cut = 75% remaining;
- Maintaining performance – less for less, same for less, more for less?;
- Maintaining good communications with clients, staff, partners and Members.

With regard to the Parish Charter, a Member took the view that this would place greater emphasis on the responsibilities of Parish Councils which he felt would, in turn, lead to stronger and more beneficial relationships with them. Another Member, who had been a member of this Committee's predecessor, the Communications Overview & Scrutiny Committee, stated that that Committee had submitted a proposal to the Executive for a Parish Council Champion to be established but that the matter was yet to be considered by the Executive (in January 2011).

RESOLVED –

That the Executive Member's verbal report be noted.

13. CORPORATE SERVICES BUDGET – BUDGET SAVINGS

CONSIDERED –

The joint report of the Chief Executive and the Corporate Director, Finance & Central Services, to advise Members of the Corporate & Partnership Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the latest proposals for delivery of the Chief Executive's Group (CEG) and Finance & Central Services (FCS) contributions towards the County Council's required budget savings from 2010/11 to 2014/15.

John Moore, Corporate Director, Finance & Central Services introduced the report, stating that Paper A1 outlined the situation from June until the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) and Paper A2 outlined the 'best guess' as to the position post-CSR.

Mr Moore informed Members that the projected cuts were 'front loaded', over half of which would fall due in the first year of the four year plan.

Gary Fielding, Assistant Chief Executive (Policy, Performance & Partnerships), stated that a similar report format would be taken to all scrutiny committees across all the directorates, seeking Members' views.

In response to a query, Mr Moore explained that the figures in Paper A2 reflected the reduction in grant funding, not in total spend, ie there would be a 27% loss of grant which equates to 14-15% loss of spend.

With regard to page 8 of the report concerning officer groups, a Member voiced concern as to the independence of scrutiny support under the proposed restructure. Gary Fielding responded that the independence of the support function would be preserved.

A Member queried what functions the Communications Team was responsible for. Helen Edwards explained that the work of the Team encompasses NYTimes; press issues; internal communication with staff and Members; the website and marketing.

In a discussion regarding budget targets, Gary Fielding stated there was sometimes a misconception that Chief Executives' Group costs were purely related to central functions whilst large elements were either frontline (e.g. Customer Services Centre) or directly influenced by the workloads of directorates.. Mr Fielding explained that for example HR and Legal Services in particular face considerable pressure in respect of tribunals and other issues. Efforts were being made however to focus savings on 'back office' roles and to protect the frontline / customer influenced areas as much as possible.

The Chairman asked whether Freedom of Information (FOI) requests fall into this domain. Mr Fielding confirmed that this does fall within the remit of Legal Services and does impact on both CEG and FCS. Mr Moore explained that the audit section, Veritau (the internal audit provider) has 3 full time staff working solely on FOI matters for the County Council.

A Member queried whether the reductions in scrutiny support staff was evidence of further reductions in scrutiny committees, given that these had already recently been reduced in number. Mr Fielding explained that the proposed reductions related to support staff for scrutiny committees; there were no proposals to further reduce the number of scrutiny committees.

Discussion followed regarding the provision of IT equipment to Members, with concerns being raised about the cost implications. Mr Moore responded that whilst costs had to be taken into consideration, the most cost-effective option was to provide and maintain a standardised, corporate IT 'kit', stating that this provision process had almost been completed.

A Member voiced the view that Members themselves should share the burden, particularly in relation to Members' expenses, including meal provision and mileage claims, suggesting that the rate commonly applied elsewhere for the latter is 40p per mile, rather than the 48.5p per mile that Members currently receive. He further queried whether the number of elected Members serving the Council should be reviewed, given the related need for support staff. Mr Moore responded to the point on staff mileage, stating that this was being reviewed for staff, with a range of proposals being put to the Management Board in December 2010, which could be implemented in April 2011 if approved. He further clarified that the current mileage rate for officers was 47p per mile. Mr Fielding commented further that an Independent Remuneration Panel is responsible for setting Members' expenses, and a link to officer's rates was a possible outcome.

Councillor Les commented that a FOI request had been received in respect of Members' expenses and that discussions were ongoing on the topic of provision of meals for Members, with the suggestion that Members utilise the staff restaurant rather than have a meal provided for them in the Members' Dining Room. He was happy to be guided by the Committee in this regard.

Members agreed that steps should be taken to reduce the costs in relation to their roles, being keen to shoulder their share of the responsibility to reduce the Council's expenditure. In this regard, a Member asked whether they could be provided with an overview on the costs in respect of elected Members.

Regarding Accountancy trainees, Mr Moore explained that there was now a need to manage with what staff they have in this area for the next few years, due to financial constraints.

In respect of maintenance costs, Mr Moore explained that it was highly likely that there would be no planned maintenance projects for the next year, with efforts being concentrated on keeping buildings 'dry and windproof' only. The likelihood of repercussions on taking this course of action was accepted as an unavoidable inevitability.

A Member queried how smallholdings held in the Council's property portfolio were being sold. Mr Moore stated that it was preferable to sell them piecemeal rather than as a whole, with the intention being to reduce recurring maintenance/improvement expenditure. Councillor Les commented that the disposal project had been successful over the past 10 years; information on this would be circulated to the Committee.

To conclude, Ray Busby, Scrutiny Support Officer, summarised the discussions:

- To identify what areas of service should/should not be reviewed;
- Seek reassurance that HR, Legal Services and Financial Services are equipped to cope with the future challenges;
- Review Members' expenses and Members' responsibility for making savings;
- Reducing expenditure wherever there is opportunity to do so.

The Chairman thanked Mr Moore and Mr Fielding for their report. Mr Moore confirmed that he would look into the request for details of Members' costs.

RESOLVED –

That feedback on the Committee's views on the savings proposals for CEG and FCS as identified in Papers B and C of the report be provided to the Budget Workshop scheduled for 10 December 2010.

14. REPORT ON THE FUTURE OPTIONS FOR NY TIMES

CONSIDERED –

The Report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Human Resources & Organisational Development), to outline current issues surrounding council newspapers and possible future options for communication with residents, including NYTimes.

Executive Member, County Councillor Carl Les introduced the report, stating that he was a supporter of NYTimes, but was not 'wedded' to it in its current format, being aware that IT was becoming more widely used. Councillor Les stated that he valued Members' opinions on how they could influence change in this arena.

Helen Edwards, Head of Communications, showed a powerpoint presentation outlining different media circulations and areas. In response to a Member's query, Ms Edwards explained that there were around 17-20 different newspapers/publications being produced and distributed across the county.

Ms Edwards circulated a letter from Councillor Les, on behalf of the authority, which had recently been sent to CLG, in response to the Publicity Code consultation.

Additionally, a table of the summary costs of the various options in relation to NYTimes was also provided to Members for their consideration.

Members then addressed the key questions detailed in the presentation, the first of which was whether the Council should keep residents informed about its services and actions. Members agreed that the Council should do so, feeling that this was an implicit responsibility.

The possibility of reducing the number of times per year that NYTimes was published was raised by a Member. Ms Edwards responded that it was an option to be considered but felt it was important that the information remained current, hence its newspaper format. This would not be the case if it were only produced, say, on a quarterly basis, which would possibly be more suitably produced in a magazine format. It was queried whether the change of format would affect the cost of the publication. Ms Edwards responded that this could possibly be the case.

A Member commented that as some information which needed to be published would not sit with quarterly publication, this would inevitably mean that other means of publishing some information would be required. The Member felt that more information should possibly be made available on the Council's website.

Another Member asked whether a survey of readership numbers had been carried out, feeling that there were probably a large number of households who did not even read the NYTimes. Ms Edwards responded that there had been a limited number of responses to such a survey but that the NYTimes in its current form had been created in response to public opinion as to how they wanted to receive information from the Council. The Member agreed that it was necessary to find a solution to how to provide the information to the public, but did not feel that the current publication was the way forward.

A Member expressed the view that, although Option B could be implemented at little cost, he did not feel that this would achieve what was needed. He stated that if there was a statutory need for printed information to be provided, a possible solution may be to have leaflets in public places such as libraries, which would eradicate the need for distribution and its related costs. The Member felt that efforts should be made to identify those who wanted to receive such information and possibly to produce a mailing list for those persons, believing that there would be a high percentage of the public who did not want to receive it. Ms Edwards acknowledged this view but stated that this approach would not meet the Council's statutory requirement in respect of public notices, eg road closures.

In discussion, Members generally agreed that the frequency of publications should be reduced, with the consensus being that 3-4 times per year would be the best way forward. It was noted and accepted by Members that this approach would mean there would still be a need for public notices to be published elsewhere. With this in mind, it was queried what the related costs were for this process, and also for advertising staff vacancies, prior to their inclusion in the current version of NYTimes. Justine Brooksbank, Assistant Chief Executive (HR and Organisational Development), responded that the need for staff advertisements in newspapers and similar media had been vastly reduced by the increase in online job searching. Ms Edwards commented that all the required information in relation to the costs of statutory notices had not, as yet, been captured.

Members agreed at this point that a mixture of options B (removal of NYTimes), C (fewer pages) or D (less frequent publication) in the table appeared to be the most favoured options. Councillor Les asked for Members' views on option F (use of local newspapers). Justine Brooksbank outlined this option to Members, stating that the proposal was for the Council to be given full editorial control over a number of pages.

Advertising and statutory notices would be tied in to the package. It would also be possible to tailor the different editions to meet local need and content. Members agreed that there was some merit to the option, which should be given further consideration.

The Chairman concluded that options C, D and F were the preferred options of the Committee for further consideration, noting that further information would be required before a substantive response were possible.

RESOLVED -

That the views of the Corporate & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the progress of the review of NYTimes be noted.

15. ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE MONITORING OF PARTNERSHIPS

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Scrutiny & Corporate Performance, informing Members of the Corporate & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee of the conclusions of their Group Spokespersons on how the Committee might approach a review of partnerships.

Neil Irving, Head of Policy & Partnerships, introduced the report, stating that great changes would be forthcoming in this area, both government and budget driven. It was not clear at this stage what would come out of the review, but efforts were being made to avoid duplication of work.

RESOLVED –

That the Corporate & Partnerships Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviews, in the second half of 2011, the annual report on partnership monitoring arrangements and any subsequent decisions taken by the Executive, prior to considering what additional work may be required.

16. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

CONSIDERED –

The report of the Head of Scrutiny & Corporate Performance.

Ray Busby introduced the report, asking firstly for volunteers to form a Task Group to look at Access to Services and the Big Society. Members agreed that this was an important area of work.

RESOLVED –

That:

- (a) the report be noted;
- (b) the work programme and forward plan be agreed;
- (c) County Councillors Val Arnold, Liz Casling, David Jeffels, John McCartney, Brian Simpson and Geoff Webber form a task group to progress an Access to Services review based on the draft project plan appended to the report.

17. SUCH OTHER BUSINESS AS, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIRMAN, SHOULD,

BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, BE CONSIDERED AS A MATTER OF URGENCY

There was no urgent business to consider.

JAH/ALJ