

Economy and Business Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 28th November, 2011
6.00 - 7.40 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Garth Barnes, Tim Cooper, Paul Massey (Deputy Chair), Paul McLain, Malcolm Stennett (Chair), Lloyd Surgenor, Pat Thornton, Andrew Wall and Jon Walklett
Co-optees:	
Also in attendance:	Councillor Steve Jordan and Councillor Colin Hay
Apologies:	Councillor Peter Jeffries

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Jeffries.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None declared.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting of 19 September 2011 were approved as a correct record.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS

None received.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

None.

6. BRIEFING FROM CABINET MEMBERS

The Leader updated members on two issues as requested by the chair.

Regarding the New Homes Bonus, he advised that there were no restrictions in terms of its usage and indeed other districts in Gloucestershire had included it in their base budget. It was his understanding that after 2012/13, the New Homes Bonus will be included in the overall government settlement and therefore would not be easily identifiable. The Cabinet had taken the view to spend the funding on minor environmental improvements and to give the town an economic boost by encouraging bids which would promote Cheltenham.

Discussions were currently underway at county level regarding future infrastructure spending and whether authorities across Gloucestershire should be working together to jointly allocate available funding.

The chair still had concerns that the decision to spend the New Homes Bonus in this way seemed to go against the government's original intention that the funding was to improve areas which had suffered from new building. Therefore if funding had been allocated as a result of the North Place development for example, residents could be concerned if it was subsequently spent in a completely different area of the town.

In response, the Leader confirmed that he was totally confident in their decision and that any challenge could be defended. There were no restrictions unlike section 106 agreements which were related to a specific development and site. The Director Resources confirmed this and said the exact wording from government would be included in the budget report.

The Leader advised that Gloucestershire First, now operating as the Local Enterprise Partnership, was keen to maintain the relationships with the district councils. As the majority of their funding was now provided by the county council, GCC were currently carrying out a economic development review. He agreed to approach their chief executive, David Owen, to see whether he would be available to attend the committee in January or March 2012. Gloucestershire First had recently produced a performance report and the Leader agreed to circulate that to members.

7. ENSURING BEST VALUE FROM MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS

The Cabinet Member Corporate Services introduced the report. At the Economy and Business Improvement Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on the 23 May 2011, Members had asked for a Value for Money Review on the use of mobile technology within the council. The review had resulted in;

- confirming that the council's contract for the supply and operation of its mobile communication devices remains competitive
- identifying additional efficiency and financial savings
- the revising of the Mobile Phone principles and protocol

He highlighted that the appendix 2, Quarterly Scenario had been included in error in the papers for this meeting and should be disregarded.

In the discussions that followed, there were concerns regarding the significant number of phones where there was zero usage. Members were advised that these were often for health and safety reasons or to enable emergency contact to be made but it was suggested that staff could use their own mobile phone in that situation. There was also a significant risk that without regular checks, the phone may not be charged or fully functional when it was required. In response, officers advised that the current mobile phone policy excluded the option of use of personal phones but it was appropriate to revisit this and also include some type of regular assurance checks.

Members were reassured that there was no automatic qualification for having a mobile phone or Blackberry and every request had to be justified in terms of business need.

A member asked whether their own ICT requirements could be better satisfied through a Blackberry rather than a council laptop which was currently issued to members. The Cabinet Member Corporate Services advised that ICT support for members was currently being reviewed and a seminar was being planned in the next two months to understand how members work and how their needs could best be satisfied

Another member highlighted the large gap between rental usage and call charges which seemed to suggest that there were too many phones being allocated. There was also a challenge regarding whether a Pay as you Go tariff would be cheaper as the report seemed to suggest this would be more expensive.

In response officers advised that the mobile phone protocol does not normally allow Pay as you Go but this would be reviewed.

In response to further questions, officers advised that quite a number of phones had been withdrawn from officers as a result of this review and the review had recorded a small number of phones had been lost or damaged, although no Blackberries had been lost.

Members were advised that phones were on a two-year contract so when a member of staff left and the contract was still running, a decision was taken on whether to pass on the phone to another member of staff or cancel the contract. Members suggested that given the significant number of phones, the council should be looking to adopt a more flexible contract where there was effectively a single contract for all the phones. In response, officers advised that the contract was due for review in the New Year and the council's Procurement Officer would be working to negotiate the optimum contract to meet the council's needs.

In response to a question, members were advised that the phones for Cheltenham Festivals and Cheltenham Borough Homes referred to in paragraph 3.11 of the report were administered by the council. A member expressed concern that if the phones were lost and key data was put at risk, the council could be legally responsible. Officers agreed to review this.

The Director Resources was keen to point out to members that he had a Blackberry and the benefits of having one. Although he did not make a huge amount of calls, it enabled him to manage his e-mails, his diary and be in contact outside office hours. In that respect it was an invaluable tool and he received no reimbursement from the council for his time spent using it which was frequently in the evenings, early mornings and at weekends. In the new commissioning structure it was essential that senior managers across the organisation could keep in touch and manage workloads effectively.

The chair concluded that it had been a very worthwhile exercise and he hoped that the information presented satisfied both the committee and members of the public who had challenged the usage of mobile communications.

Resolved that a further report be brought back to members in six months time to include consideration being given to staff using their own

personal phones, figures on turnover of phones, multi-phone contracts and updates on all the issues that had been raised during this meeting.

8. QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Strategy and Engagement Manager introduced his report which set out the corporate performance of the organisation at the end of the second quarter 2011-12. Members were invited to make any comments and observations in order that Cabinet can agree the report at its meeting on 6 December 2011.

The Leader emphasised that the report represented the position as at the end of September 2011. He was pleased to report that the budget gap for 2011/12 reported under the amber milestones, had now been closed. There was also a national trend of rising unemployment which was also apparent in Cheltenham although exact figures were not available.

In response to questions from members, officers gave the following responses:

- Regarding the 95% appraisal return, there were now only three people where appraisals were outstanding and in each case there were good reasons why they had not been done.
- Regarding the proportion of planning decisions upheld on appeal, officers advised that a one-off issue at a particular site had skewed the figures.
- The technical problems at the Tourist Information Centre had been due to the website and the loss of the skill and expertise of a key member of staff. The content management system had been reviewed and the staffing issues were being addressed.
- A member questioned how many garden waste bins had been sold as a result of the promotional campaign referred to on page 20 of the report and hence had it been a good use of the additional spend. The Leader advised that the costs of the campaign had been covered in the existing marketing budget and so it was not an additional spend. He agreed to provide the figures requested to members
- Regarding the traffic modelling referred to under the amber milestones, the Leader advised that the county council were working on a revised bid which could be submitted to government and this bid would cover Boots Corner as well as sites in Gloucester.
- Regarding the problems with user assessment testing at the Forest for the GO project, the strategic director advised that user testing had raised a number of errors which had been investigated and the system was now due to go live at the Forest next week.

The chair thanked members for their input.

Resolved to note the report and request further information on the take-up of green waste bins following the promotional campaign be circulated to members.

9. COMMISSIONING PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Cabinet Member Corporate Services introduced the update report on Strategic Commissioning which had been requested by the committee.

Members were reminded that Council had agreed the ambition of leading the community by taking a commissioning approach by April 2012. This would be driven by the needs of people and place, in order to improve wellbeing, the economy and the environment, and use resources efficiently and effectively. During the last six months, the council had made great progress in turning its ambition into reality which was set out in the report.

In his introduction, he referred to paragraph 3.3.1 and the work of the cross party member group which had now been disbanded. Of their original objectives, the scrutiny review was now taking forward the definitions of the scrutiny process for a commissioned service. The other important question was how the decision was made on which area should be next for the commissioning approach. As this decision had to be taken in the context of the corporate plan and available resources, he had asked the Group Leaders to consider this with advice from the Director Commissioning and the Chief Executive. He did not believe a formula approach could be adopted and the decision must be made on what was right for the situation which applied at that time.

The chair suggested that future reports should give details of comparative costs of a service before and after commissioning, success measures and whether the council had made any profit on services they had taken on.

The Cabinet Member Corporate Services was keen to emphasise that the council was a non profit-making organisation and although finance was a very important factor, the outcomes being delivered from the commissioned service were equally important success measures. Resilience was also a key factor in ensuring that the provision of the service was sustainable.

Councillor Cooper was concerned that the cross-party member working group had been disbanded. He felt strongly that there should be member involvement in the commissioning programme at a strategic and planning level. There did not appear to be a plan and although he had requested this, it had not been provided to him. He questioned the difference between a departmental review and a commissioning exercise as the review of built environment seemed to be the former and there had been no changes as a result.

In response the Cabinet Member Corporate Services said that the way in which the council now does business follows a commissioning approach. This was being rolled out across the authority and there would be an ongoing learning process. As he had already indicated the Group Leaders would be responsible for agreeing the high level strategic plan for future commissioning.

The Director Commissioning said that in her experience the review of Built Environment had been very different to any review she had previously been involved in. It had started by defining outcomes and had consulted with stakeholders including a full day session with them. The review had concluded that in-house provision was best at this time but this would be retested in 2013. A service specification was currently being written for Built Environment to specify the outcomes that should be delivered from the service. This was a completely different approach and would be implemented on 1 April 2012 once agreed by the member working group. Traditionally such reviews had started with the mindset that the council was the best option for providing the service. In the commissioning process there was no such assumption.

Councillor Wall questioned how successful the programme had actually been. He was concerned that there was no strategic plan and if a key benefit of the

commissioning programme was to develop the marketplace, as a member he couldn't see what the council was doing to achieve that. The programme highlight report circulated with the papers indicated an amber status for developing knowledge and skills for members and employees and he found that a concern. The programme also needed to define its critical success factors.

Councillor McLain questioned why the built environment review had been started given the full knowledge that the government plans for legislation on planning fees were still uncertain. He also suggested that the Local Authority Company was joint working and not commissioning. He was concerned about the reduction in the scope of the future work on the Leisure and Culture review. It appeared to be concentrating on areas such as catering at the Town Hall whereas the obvious target for the commissioning approach was in the provision of leisure services. He was happy to support the commissioning programme but felt it was important to focus on the right things.

The Cabinet Member Corporate Services acknowledged that commissioning had been a learning process and both the built environment and the leisure and culture review had been heavy on resources and time. Therefore it was important that learning points from these were incorporated into future plans. The built environment review had been necessary because of the changes coming through and had been carried out in a commissioning way. The council was already reaping the benefits of the efficiency savings that had been made as a result of the systems thinking exercise. The members' skills audit was really important and he encouraged members to complete it if they had not done so already. Quite a lot of work had been done already in developing the marketplace particularly in working with the third sector. Following the systems thinking exercise, it does become more apparent which delivery options might be suitable and therefore some soft market testing could be done at this stage. There would then be a decision point regarding which options would be explored in more detail.

In response to a challenge that this decision point should be more transparent, he reminded members that all commissioning projects were supported by a member working group where any member could challenge the outcomes or delivery options to be pursued. In addition overview and scrutiny committees could ask any commissioning project to come to a meeting and provide members with an opportunity to ask questions and challenge.

Councillor Massey welcomed the report as the first time members had been able to see such details on progress. He was pleased to see the diversity of options being looked at and encouraged by the range of delivery mechanisms. He welcomed a report in six months time to highlight further progress.

The chair commented on the lack of reference in the report to staff morale and requested that this be included in a future report. The report should set out the resource costs of carrying out the commissioning exercise and the impact on staff once implemented.

Resolved that a further report be brought back to the committee in six months time and members advise the Democratic Services Manager on any specific information they require to be in the report.

10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

Councillor Cooper introduced his scrutiny registration form which had been circulated with the agenda which suggested that the management of the Pittville Bridge project was a suitable topic for scrutiny. In his opinion it had not been well managed and he had concerns that future small projects could go down the same path if lessons were not learnt.

Members noted the officer advice that a post implementation review would be carried out and the results of this would then be communicated to this committee. They would then be in a position to assess whether they needed to carry out a review of project management for such projects and how any lessons should be communicated.

Councillor Massey referred to the suggestion listed on the agenda that the committee might scrutinise the economic results of the decision to replace the over bridge at J10 of the M5 at Piffs Elm. He considered this would only be of value if the Highways Agency were willing to attend and requested officers investigate this.

The future workplan was noted and the date of the next meeting was Monday 23 January 2012 at 6 pm.

Chairman