

## **SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD**

### **Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Leadership Board held on Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2009 at Telford Library, Southwater Square, Telford Town Centre**

**PRESENT:** Councillors D.R.W. White (Chairman), R. Aveley, J.A. Francis, A.A. Mackenzie, A.A. Meredith and H. Williams.

Councillor S. Bentley (Cabinet Member: Community Services)

**ALSO PRESENT:** Angie Astley (Interim Corporate Director: Community Services), Andrew Meredith (Customer Services Manager), Helen Ward (Customer Quality Manager), Sharon Smith (Borough Librarian), Lynn Brayne (Citizens Advice Bureau), Alison Smith (Scrutiny Manager), Stephanie Jones (Scrutiny Officer) and Phil Smith (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

#### **SLB-16      MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2009 be approved and signed as a correct record.

#### **SLB-17      APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE**

Councillor G.M. Green (Independent Group Co-optee)

#### **SLB-18      DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP**

None.

#### **SLB-19      THE CREDIT CRUNCH ADVICE CENTRE**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to Telford Library, which was the location of “First Point Telford” – an Advice Centre that had been set up by the Council (with partner organisations) to provide help to residents and businesses in the Borough to access services that would assist them in the current economic recession. The principle to establish an advice centre in the Town Centre had been made by Cabinet on 12 January 2009 (a copy of that report was attached to the agenda for information). At the last meeting the Board had expressed concern at the proposed costs for locating the advice centre in the shopping centre, and sought a meeting to scrutinise the proposals. Since then, a decision had been made to locate the Centre in the Library, which allayed the previous concerns over likely costs. “First Point” had opened on 23 February 2009, and this meeting therefore allowed Members the opportunity to see how the facility was operating, and the type of assistance that was being provided.

The Interim Corporate Director: Community Services and Customer Quality Manager reported that over 300 people had visited the Centre during its first two weeks of opening. Details of the services provided were circulated, and it was emphasised that the biggest benefit of First Point was in bringing a number of services and agencies together in a “one stop shop” which could provide a co-

ordinated solution for the customer. The services represented at “First Point” included the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Benefits, Affordable Warmth, Community Training, Family Information Service, and Housing Advice. Examples were given of the type of enquiry that had been received, and how the Advice Centre had been able to assist them. In relation to the CAB, Lynn Brayne reported that 75% of the people seen had been new to the Bureau. 32% of enquiries so far had related to benefits, 29% were debt related and 17% around employment issues. The latter was higher than usual, and perhaps reflected the deteriorating economic situation. The Customer Quality Manager added that work was currently being done to standardise the performance management and information data that was collected by the different agencies operating in “First Point”.

Members then asked a number of questions, including:

- from the enquiries received so far, what evidence was there that the economic downturn and credit crunch were having an impact?

Response – many benefits enquiries were from people who had been made redundant or had been put on short-time working, and who were trying to find out what they were entitled to claim.

- had there been any complaints from customers about having to pay the Town Centre parking charges?

Response – this had not been an issue, and the Library was open for longer hours than other Council buildings.

- what hours was the Advice Centre operating?

Response – it was open 50+ hours a week, Monday to Saturday – including Thursday evening and all day Saturday.

- would the provision of advice on community learning and training duplicate similar work that was going on at local community centres?

Response – “First Point” was supplementing the work undertaken in this area and had led to an increase in residents accessing the service. “First Point” was not seeking to undermine the work taking place at community centres.

- how was the Advice Centre being advertised?

Response – A Communications Plan had been prepared, and copies were circulated. This set out the key messages to be communicated and the strategy that was being followed. The Launch had included adverts on local radio, printed information handed out in the Town Centre and placed in Council buildings, and articles in the Insight magazine and the local press. Radio Shropshire had covered the opening of the Centre, and there was a promotional video on the Shropshire Star website. It was also hoped that the video would be placed on the Council website.

Members made a number of suggestions for publicising/advertising “First Point”, including parish magazines, doctors’ surgeries, children’s centres/nurseries and MPs surgeries. It was also suggested that letters being sent to people in arrears with council tax could include information about the Advice Centre and the help it could provide.

- what were the costs in setting-up the Advice Centre?

Response – the one-off cost for fitting-out the new facility in the Library (including the cost of relocating New College Learning Point) was £38,000. There were revenue costs of £66,000 to operate the Centre for a 12 month period, with an additional cost of £50,000 to open for longer hours.

In considering the information that had been provided, and the responses to questions, Members were impressed by the numbers of people accessing First Point within the first two weeks of it's operation; a total of 300 people. They were further impressed with the wide array of advice services on offer, and noted with approval the co-operation between the organisations participating in the scheme.

The Scrutiny Leadership Board felt that the general ambience of the Library setting presented a far more friendly and welcoming environment than either Civic or Darby offices could, and that this had probably contributed to the numbers of people accessing the service so far. Questions were asked about possible expansion of the role that libraries throughout the Borough could play in providing links to other Council services.

**RESOLVED – that Cabinet be recommended to:**

- (a) provide continual monitoring of the First Point advice centre to ensure that the appropriate range of services are provided to the public;**
- (b) consider providing a permanent point of contact for council services in the town centre vicinity;**
- (c) consider the use of library buildings to offer a first point of contact for Council services throughout the Borough; especially in areas where the library building is used on a part time basis.**

**SLB-20      SCRUTINY REVIEW SUGGESTIONS**

Members considered a suggestion that had been submitted by a member of the public relating to the process used by Plans Board when considering planning applications. The resident had attended a recent Plans Board meeting, and was of the view that the current procedures led to a situation that was potentially unjust because there was not an opportunity for all parties to speak or respond to questions.

After some discussion, Members felt that this particular suggestion constituted an individual complaint about the plans process and that it wasn't appropriate for scrutiny to consider it. However, Members did acknowledge that on the general point, many other local authorities allow public representation at Council meetings and that there should be a reconsideration of this policy by the Council. It was reported that a paper looking at wider issues of public involvement in

decision-making was being prepared, and that the Board's views could be incorporated into that document.

**RESOLVED** - that this issue be referred to the Council Constitution Committee for further consideration.

**SLB-21      CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE**

None

**SLB-22      DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was noted that the next scheduled meeting of the Board was on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2009.

The meeting ended at 7.23 p.m.

Chairman: .....

Date: .....