

TELFORD & WREKIN COUNCIL

SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD – 24 SEPTEMBER 2009

THE FORWARD PLAN

BRIEFING PAPER OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL SERVICES

1.0 PURPOSE

1.1 At the Scrutiny Leadership Board meeting on 23 June 2009, some Members expressed dissatisfaction with the Forward Plan, and it was agreed that a paper be brought back to the Board with suggestions for possible improvements in layout and content.

1.2 This briefing paper also provides information about the function and purpose of the Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

2.0 INFORMATION

2.1 Legal Requirement for the Forward Plan

The Leaders of all local authorities operating executive arrangements have a statutory duty to prepare a forward plan of key decisions for the next four months. The forward plan must be updated on a monthly basis, and a new forward plan produced at least 14 days prior to the first day upon which it comes into effect.

The Regulations specify that the following information should be included in respect of each key decision listed in the Plan:

- the matter in respect of which the decision is made;
- the name of the decision-making body (ie the Cabinet);
- the date on which the decision is to be made;
- the identity of the principal groups or organisations whom the decision maker proposes to consult before making the decision;
- the means by which any consultation is proposed to be undertaken;
- contact details of a named person (usually an officer) to whom representations can be made in respect of that decision.

2.2 Purpose of the Forward Plan

The principal purpose of the Forward Plan is to give the public a longer term advance notification of key matters that are to be dealt with under executive (cabinet) arrangements. It was introduced by the Government as part of the access to information provisions that sought to make executive arrangements transparent and accountable to the public. By receiving notice of forthcoming decisions, the public would

have a chance to make representations to the decision maker before the decision was taken.

It is not the purpose of the Forward Plan to provide detailed information about each proposed key decision. It is designed to highlight the matters to be decided by the Cabinet, and to signpost any individual who requires more information or wishes to take part in consultation on that matter to the named Officer and/or Member contact for that item.

3.0 TELFORD & WREKIN FORWARD PLAN

3.1 This Council's Forward Plan has been produced monthly since 2001. The information for each Forward Plan item relates directly to the information required by the Regulations (see 2.1 above). There is no scope to change these headings.

3.2 In terms of identifying the subject matter of each key decision, our Forward Plan contains a greater amount of information than that provided in the Plans of many other Councils. It should also be recognised that some Key Decisions relate to exempt information that will be dealt with confidentially by Cabinet. As the Forward Plan is a public document, care must be taken in ensuring that no sensitive information is included in the Purpose and Recommendations sections.

3.3 Standard Items

The Telford & Wrekin Plan does contain a number of "Standard Items", which appear in each Edition. These are used in situations when there are regular reports coming to Cabinet on a particular matter (eg: Woodside Regeneration, Local Development Framework, Financial Monitoring), so that report authors can rely on a generic heading in the Forward Plan rather than having to submit a separate entry for every report. However, it does not mean there are necessarily key decisions relating to all these items during any one Forward Plan period. While this may be more efficient operationally, it could be said that individual decisions under these "umbrella" headings are not always transparent. The "Standard Items" are not "set in stone" and are periodically reviewed.

Members may wish to comment on the use of "Standard Item" headings in the Forward Plan.

3.4 Layout and Design

The layout and design of the Forward Plan has been fine tuned over the last eight years. However, there are not many options as to how the Plan can be presented. It must show the key decisions to be taken over a four month period, and this is done chronologically. Under each month, the key decisions are listed alphabetically. One suggestion is that for each month the items could be split under Portfolio headings,

so it would be easier to find, for example, any items relating to Children & Young People. Another option is that in each month's Plan, the items that have been newly added could be highlighted in the index – so that they are more easily identifiable.

Members views are welcome on the layout and design of the Forward Plan, and whether sub-dividing the items by Portfolio and/or identifying new items would make the document more “user friendly”.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

If the Scrutiny Leadership Board wish to suggest any amendments to the format of the Forward Plan, these will need to be in the form of a recommendation to the Leader of the Council.

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