

COMMUNITY FOCUSED & EFFICIENT COUNCIL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Community Focused & Efficient Council Scrutiny Committee held on Monday, 31st January 2011 at 6.00 pm in the Reception Suite, Civic Offices, Telford, Shropshire

PRESENT: Councillors C.P.R. Mollett (Chairman), D.R. Chaplin, L. Lomax, A.A. Meredith and W.L. Tomlinson

ALSO PRESENT: Mr. M. Viney and Mr. R. Williams (Co-opted Members)

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors R.G. Chaplin and V.A. Fletcher

OFFICERS: Fiona Bottrill – Scrutiny Manager; Stephanie Jones - Scrutiny Officer; Felicity Mercer – Policy Planning Manager; Deborah Moseley - Assistant Democratic Services Officer; and Richard Partington - Assistant Chief Executive

CFEC-15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor S Kelly (Cabinet Member for Community Focused and Efficient Council) and Councillor A.D. McClements

CFEC-16 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting of the Community Focused and Efficient Council Scrutiny Committee held on the 12th January 2011 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman;

CFEC-17 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor L. Lomax declared a personal interest in minute number CFEC-21.

CFEC-18 ALTERNATIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS

There were no alternative budget proposals for consideration.

CFEC-19 BUDGET STRATEGY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK

The Policy Planning Manager advised that a specific programme of consultation on the draft budget proposals had been carried out during January 2011. This programme had included a postal survey of the Community Panel which had received a 60% response rate (compared to 40% the previous year); meetings with a range of external and internal groups and forums including the Parishes Forum, Young People's Forum, Connecting Communities Group, Disabilities Forum, Senior Citizen's Forum, Rural Forum, Voluntary and Community Sector Forum, Chamber of Commerce (Policy & Representation Board), JICF (trade unions) meeting, Corporate Employee Focus Group; publication and distribution of the 'Your Money, Your Views' consultation guide summarising the budget proposals and advising readers how to give their views by freepost, email, Facebook and Twitter; engagement at a range of locations across the Borough, including leisure centres,

supermarkets etc and consultation with Scrutiny Committees. In total over 800 responses had so far been received but a surge was anticipated on the last day of consultation. Engagement with young people had been a particular focus of the activities. Some disappointment was expressed at the low level of responses achieved through social media but this was expected to continue as an option in future years.

Looking forward, two pieces of follow-up work would be undertaken to enable understanding of specific impacts: a meeting with Ironbridge traders was scheduled for 7 February 2011 regarding proposed car parking charge increases (a topic which had been highlighted by this Committee) and telephone contact would be made with the 11 regular users of the Twister service regarding the proposed withdrawal of that service. The results of both would feed into the Cabinet report.

The Assistant Chief Executive reminded the Committee that the consultation period on the budget strategy did not close until midnight on the day of the meeting and, therefore, views were still being expressed. He emphasised that the consultation was a genuinely objective process. He was loathe to say anything about the messages garnered from the process so far as they had not yet been fully analysed and he wished Scrutiny to add their own important dimension to the consultation without external influence. However, he did feel it appropriate to advise that one of the big messages coming from the consultation was the lack of public support for the £61,000 savings around highways maintenance.

Referring to recent experiences, principally around reduced bus services which were felt to have been badly managed by Arriva, Members were concerned that the Council should give sufficient notice to service users who would be impacted by any of the cuts and sought a firm commitment from the Cabinet to ensure that this would be the case. The Chairman requested that the Assistant Chief Executive liaise with the Cabinet in this regard.

The results would be published on 14 February 2011 ready for the Cabinet Meeting to be held on 22 February 2011. The Policy Planning Manager was happy to receive any queries from Scrutiny Members on the published paperwork.

CFEC-20 RESPONSES TO THE COMMUNITY FOCUSED & EFFICIENT COUNCIL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S LINES OF ENQUIRY INTO THE BUDGET STRATEGY

Members had received generally satisfactory written and verbal responses to the lines of enquiry, however, despite welcoming the additional assurances relating to the value of capital receipts, some Members had continuing concerns in this regard.

CFEC-21 COMMENTS ON THE BUDGET STRATEGY FROM THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Committee received comments on the budget strategy from each Scrutiny Committee to be considered as part of the process and inform the final response.

Members considered each comment received from the Scrutiny Committees on its individual merits and debated the level of concern raised. From the list supplied, the Committee concluded that several recommendations should be particularly highlighted in the overall Scrutiny response for consideration by the Cabinet prior to the finalisation of the proposals and sought a written response from the Cabinet to demonstrate how the recommendations had been taken into account:

1. The Committee recommended that as decisions were made about savings in health and social care, safeguards would be put in place to ensure people who were most vulnerable and with the greatest need received appropriate support. Any reduction in service would be fully explained to service users.
2. The Committee recommended that the Council continued to work very closely with the PCT and existing and emerging NHS structures to ensure that in a time of great change signalled by the Health White Paper, services were delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible and the best possible use was made of money available within the Borough.
3. The Committee was confident that the Council could make the proposed savings from the reduction in grants to the voluntary sector, but were concerned that voluntary organisations may not be able to make the necessary changes to their culture or operation that the grant reductions would require for them to continue with reduced funding. The Committee commented that a small investment in a voluntary sector organisation could result in services of a much higher value being delivered.
4. The Committee recommended that within the revenue budget for rights of way, the budget for legal services was protected to maintain the level of service to process modification orders.

The Committee further concluded that all other comments would be appended to the report to inform the Cabinet's decision and sought responses where clarification had been sought.

CFEC-22 AGREE FINAL SCRUTINY RESPONSE TO BUDGET STRATEGY

The Committee generally accepted the overall Service and Financial Planning Strategy and whilst some hesitation remained, the Committee understood the necessity for making the level of savings required due to the unprecedented severe economic conditions. In particular, the Committee supported the prudent use of one off balances to bridge the budget gap during 2011/12, but cautioned that a similar level of savings would be likely to be required in subsequent years and this would be difficult to deliver.

The Committee recommended that the Cabinet take into account all the comments of all the Scrutiny Committees in their proposals and further work. Noting that the list included some requests for clarification on specific points, Scrutiny Members concluded that the Cabinet Members should be asked provide responses on those issues.

The Committee concluded that the Scrutiny Officer should prepare a report which reflected the concerns of the Members of this Scrutiny Committee and the Committee's discussion of the comments received from all Scrutiny Committees. The draft report would then be circulated to the Committee Members for consideration and comment before its finalisation and submission to Cabinet.

CFEC-23 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that no further meetings were scheduled for the current municipal year and the next meeting of the group would be a Working Group.

Some Members considered that Scrutiny should meet when Financial Progress Reports were delivered to Cabinet and that Scrutiny should receive details of the Service Reviews and Restructures which were being made throughout the Council over the coming months. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Manager would approach the appropriate Corporate Director and Organisational Development & Change Manager for their input on how best the reviews and restructures could be scrutinised within the limited resources available. In the meantime, Scrutiny Members were advised that restructure proposals were published on the Council's intranet as and when they were launched for consultation with affected staff.

The meeting ended at 7.13pm

Chairman:

Date: