



BUDGET SCRUTINY TASK GROUP

REPORT OF A MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY 14 MAY 2008 AT COUNTY HALL, TROWBRIDGE

Present:

Members: Patrick Coleman, Tony Molland, Bill Moss, Jeff Osborn and Ricky Rogers

Officers: Caroline Bee (Head of Financial Planning), Carlton Brand (Director of Department for Resources), Saira Khan (Head of Communications) and Karen Linaker (Scrutiny Support Officer)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1. Apologies for absence were received from Sandra Schofield. Also, noting that Brigadier Hall had been confirmed as the Chairman of the Council on the 13th May, the task group recorded its thanks to him for his contribution to the task group's work over the past three years.

REPORT OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

2. The task group noted the report of the meeting held on the 18th March 2008.

3. **PROVISIONAL OUTTURN FOR 2007/08**

The task group was informed that this report had yet to be published, but would be forwarded to members as soon as possible for their comment. In the meantime, members were asked to note that the provisional outturn was expected to indicate further departmental underspends, mainly due to the holding of staff vacancies, and due to the usual confirmation of spend as 07/08 accounts draw towards closure.

AGREED: to note the verbal update and to await receipt of the full report.

4. **DEVELOPMENT FUND 2007/08 PROGRESS**

The Director for the Department of Resources (DoR) presented a report which detailed the progress made in implementing the schemes that had successfully bid to the 2007/08 Development Fund. During consideration of this report, the following key comments and clarifications were made:

- (a) this report had already been considered by cabinet on the 22nd April 2008;
- (b) with regard to the Business Transformation Programme in Adult Social Care, whilst no information on the efficiencies to be made from this were detailed in the report, a recent meeting with Charteris had indicated that £1.89m savings, recurring annually, were projected to be realised from the programme, following the £0.575m investment. Members noted that this would be achieved by streamlining the processes involved in administering adult social care services;
- (c) cabinet would receive reports in June on the scheme referred to in (b) above and on the scheme which had received £150,000 from the Development Fund – “Developing Strategy for Residential Care Homes for Older People”;
- (d) the task group expressed its continuing support for the Virtual Headteacher for Looked After Children initiative, and noted the rollover of £36,586 requested for 2008/09, from the total £60,000 allocated. Also, members commented on the intention that this virtual school support would be funded from an Area Based Grant from 2009/10. Members felt this to be contradictory to the assurances given when approving this Development Fund scheme, i.e. that it would not impact on future base staff budgets;
- (e) concern was expressed that a number of the schemes had yet to be fully implemented in 2007/08, resulting in a number of rollover requests. The Director, DoR agreed that this was concerning and confirmed that discussions would take place to minimise the possibility of any further delay in implementing these schemes;
- (f) Mr Coleman agreed to ask further questions at the 22nd May meeting of the Children’s Services Scrutiny Committee regarding the Academy Capital Project Support scheme, especially as only £5,000 of the £130,000 allocated had been spent in 2007/08;
- (g) the £75,000 pothole repair study was helping to streamline the processes involved, from pothole identification to repair, which previously could take up to 136 days, and involved many people and complex procedures. Results were already promising, with 600 more potholes filled over the last two months, assisted by the help of parish stewards, and a consequent reduction in insurance claims. It was

suggested that scrutiny members receive a presentation on the progress made as a result of this study;

- (h) in relation to the “Military Integration Research Programme”, the Chairman expressed concern that no mention had been made in a recent press release about the Castledown Business Park, of the significant financial contribution and other support given by Kennet District Council to this initiative;
- (i) in respect of the Passenger Transport Review, which had been assisted by the Development Fund, but was not yet complete, members also expressed concern over the financial risk associated with the park and ride (Petersfinger, Salisbury) scheme.

- AGREED:**
- (1) to note the progress report on schemes allocated resources from the Development Fund in 2007/08, and that a number of these schemes had not yet been fully implemented;**
 - (2) to highlight to cabinet concerns arising from consideration of this report, especially those listed at (d), (e), (h) and (i) above; and**
 - (3) to note the Chairman’s continued concern that a number of the Development Fund schemes had resulted in raising future base budgets, despite reassurances to the contrary.**

5. COUNCIL TAX SUMMARY

The Head of Communications presented a report explaining how the Council Tax Summary 2008/09 had been produced and distributed, and seeking comment from the task group on the effectiveness of the summary. The main comments and clarifications made in considering this report were:

- (a) local authorities had a statutory responsibility to publish performance and financial information annually, and the way the council had chosen to do this over the past 4 years, was through distribution of the Council Tax Summary document;
- (b) the process was carried out in partnership with all other local authority partners in Wiltshire, including town, parish, district, police and fire authorities;
- (c) there had been a 8.34% increase in production costs this year, due to a rise in the cost of paper, print and design services, and as more copies had been printed;

- (d) with information about the County Council occupying the majority of the summary, costs to the council were proportionately greater than those of other authorities, i.e. £209 per page for the county and £165 per page for town and parish councils;
- (e) the style and content of the summary was enhanced each year, in response to feedback. The enhancements this year included:
 - i) improved use of colour print,
 - ii) a retention of the strapline “essential guide to council services and spending” to encourage people to keep and use the guide
 - iii) greater clarity regarding the offer that extracts of material from the summary (as opposed to the whole summary) could be provided in alternative languages and format;
 - iv) website address of the relevant authority as a footnote on each page
- (f) the task group reaffirmed its support for the summary, particularly its content, style, and value for money, and commented on how production and the method of publishing would need to be reviewed for 2009/10, bearing in mind the move to one council.

AGREED: to note and reaffirm support for the way in which the Council Tax Summary was produced.

6. BUDGET SCRUTINY TASK GROUP’S DRAFT FINAL REPORT

The task group discussed the key findings and recommendations included in its draft final report on the 2008/09 budget setting process and following its 2007/08 budget monitoring activities. The key comments made and amendments requested included:

- (a) to confirm draft recommendations (1) and (3), as written;
- (b) to confirm draft recommendation (2), subject to further discussion at the Development Workshop;
- (c) to delete draft recommendation (4), and instead to explore as part of the task group’s work programme the budgetary implications and outcomes of performance issues such as Local Public Service Agreements, the Local Area Agreement and the significance of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment from April 2009;
- (d) noting the task group’s conclusion not to request a merger with the Performance Task Group, the Director of Resources supported members’ intention as detailed in (c) above, and suggested that the task group should also look at the budgetary implications and

outcomes of key projects such as the review of Adult Social Care and of highway related projects being implemented by ESD;

- (e) to delete draft recommendation (5), following further clarification that the most appropriate use of any surplus on the council tax collection fund was to direct this for one-off expenditure. The task group was informed that whilst it may have appeared that the surplus had been directed to general service budgets in 08/09, this had been done on the condition that it would be applied to one-off projects and initiatives, and not form part of future base budgets; and
- (f) to amend draft recommendation (6) to reflect the task group's request that its remit be extended to scrutinise how the capital budget / programme was set and to monitor spend against this budget.

AGREED: to confirm the task group's final report, subject to amendments described (a) to (f) above being made, and to further discussion at the Development Workshop.

7. **NEXT MEETING**

Members noted that their next informal meeting would be at the Development Workshop on the 4th June, and their next formal meeting would take place on the 16th July 2008 at 2.30pm.

(Duration of meeting: 2.38 pm to 4.00 pm)