

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

6th October 2003

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Murphy (Vice-Chair) and Councillor Stone.

Conservative Group

Councillors Bale, Ford and Mrs. Hood.

APOLOGY

An apology for absence from the Meeting was received from Councillor Mulgrew (Labour Group).

COS/26. COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT REALITY CHECKS - BENEFIT FRAUD

The Committee received a verbal report from the Revenue Manager. He advised that a letter had been received from the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) enclosing a questionnaire comprising 54 questions to provide a self assessment. Information received as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment in July had included a copy of the questionnaire and some preparatory work had been undertaken. The information would be brought together into documents with a common design and there were various supporting documents for the submission, which would be finalised over the next two weeks.

In addition to the self assessment questionnaire a "story board" would be submitted to provide a context for the questionnaire answers. The third part of the submission compared the Council's service to 500 service standard assessments. Arrangements had been made for this part of the submission to be reviewed by Internal Audit. The submission would be made on 24th October 2003.

The Chair enquired whether Members would have the opportunity to see the documents before the submission. There was a tight timescale and substantial documentation involved in this submission, but some of the documents could be provided for Members information. Members commented on the good performance of the Council in terms of Benefit Fraud and the Revenue Manager spoke of the training provided and the steep learning curve for the Officer involved. It was hoped to improved this service even further in the future.

COS/27. REVIEW OF 'SCORING' FOR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS AND CAPITAL PROJECTS

The Chair reminded Members of the topics discussed at the first Special Meeting, the previous Tuesday. The key message was to focus on service priorities before considering financial issues as a secondary stage.

The Chief Finance Officer and Financial Services Manager had prepared a revised scoring system, taking on board Members' comments from that Meeting. Documents were circulated relating to revenue funding bids and the Financial Services Manager commented on the proposed revised system. It contained four main sections, concerned with Council priorities, local and national priorities, risk analysis and then separately, financing and external support. The Financial Services Manager explained the weightings applied to each of the priorities and how these were sub-divided through a series of specific questions.

The Chair felt more comfortable with the revised scoring system. The Vice-Chair enquired whether service developments to meet statutory duties would still have to be assessed and this was confirmed. With regard to risk analysis, the Chair asked whether a weighting should be applied to recognise the risks associated with implementation, for example if a scheme could not be sustained. The Chief Finance Officer felt this was more applicable to capital projects. In response to a question from the Chair, it was confirmed that the primary aims were those contained within the Council's Corporate Plan. Details were provided in supporting information of the Council's primary and secondary aims and it was confirmed that these were to be reviewed shortly. The Vice-Chair asked whether the primary aims were prioritised, but to date, the consultation undertaken had not been that detailed. The scoring system sought to provide a guide for the Service and Financial Planning Working Group, which then had discretion to vary the ranking of bids when making its recommendations.

In terms of revised primary aims, it was considered that crime and disorder would be a key issue. Explanation was provided on the current primary aims of providing Best Value services and "managing our business".

The Vice-Chair felt that the weighting relating to the duration of a bid encouraged schemes for a single year and did not promote partnership working or sustainability. After some discussion, it was agreed to delete this weighting and to add the corresponding 3% to the risk analysis heading of risks of not implementing a bid.

The Chair asked whether the financial elements of the scoring system could be separated totally. This issue was discussed and it was agreed to move the section on costs and financing to the end of the scoring system.

The Vice-Chair asked whether separate funding would be identified for the Local Strategic Partnership. Any schemes identified through the LSP would be considered alongside Council projects and assessed using the scoring system. It was questioned whether common plans and priorities would be devised by the LSP and pursued by each of the partner organisations. This was anticipated, but until the LSP became established, it was thought that each of the partner organisations would pursue their own priorities. It was noted that the Council already financed the LSP in terms of the staffing costs for those people supporting the Partnership. Discussions would be held with partner organisations about contributions towards these costs. Discussions were also planned with the Sub-Regional Strategic Partnership about establishing core funding for the Local Strategic Partnership.

The proposed scoring system for capital spending bids was then circulated. As with the revenue scoring system, Members discussed the weighting

applied to the duration of the bid. It was agreed to delete this heading and to apply the corresponding 3% weighting to the following question which related to ongoing revenue costs.

The Chair asked about the process to assess development bids and to award a weighting under each of the headings. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed that supporting information was submitted with the development proposal and Members assessed the importance of the contribution made under each heading.

The Chair asked how this special project would be taken forward. It was noted that the Corporate Management Team had considered a first draft of the revised scoring system. Subject to the approval of the Finance and Management Committee, the new scoring system would be introduced for the impending budget round. Service development bids would then be assessed and submitted to the Service and Financial Planning Working Group.

A Member questioned the possibility of comparing the service development bids submitted for the previous financial year using both scoring systems. This would be time consuming and some further information would be required. It was probable that some of the unsuccessful service development bids from the previous year were likely to be resubmitted. Assuming that the revised scoring system was approved, it would enable some comparison.

The Chair then asked how Members could submit service development bids and the Chief Finance Officer explained the opportunity for Members to raise bids through Policy Committees.

The Chair felt that the review had been worthwhile and he thanked Officers for the work undertaken. It was agreed to recommend the revised scoring system, incorporating Members' alterations to the Finance and Management Committee. The Chair hoped that the scoring system could be reviewed again in approximately six to nine months time, to assess its effectiveness.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.20 p.m.