

RESOURCES SCRUTINY PANEL

31 January 2006

Attendance:

Councillors:

Hollingbery (Chairman) (P)

Clohosey (P)
Cooper (P)
Davies (P)
Higgins (P)
Hoare (P)

Jeffs (P)
Mitchell (P)
Pearce (P)
Spender (P)
Verney (P)

Others in attendance who addressed the meeting:

Councillor Learney (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources)
Councillor Collin (Portfolio Holder for Healthy and Inclusive Communities)

Others in attendance who did not address the meeting:

Councillor Beckett

764. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Panel held on 7 December 2005 be approved and adopted.

765. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no questions asked or statements made.

766. **BENEFITS INFORMAL SCRUTINY GROUP**

It was agreed that the Informal Scrutiny Group should initially comprise three Members. However, contributions from other Members towards aspects of the Group's work would be welcomed.

The Panel noted that the Member training session on Benefits held prior to the meeting had highlighted several issues that the Informal Scrutiny Group could look into, including:

- encouraging the Inland Revenue to develop means of exchanging information electronically on change of clients' circumstances, which would help the Council in processing claims and provide a better service to the clients involved. The lack of facilities for any electronic

communication with the Inland Revenue, even by e-mail, was a cause of concern that the Inland Revenue should be lobbied to address.

- better training for Ward Members on benefit applications, recognising that the role of the Member is not to provide professional advice and that the duty of confidentiality meant that a Member could only become involved if the client agreed. A role description could be developed for Members asked to help on benefits issues.
- a review of communications could be undertaken, particularly to help Members understand the benefits system and issues that would constitute a 'change of circumstances' for a claimant. It was recognised that this was already undertaken by the Division but a Member perspective could be helpful.
- how benefits could be processed more efficiently - whether any improvements could be identified to assist with processing change of circumstance applications e.g. rate of processing; minimising overpayments.
- economies of scale – would collaboration with other councils or partners produce meaningful benefits?

It was suggested that another scoping report be prepared by the Informal Scrutiny Group for the next Resources Scrutiny Panel.

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Revenues confirmed that another agency in the local area able to help customers with benefit claims was the Citizens' Advice Bureau, although they had limited resources. She added that although the Council employed visiting officers, this was not widely promoted due to restricted resources. The Panel also discussed options for training other community workers on advising customers on how to claim benefits and complete application forms, and whilst this was accepted as possible it was agreed that there were practical limitations why the Council should not encourage non-professionals to advise the public in a professional capacity.

During discussion, consideration was given to the possibility of using the Parish Access Project to assist those in rural areas. The pilot was planned for New Alresford Town Council's office. It was suggested that parish clerks could be trained in helping customers use the Benefits part of the website, as well as officers running surgeries at set times in the week.

RESOLVED:

1. That the following appointments to the Benefits Informal Scrutiny Group be agreed:

Councillors Davies, Higgins and Hollingbery

2. That a scoping report be brought to the next meeting of the Panel, taking into account the issues raised above.

767. **FINANCE AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT – THIRD QUARTER PERFORMANCE MONITORING (ESTATES)**
(Report RE17 refers)

In response to a Member's question, the Chief Estates Officer reported that 152 High Street, Winchester was vacated on 31 December 2005 as the lease had come to an end. He added that although it was empty, a new tenant had been found. He continued that back to back leases were difficult to arrange hence the short delay in tenancy for the premises.

The Chief Estates Officer also understood that good progress was being made on fundraising for the Durngate Centre and that a planning application had been submitted.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

768. **FINANCE AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT – THIRD QUARTER PERFORMANCE MONITORING**
(Report RE16 refers)

The Director of Finance brought the Panel's attention to Page 3 of the report and stated that in January 2006 the percentage of calls answered by the switchboard had remained at approximately 99%, but that the percentage of calls answered by the Customer Service Centre had increased from 77% to 83%. She confirmed that the Customer Service Centre still suffered from high levels of sickness absence.

During discussion, the Director of Finance stated that there was a queuing system in operation in the Customer Service Centre, whereby an operator could speak to one customer and have another on hold. After that an engaged tone would be heard by anyone calling the Council. She continued that other call queuing systems were being looked into, but that implementation of such systems could be difficult.

Responding to a question, Councillor Learney confirmed that she had no concerns about reaching the target for the Gershon efficiency savings in due course, and the operation of the Customer Service Centre would contribute to this. She continued that other savings were possible which had not yet been specifically identified, such as those which would come from better procurement practice.

RESOLVED:

1. That the report be noted.
2. That the Panel notes that the Director of Finance was recommending that Cabinet approves a Business Rate debt of £28,643.95 be written off.

769. **FINANCE AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT – THIRD QUARTER PERFORMANCE MONITORING – CITY SECRETARY AND SOLICITOR**
(Report RE15 refers)

During discussion, the City Secretary and Solicitor confirmed that the application fee for liquor licensing was intended to cover the central administration costs of the licensing function, but that it did not cover the costs of other Directorates' involvement, meaning that overall there was a cost to the Council. He stated, however, that the base budget was currently sufficient to allow the continued operation of the service, but the licence fees did not meet all of the Council's central administration costs. The Government had asked an independent panel to assess whether the licence fees had been set at an adequate level. The Council was providing information, together with other local authorities.

Responding to a question, the City Secretary and Solicitor confirmed that although not all of the full written decision notices had been issued, all applicants had been informed of the decisions made so that premises could continue to operate. He continued that there would be an ongoing cost to the Council in respect of this new function as well as significant levels of work.

Following discussion, the City Secretary and Solicitor clarified the financial situation of the Cemetery budget, stating that the income received was above the projection for the year. This was due to higher fees and increased numbers of burials taking place.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

770. **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**
(Report PS216 refers)

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Work Programme, as set out in Report PS216, be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and concluded at 8.15pm

Chairman