

POLICY & REVIEW (PERFORMANCE) PANEL

MINUTES OF A MEETING of the Policy & Review (Performance) Panel held in the Civic Offices at 4.00 pm on Thursday 15 February 2007. (NB These minutes should be read in conjunction with the agenda for the meeting.)

Present

Councillors Jason Fazackarley (Chair)
Frank Jonas
Anthony Martin
Steven Wylie
Richard Jensen
Gerald Vernon-Jackson

Officers

Michael Lawther
Valerie Lane
Roger Ching
Julian Lomas
Kay White
Paddy May
Teresa Cooper
Chris Ward
Stephen Checkley
Rob Brind

14 Apologies for Absence (AI 1)

Apologies were received from Councillors Alistair Thompson, Howard Jones, April Windebank and Simon Boshier.

15 Declaration of Members' Interests (AI 2)

Councillor Richard Jensen declared a non-prejudicial interest in the Victoria Swimming Pool and Eastney Swimming Pool, (in relation to the Landlord's Maintenance Budget Report and City Council Budget Reports 2007-2008) as he uses both these facilities.

16 Minutes of Meeting held on 18 January 2007 (AI 3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Policy & Review (Performance) Panel held on 18 January 2007 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

17 Executive Response to the Risk and Project Management Report (from July 2006 Meeting) (AI 4)

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson and Julian Lomas, the Strategic Director for Environment & Transport gave the Panel an update following concerns raised at the October meeting of this Panel. The concerns raised were about the City Council's capacity to support its current

project portfolio and suggested more stringent scrutiny is required before new projects are allowed to proceed. The report also raised concerns about lack of effective member involvement in risk and project management. The Panel was advised that following the recruitment of Paul Jackson as Corporate Programme Manager, the Corporate Management Programme had been refreshed. Quarterly reports on all projects now have to be carried out. Anything which is not green in the traffic light system becomes the subject of a more detailed report and these, with exception reports, go to Strategic Directors Board on a regular basis. External consultancy support is also expected to be brought in to help revise the project management policy and an audit of projects is being undertaken. The Panel was advised that no new major projects will be commenced until they have passed the “gate zero” tests (business case, resourcing, risk assessment etc) at Strategic Directors Board and the appropriate member decision making forum (both advised by the Head of Project Management, Risk Management and Emergency Planning). In response to questions members heard that

- Project management is getting better, but there is still room for further improvement.
- Significant projects go through Strategic Directors Board as an extra safeguard.
- That despite many different dates and times being made available to members, take-up of training sessions on project management has not been well supported by members.

RESOLVED that the Panel notes the response.

18 Update Report on an Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy and Fraud Response Plan and Verbal Response on Agency Staff Procedures (TAKE IN REPORT)

The Panel was advised on progress by the City Solicitor in developing an anti-fraud and corruption policy and fraud response plan and dealing with other key areas of concern in relation to governance arising out of the Council’s 2004-2005 audit and inspection letter.

The Panel was advised that at present, whilst the Council does adopt a zero tolerance towards fraud, the policies and procedures are not formally set down. However it is anticipated that the anti-fraud and corruption policy and response plan will be considered as part of the work of the Standards Committee in spring 2007. An interim anti-fraud and corruption policy and response plan have been prepared which it is proposed will be adopted by the Council and this is attached to the report as Appendix B. in response to questions, the Panel heard that

- A report will be brought back to this Panel about an induction programme to communicate its contents at some time in the future.
- With regard to whistleblowing, there is a policy in existence and up-to-date contact details are available. It was however acknowledged that this may be difficult to find and more prominence needed to be given to it. This will be addressed by the Standards Committee.

The Panel then heard from the Head of Human Resources about agency staff procedures. The Panel heard that the process of engaging agency staff is still being reviewed with the audit manager but that general trends showed

that often, especially where professional agencies are used to provide temporary staff, the Human Resources Service is bypassed and therefore there is no evidence that checks such as CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) or references from previous employers have been made. The Human Resources Service has a very good process in place and all relevant checks are made when they are involved. The Panel heard that the audit report concerning agency staff should be completed by the end of March although the results take a long time to collate.

RESOLVED that the Panel

- (1) notes the report and the action that is being taken by the City Solicitor on an anti-fraud and corruption policy and fraud response plan;**
- (2) requests that a further update report is brought back to this Panel;**
- (3) notes the verbal response given by the Head of Human Resources concerning agency staff procedures;**
- (4) requests that an update report concerning agency staff procedures is brought back to this Panel later in the year.**

19 Landlord's Maintenance Budget Report and City Council Budget Reports 2007-2008

As these reports are inextricably linked, the Panel decided to hear these items together.

(TAKE IN REPORT ON FUTURE FUNDING OF LANDLORD'S MAINTENANCE BUDGET)

Consideration was given to a report from the Head of Asset Management Service which brought to the attention of the Executive the current spending profile of the landlord's maintenance budget and identified what is required to deliver a properly managed asset portfolio. The various options available concerning the Guildhall bells were explained to the Panel. The Panel heard that a structural survey report would be available in time for the Council meeting on 20 February 2007. In response to questions the Panel heard that

- Although the Head of Asset Management Service is grateful that money is being allocated for maintenance after a substantial period, there will still be an ongoing need for more money.
- The costings mentioned in the report are best estimates and there is no guarantee that these will not rise further when work is actually commenced.
- The condition of the bells was last checked six years ago when it was stated that after a five year period it was likely that the bells would need to be melted down and recast as trying to use them in their current condition would be likely to cause them to crack. Furthermore the base structure is also in a serious condition.
- If an electronic sound system is installed to replicate the bells, the acoustic sound may be very different. As yet no-one has listened to the electronic sound system.

Budget 2007/08 to 2009/10 and Medium Term Resource Strategy

(TAKE IN PRESENTATION)

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources and Services presented the

budget reports. It was explained to the Panel that this year the Leader of the Council, Councillor Gerald Vernon-Jackson requested a change to the usual procedure and consequently the budget being presented is the administration budget. The Panel was advised that there had been an improvement in expected balances as at 31 March 2007 of £2.812 million and that the reasons for the improved balance occurred as a result of additional income from Port, external lending etc and Spinnaker Tower income. However the revised forecast is still for a cumulative deficit of £12m. Savings in 2007/08 and 2008/09 of £6m would have to be made. It was explained to the Panel that yet again under local government finance settlement for 2007/08 and 2008/09 Portsmouth is at the floor and as such received an increase of 2.7% (as estimated). The council tax maximum increase is set at 5% and 86% of properties in Portsmouth are in council tax band categories A, B and C which are the lowest in terms of council tax charged.

Members heard that the available capital resources assuming that the cheapest option for the Guildhall bells is approved, amounts to £1.912m.

In response to questions members heard that

- With regard to recent publicity about people's properties being placed in the wrong band for council tax purposes when council tax was first introduced, there is only a small allowance based on previous years claims and there is no specific allowance for refunding any possible overpayments.
- The council tax for Portsmouth is likely to be the lowest in Hampshire.

RESOLVED that the Panel

- (1) Notes the landlord's maintenance budget report;**
- (2) Notes the City Council budget reports 2007/2008.**

The meeting ended at 5.40 pm.

Chair