



Enterprise and
Growth Scrutiny
Committee

4th December 2014

10.00 am

Item

3

Public

**MINUTES OF THE ENTERPRISE AND GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING
HELD ON 6 NOVEMBER 2014
10.00 AM - 12.15 PM**

Responsible Officer: Julie Fildes

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Present

Councillor Steve Davenport (Chairman)

Councillors Andrew Bannerman, Martin Bennett, Charlotte Barnes, Dean Carroll,
Jean Jones, William Parr and Peter Cherrington (Substitute) (substitute for Pauline Dee)

28 Apologies for Absence and Substitutes

Apologies were received from Councillors Nicholas Bardsley, Pauline Dee and John Hurst-Knight.

Councillor Peter Cherrington attended as substitute for Councillor Pauline Dee.

29 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were none disclosed.

30 Minutes

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 9th October 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

31 Public Question Time

There were no Public Questions.

32 Member Question Time

There were no questions from Members.

33 Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing

The Senior Commissioner for Public Protection, spoke on the system of licensing Private Hire Vehicles and Hackney Carriages.

She explained that this was a significant part of the wider licensing regime delivered by the Council.

It was emphasised that the licensing process is underpinned by the Council's Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, although there was no specific legal requirement to have a Licensing Policy, in practice it was impossible to make fair and consistent decisions without one. Whilst being aware of the need to support the trade the overriding aim of the Licensing Policy was Public Protection and in particular, the Council's responsibility to ensure that children and vulnerable adults were protected in line with its safeguarding responsibilities.

She stated that the Policy was being reviewed and consultation had been undertaken. If approved the new policy would come into force at the beginning of April 2015. The scope and purpose of the proposed policy was presented to Members. The Senior Commissioner informed Members that there remained an opportunity to influence the scope and purpose of the policy if they wished to do so.

The Members of the Strategic Licensing Committee had responsibility for giving strategic direction on licensing issues and the Licensing and Safety Sub-Committee and officers dealt with applications. Due to a high number of applications in 2010/2011, the Strategic Licensing Committee had agreed to the creation of a panel with delegated powers given to the Licensing Manager. More complex cases were referred to the Licensing and Safety Sub-Committee.

The Senior Commissioner for Public Protection queried whether this situation should continue or whether all applications should be considered by the Licensing Sub-committee.

Members asked for information regarding the level of information provided by the Police. The Senior Commissioner for Public Protection explained that the Police fully supported the revised Licensing Policy. Licensing Officers utilised all intelligence available to them on an individual, even where this would not satisfy the criteria of beyond reasonable doubt burden of proof. The revised policy had been reworded to allow for any intelligence suggesting that the applicant was not a fit and proper person to lead to a license refusal.

In response to a Member's question regarding spot checks, the Senior Commissioner for Public Protection explained that the authority had the power to carry out routine assessments of vehicles and also worked with the VOSA, social security officers and police to carry out unannounced vehicle and driver checks. These were generally undertaken on a quarterly basis and were often based on intelligence received.

A Member asked for details of how the policy ensured that drivers coming into the County from other areas had sufficient knowledge of the area they were working in

and adequate language skills for communication with passengers. The Team Manager for Operations Community Safety explained that all applicants were required to undertake a knowledge test which was written in English and interpreters were not allowed to be present during the examination. The revised policy supported the continuation of the written test and the requirement to be able to communicate in English had been strengthened, although this had raised some equality issues.

The Chairman welcomed the Policy's approach in supporting safeguarding through requesting an enhanced DBS check and other intelligence on all applicants, but he expressed concern that applicants who had not been resident in the UK for a length of time may not be subject to such tests. He was reassured that the DBS worked on a five year basis, and in cases where this could not be provided the applicant's Embassy was contacted and a report confirming good conduct requested.

A Member raised concerns about drivers disregarding the traffic regulations in Shrewsbury town centre. He was advised that complaints could be dealt with under the driver's licensing conditions but evidence would need to be obtained. A Member commented that there may be good reason for drivers disregarding traffic regulations when carrying disabled people.

In response to a Member's query The Team Manager for Operations Community Safety explained that there was a central licensing contact number which was answered by a Licensing Officer or they could be contacted via Customer Services.

A Member commented that planning applications delegated to Officers were subject to targets and asked if a similar procedure existed for licensing applications. The Senior Commissioner for Public Protection confirmed that there were no set targets and the Officer Panel dealt with the majority of straight forward applications with the more complicated or contentious ones going before Members.

Members asked for more information regarding the colour of taxis. The Team Manager for Operations Community Safety explained that users with sight problems had asked for the distinction to be made. The Licensing Officers perceived that the public did not comprehend the difference between private hire vehicles and hackney carriages, by specifying that hackney carriages should be black and display a roof sign would differentiate them from other vehicles and increase public confidence. Members asked if the transition period of three years was sufficient time frame for operators; the Team Manager for Operations Community Safety accepted that it might need to be extended.

A Member asked whether disabled access vehicles were required to be able to accommodate mobility scooters. The Team Manager for Operations Community Safety replied that the type of wheel chair was not specified but provision would be subject to market forces and that operators were encouraged to have a range of vehicles suitable for a range of needs.

The Chairman confirmed that the purpose the Licensing Presentation was not to diminish the role of the Strategic Licensing Committee but to add to the quality of information going to it particularly comments on the Licensing Panel.

Members debated whether the granting of licensing applications required greater Member involvement. It was agreed that advice should be taken from Licensing

Officers as to whether greater Member involvement was required. In principle, it was agreed that where possible Officers should make the decisions where they were able to, bringing only those that could not be determined before Members.

The Head of Public Protection asked Members to support the issue of training. Regular training on safeguarding issues was offered to Licensing Members and only Members who had undertaken training were able to sit on the sub-committee. Members supported that Licensing Members should be subject to continuous training.

34 Scrutiny of the progress in delivering the Council's Financial Strategy

The Director of Commissioning stated that the Council was undergoing a period of unprecedented change and had already made significant financial savings and was working to a Business Plan to further reduce spending.

Referring to the reports despatched with the agenda, the Director of Commissioning stated that the Council was in Year 1 of the current cycle and £40m of savings had been identified. Some of which had been achieved, some were proving more difficult and Officers were having to look to other areas. He continued that some of the savings were taking longer to achieve than anticipated and there had to be some flexibility in the Business Plan.

The Commissioning Director identified the areas of interest to the Committee as business growth, public protection, transport and housing.

He continued to outline that the predicted savings for year 1 were in the region of £2.45m, and had been identified as attainable and agreed by Finance as such. In year 2, it was anticipated that £800,060 would be saved and £1.7m for year 3. Using the RAG system, savings for Year 2 were categorised as green and amber, but savings for Year 3 were amber and red. This pattern mirrored what was happening across the Council.

The Commissioning Director continued that the service areas of the Council under the remit of the Committee were undergoing re-design. It was noted that Members were aware of and involved in the Economic Re-design work, a business plan had been approved by Cabinet to combine Public Protection and business management into a new unit called RABBS which would be transferring to ip&e in April 2015. The Portfolio Holder for Transport added that transport services were feeding into a wider transport review with a specific area of public transport and the achievement of efficiency savings. The Commissioning Director continued that CCTV provision had been transferred from Customer Services to Public Health as it was recognised as a community safety issue.

It was noted that within the Housing section £500,000 would be saved in year 1, but savings in the next two years would be more challenging to find and depended on the co-operation of partner organisations.

A Member commented that the committee had received a presentation on the Tourism Economy at a previous meeting and no reference had been made to the £300,000 cuts in funding to be made. The Commissioning Director explained that

some of the savings would be made through efficiency savings, others would be achieved through the increased use of commissioning, with other bodies taking on services previously provided by the Council. The Commissioning Director replied that he was confident that savings could be made without diminishing services.

A Member observed that this report covered a huge area of Council work, which made it difficult to focus on particular items. She asked the Commissioning Director to comment on outcomes and satisfaction for the people of the County. She gave the example of Much Wenlock museum where much of the responsibility for its running had been transferred to the Parish Council and Volunteers. She asked for comment regarding how the repetition of this experience would affect the County's infrastructure. The Commissioning Director stated that it had been recognised that in some instances services were better co-ordinated and delivered at a local level. Conversations were being held within communities, although it was recognised that some communities were more active than others.

It was noted that the Voluntary Sector had been receiving support and the Council had been building capacity within it to enable it to take on greater responsibility for the provision of services. Work had been done with the Shropshire Providers Consortium to ensure that they could successfully bid for contracts. The Business Strategy had identified the importance of ensuring that money spent by the Council remained in Shropshire.

A Member asked how synergy across the Council was being achieved, where an area of reduced spending could prevent the provision of a service in another area. The Commissioning Director explained that Directors and Cabinet met regularly to review progress, and all sections had checks and balances in place to reduce the risk of this happening. The Commissioning Director commented that unforeseen circumstances could have a detrimental effect on planned savings, which is why they were not categorised as green until Finance agreed that they had been achieved.

A Member requested information on changes in the business rates system. The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Planning, Housing and Commissioning suggested that the Scrutiny Committee may wish to consider this issue as part of its future work programme.

A further question was asked about the increase in planning applications and the department's capacity to handle this. The Portfolio Holder for Planning replied that there had been a huge increase in planning applications which was putting pressure on the department additional staff had been recruited to cover the workload. More efficient working techniques were also being considered and the computer system was being upgraded.

The issue of public concern over the reduction in street lighting was raised. The Commissioning Director suggested that this scheme had good support across the county but if Town Councils felt that they could better meet the needs of their area, the Council would be happy to negotiate the transfer of lighting to them.

A Member raised concerns about the lack of public consultation for the closure of buildings and services. She continued to voice concern regarding lack of investment. A Member replied that he understood that the Administration did not just intend to

make savings but also intended to improve services. He asked for evidence of service improvement and investment.

The Performance and Design Team Leader introduced the Dash Boards that brought together financial and business information.

New Homes: the number of affordable new homes had reduced whilst the number of households on the Council Tax register had increased.

A Member commented that the average house price was 7.42 times that of the average earnings figure which remained above the West Midlands average, he suggested that this should be considered with the affordable housing figures. The Performance and Design Team Leader replied that when looking at the statistics Members should be aware that those living in the County but working out of it tended to have higher earnings than those living in the County. There were also issues with social housing and right to buy.

Jobseekers: those claiming Jobseekers Allowance had reduced. The Performance and Design Team Leader continued that those claiming Jobseekers allowance pulled most strongly on Council Services, by stimulating opportunities for employment and getting claimants back into work it helped employers, and the local economy.

Qualifications: there were a high number of people with NVQ level 4 qualifications but no information on whether they were using these. The dashboard showed that Shropshire had a higher percentage of lower qualified people than the Regional/National average. The Performance and Design Team Leader continued that this may lead to examination of whether pupils leaving school had the right qualifications to promote the economy.

RESOLVED:

- i. That it be noted that the areas within the remit of the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee were green for Year 1 but there could be cause for concern in Years 2 and 3;
- ii. That concerns regarding the tourism economy be noted; and
- iii. That the importance of the economy as a priority within the revised Business Plan for the next 2 years be endorsed.

35 Future Work Programme for the Enterprise and Growth Scrutiny Committee

RESOLVED:

That the Future Work Plan be noted and consideration be given to adding Business Rates as a future work area for the Committee.

36 Dates for Future Meetings

RESOLVED:

That the Committee next meets at 10.00am on Thursday 4th December 2014.

Signed (Chairman)

Date: