



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING : Monday, 21st July 2014

PRESENT : Cllrs. Lugg (Chair), S. Witts (Vice-Chair), Gravells (Spokesperson), Haigh, Wilson, Ravenhill, Field, Dee, Toleman, Pullen, Patel, Porter and Norman

Others in Attendance

APOLOGIES : Cllrs. Hanman, Lewis, Beeley and Hansdot

13. APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received from Councillors Beeley, Hanman, Hansdot, Lewis and Taylor. Councillor Patel was present as a substitute for Councillor Taylor.

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

15. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 June 2014 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

16. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (15 MINUTES)

There were no questions from members of the public.

17. PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS (15 MINUTES)

There were no petitions or deputations.

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18. ALLOTMENTS STRATEGY

The Chair welcomed Councillor Jim Porter, Cabinet Member for Environment and Mr Ross Cook, Head of Neighbourhood Services, to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member presented the Committee with a report which sought adoption, for the purposes of consultation, of an Allotment Strategy for Gloucester City, which detailed how the City Council intended to manage its allotment holding over coming years. Overview and Scrutiny was asked, subject to any comments it wished to make to Cabinet, to note the report.

The Committee discussed the following matters:-

1. Two Members reported that they had not had access to the Allotment Strategy papers until shortly before the meeting. The Cabinet Member responded that he had released the papers for circulation immediately following a Cabinet pre-meeting the week before. It was agreed that this issue would be referred to the Democratic Services Manager.
2. A Member commented that the document lacked clarity and had been left 'open ended'. The Cabinet Member responded that the strategy had been deliberately left 'open ended' as the intention was to canvass allotment associations for their views on the draft document.
3. Clarification was sought on the powers that the proposed allotment associations would have. The Cabinet Member referred the Committee to the list of functions set out at Appendix 1 to the strategy.
4. There was a query on how the associations would continue to operate if individuals left. The Committee noted that the Allotments Officer would have a role in overseeing such matters.
5. A Member asked how allotment associations were constituted and whether other organisations could be regarded as 'associations'. The Cabinet Member replied that any associations would be properly constituted bodies established in accordance with the National Allotment Association. He was aware of five such bodies within the City. Other organisations could form an association if the Council was satisfied that they could operate efficiently.
6. The City Council's statutory responsibilities were discussed with the Cabinet Member confirming that individual letting agreements would remain with the City Council.
7. A Member requested information on the number of allotments that were not maintained and the number of vacant sites. The Cabinet Member agreed to provide this.
8. A Member suggested that the City Council's Neighbourhood Officers could take a proactive role in identifying residents who had large gardens and who would be willing to make them available as prospective allotment plots. The

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Cabinet Member responded that this was currently being explored. The Member requested an update on this initiative.

9. There was a discussion on plot sizes and the Committee noted that active measures were being taken to halve plots where possible to meet demand for allotments.
10. Clarification was sought on issues regarding what could be grown and kept on individual plots. The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that this could vary from site to site and was subject to approval by the Allotments Officer. Regarding livestock, the Committee's attention was drawn to the recommendations of the Allotment Task and Finish Group in 2007 which had advocated that no livestock, including fowl, should be kept on allotments. The Cabinet Member responded that individual associations might be able to agree adoption of livestock on plots, but that the final decision would have to be made by the City Council.
11. There was a discussion on the Public Open Space strategy which had referred to the identification of new sites for allotments. The Committee noted that new sites were only earmarked for Kingsway. The Cabinet Member explained that it was the intention to look at existing land to see whether any parcels could be redesigned for allotment purposes. A Member expressed concern over the length of the waiting lists in some wards and queried whether the demand could ever be satisfied. The Cabinet Member reiterated that new sites had to be identified from existing land in accordance with the Public Open Space strategy and that he believed the waiting lists were manageable.
12. A Member queried the charging policy for allotments. The Cabinet Member indicated that this depended on the size of the plot and that there were concessions for older people and for those in receipt of benefits. He advised Members that the pricing structure was currently being reviewed with the intention of linking it to the RPI.
13. The Committee noted that private allotment sites were not precluded and would be considered should they become available.
14. The Committee requested that plot sizes should be examined as part of the consultation exercise. The Cabinet Member agreed to take this on board.
15. A Member commented on the practice of sponsored fruit growing and queried how this fitted with the strategy. The Cabinet Member agreed to report back on this issue.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO CABINET: That the report be noted.

19. 2013/14 FINANCIAL OUTTURN

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The Chair welcomed Councillor David Norman, MBE, Cabinet Member for Performance and Resources, and Mr Jon Topping, Head of Finance, to the meeting.

Members were presented with a report which informed them of the final Council position against agreed budgets for the 2013/14 financial year and which also highlighted key performance indicators. The Committee was asked, subject to any recommendations it wished to make to the Cabinet, to note the report. Members' attention was further drawn to a revision to the recommendations at 2.2 (3) of the report.

Members discussed the following matters:-

1. **Incorrect invoicing (paragraph 6.2).** The Committee noted that agreement had been reached with Amey regarding the accrued income from 2012/13.
2. **Additional cost of interim staff (paragraph 7.5).** The Committee noted that as a result of the recent restructuring exercise this overspend would not recur in 2014/15.
3. **The cost of software and hardware (paragraph 7.6).** The Committee queried why some of these costs were not capitalised. The Head of Finance explained that, where appropriate, capitalisation had taken place. This was part of the closedown process.
4. **Reasons for the Capital Budget underspend on three initiatives under the Housing General Fund.** The Head of Finance agreed to provide these to the Committee.
5. **Reasons for the increase in bad debt provision.** The Head of Finance clarified that the City Council's income collection performance had not deteriorated. The calculation of the bad debt provision had been reviewed as part of required accounting treatment.
6. **The fact that the Guildhall had not achieved its budgeted level of surplus.** The Head of Finance reported that the income target for the Guildhall was challenging and that the ongoing service review would look at ways of improving that position in future years.

The Committee placed on record its satisfaction with the performance that had been achieved in 2013/14.

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO CABINET: That the report be noted.

20. ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT CIVICA (REVENUES AND BENEFITS)

The Chair welcomed Mr Gary Bell and Ms Jo Styles from Civica and Ms Sarah Tilling, Client Liaison Officer (Gloucester City Council).

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The Committee received an annual update on the Gloucester City Council Revenues and Benefits Partnership with Civica. Arising from the presentation, Members discussed the following matters:-

1. Profit sharing with Gloucester City Council. It was noted that a proposal would be considered by the Strategic Partnering Board at the end of August 2014.
2. The fact that jobs in the Severn Centre were undertaken by mostly local Gloucester people.
3. Information was sought on those cases where DLA had been taken into account when DHP applications had been assessed. The Civica Client Liaison Officer agreed to provide this information to the Committee.
4. A Member queried whether there were any plans to extend the current opening hours of the service. Mr Bell explained that the hours were in line with the City Council's reception and pointed out that many of Civica's customers were actually looking into reducing their operating hours as 'self serve' became increasingly popular.
5. Benefit Fraud Team. It was noted that the two officers who made up the award winning Benefit Fraud Team would shortly be transferring to the Department for Work and Pensions to join a centralised fraud team.
6. Local authority error overpayment percentage. The Committee noted that this figure was very low and arose mostly from cases where customer updates were not processed promptly resulting in an overpayment of benefit.
7. A Member commended Civica for its performance and acknowledged that customers now found it easier to access benefit services.
8. Responding to a query from a Member, Mr Bell explained how the new postal address in Pershore had resulted in increased efficiency and streamlining of the postal process.
9. A Member commented that voluntary sector organisations in the City who were funded by the City Council were unable to compete with the service offered by Civica.

The Committee placed on record its satisfaction with the performance achieved by the Gloucester City Revenues and Benefits Partnership with Civica.

RESOLVED: That the annual performance report be noted.

21. UPDATE ON CIVICA IT PARTNERSHIP

The Chair welcomed Mr Matthew Salter, IT Outsourcing Director, Civica, to the meeting.

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Mr Salter briefed Members on progress made by the new IT partnership to date and set out future plans and priorities.

SUSPENSION OF COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 6

The Chair drew Committee's attention to the fact that it was now 20.30 hours.

RESOLVED: That Council Procedure Rule 6 be suspended to permit the consideration of the remaining items on the agenda.

The Committee discussed the following matters:-

1. Members' need for an out of hours service particularly for minor issues such as password resetting. Mr Salter confirmed that Civica was hoping to address this issue by building in personal data to password control such as 'name of first school' etc. to avoid Members having to contact the Help Desk. Other measures such as recorded messages on the Help Desk advising when services were down were also being explored.
2. There was a discussion on the public's expectation of increased digital/interactive services. Mr Salter remarked that extra self-service kiosks could be installed in Customer Services.

The Chair thanked Mr Salter for his presentation.

RESOLVED: That the update be noted.

22. NOMINATIONS FOR TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

The Committee confirmed two Task and Finish Groups for the year 2014/15:-

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| Group 1 | Management of parcels of unadopted green land |
| Group 2 | Housing Conditions in the Private Rented Sector |

Nominations were sought for 3 Members for each Task and Finish Group. The following nominations were received:-

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|---------|---|
| Group 1 | Councillor Haigh
Councillor Wilson
Conservative nominee to be confirmed |
| Group 2 | Councillor Smith
Councillor Gravells
Lib Dem nominee to be confirmed |

23. CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

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The Committee considered the latest version of the Cabinet's Forward Work Programme.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet's Forward Work Programme be noted.

24. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the latest version of its work programme.

RESOLVED: That the Overview and Scrutiny work programme be noted.

25. MEMBER UPDATE ON OUTSIDE BODIES ACTIVITIES

There were no updates on this occasion.

26. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Monday 15 September 2014 at 18.30 hours.

Time of commencement: 18:30 hours

Time of conclusion: 20:55 hours

Chair