
Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Corporate and Strategic Framework)

**Report of the meetings held on 29th January and
6th February 2008**

Matters for Information

8. FINANCIAL STRATEGY, MEDIUM TERM PLAN 2009 - 2013 AND BUDGET 2008/09

The Panel has reviewed the Financial Strategy, Medium Term Plan 2009 - 2013 and the Budget and level of Council Tax for 2008/09 which is included as a separate item elsewhere on the Agenda for the Council meeting.

The Panel is disappointed that the Council continues to be affected adversely by the Government's Revenue Support Grant damping mechanism which will result in grant continuing to be withheld from the Council over the next 3 years to cushion against losses in other authorities. Notwithstanding a recognition in the grant settlement of the District's growth in population, a total of £804,000 will be withheld in 2008/09 to which the Council would have been entitled. Although the Panel has been assured that other potential funding streams will be explored and that efficiency savings and reductions in expenditure will continue to be sought, the Panel is concerned that the grant withheld will more than double in 2008/09 which will make compliance with the Council's Financial Strategy more difficult to achieve.

The Panel has been acquainted with details of the Executive Councillors' involvement in developing the current proposals and noted the rationale for changing the procedure for approving the release of funding for individual schemes from the Medium Term Plan. Having done so, the Panel is satisfied that sufficient safeguards are in place to monitor the release of funding and its expenditure.

The Panel has discussed the Government's statements in terms of council tax levels and capping for the forthcoming year and has been advised of the likely approach to be taken by other Councils. Because of the lack of certainty in the Minister's announcement on capping, the Panel has assessed the risks inherent in varying levels of increase in Council Tax. On that basis, the Panel has expressed its support for an increase of 4.99% in Band D equivalent Council Tax in 2008/09. The Panel considered a number of suggestions by a Member for inclusion in the budget, which were not pursued and therefore also expressed support for the proposed Budget and Medium Term Plan as presented.

The Panel's views were conveyed to the Cabinet at their meeting on 31st January 2008 to assist them in formulating their recommendations to Council on these matters. (Item No. 61 of their Report refers.)

**9. GROWING SUCCESS:
CUSTOMER SERVICE, COMMUNICATIONS & MARKETING AND
CONSULTATION & ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

The Panel has considered the Customer Service, Communications and Marketing, and Consultation and Engagement Strategies, which have been revised following the adoption of a revised version of Growing Success, the Council's Corporate Plan, in June 2007. The Panel has been informed that the strategies are mutually supportive and inherently connected in terms of the objectives that they are seeking to promote. The Panel has been advised that the strategies will be reviewed every three years, with the respective action plans reviewed on an annual basis.

With regard to the revised Customer Service Strategy, the Panel has been acquainted with the "Customer Insight" concept to be adopted across the authority, which seeks to identify the needs of customers thereby enabling the Council to provide services in a way that meets individual needs. The Panel has been advised that the formation of a customer services team under the responsibility of a single Head of Service together with the effective use of resources will support the delivery of the strategy. The action plan for this strategy has yet to be finalised but will be presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 21st February 2008.

The Panel has been informed of the background to the decision to expand and strengthen the former Communications and Consultation Strategy by creating two separate strategies for Communications and Marketing and for Consultation and Engagement. The Panel has acknowledged the benefits of both strategies, particularly, the need to begin marketing services that are subject to competition and tailoring information on other services to the needs of individuals. Members have been informed of the provisions in the Consultation and Engagement Strategy to support their roles.

The Panel has been advised that the documents will be used primarily as internal corporate strategies, with an executive summary of each being made available on the website for public use. The Council's performance against the strategies will be reported through the performance management system.

On the basis of the information presented, the Panel has expressed its support for the approval and implementation of the strategies presented.

S J Criswell/J A Gray
Chairmen