

# THE WAY AHEAD FOR COUNCIL SERVICES: TASK GROUP

10 JANUARY 2012

Present: Councillor M Watkin (Chair)  
Councillor S Rackett (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors N Bell, K Hastrick, P Jeffree, S Johnson, R Martins  
and K McLeod

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (JK)

## 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Greenslade after the meeting.

## 2 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interest, but it was noted that all councillors had a stake in how services were delivered.

## 3 INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF SCOPE

### Introduction

The Chair introduced the topic of the Task Group which had been proposed by the Managing Director. The Task Group was not concerned with the economics of service delivery but the political implications and how Members retained democratic influence. There were various responses to the new economic reality and officers were looking for solutions based on economics; it was for Members to ensure that democratic accountability remained. He added that although this was a one-off topic group this would be a continuing theme for Members and would doubtless generate other subjects for subsequent scrutiny. He invited Members to give their initial views.

### General discussion

Councillor McLeod said that she felt that the Task Group needed a baseline to work from indicating what the Council was currently doing.

Councillor Bell felt that this was an important topic and noted the different models being pursued by the London Boroughs of Barnet and Lambeth. He added that it was very important to look at other local authorities.

Councillor Martins advised that he felt the scope was too narrow and the broader context of localism needed to be taken into consideration. The Task Group needed to consider how the Council could engage with communities.

Councillor Jeffree agreed with Councillor McLeod. He felt it was important to formulate a view of where the Council should go. Cost was an important consideration but was one-dimensional; value for money was what was needed. Some services could be out-sourced more easily than others. He added that he would like the Task Group to have an agenda, written or unwritten, which said that their starting point was to keep all services in-house, the second option would be to share services with one or more councils and the last resort would be to outsource.

The Vice Chair said that the end point should be democratic accountability. He felt it was worth considering a range of approaches as this would allow Members to have a strong argument about why a certain approach was or was not suitable for Watford.

The Chair noted that there was not time to cover everything in this review. Localism was a very large topic which merited its own review. The Task Group could highlight areas which needed further investigation.

Councillor Bell said that the key issue was to look at the accountability of different service delivery models and the kind of accountability for Members.

The Chair said he could see a hierarchy of services; for example it may matter less to residents if pest control was outsourced than if refuse collection was outsourced.

Councillor McLeod asked if the Task Group could have a breakdown of what was outsourced or delivered in another way at present.

The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer informed the Task Group that the meeting of Cabinet in February had been cancelled. The Task Group was therefore aiming to produce a final report for the meeting of Overview and Scrutiny on 7 March 2012.

Councillor Johnson noted that this was a large piece of work and suggested that the title be changed. The progress of the group would need to be kept under review and if he was not happy with the report he would not put his name to it.

Councillor Jeffree endorsed the comments about accountability. He added that it was not clear to him how the economics of outsourcing worked, he asked how a company that needed to please share holders could deliver for less than an in-house service.

Members agreed to change the title of the review from 'Future Council' to 'The Way Ahead for Council Services.'

### **Briefing from the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer**

The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer introduced the papers to the Task Group and explained how they had been chosen. She referred to the work programme and asked that the Task Group review it and make the necessary

changes. She referred to the list of local authorities to consider that had been circulated at the meeting and asked for Members' views.

The Chair suggested that the example of Three Rivers be left aside for the time being as it was coloured by other local issues and at this stage the Task Group should look at the principles behind each option. He noted that the range of models was deliberately set at the extremes to challenge the group. He felt that although some of the authorities were different from Watford the need for political accountability were the same.

Councillor McLeod asked whether the Executive Director Services could provide the Task Group with a list of the current ways services were being delivered across the Council.

Councillor Johnson added that he would be interested in looking at authorities which had outsourced services and then brought them back in-house.

Councillor Jeffree advised that he would like to look at councils that were very similar to Watford.

#### **Comments on the draft scope**

The Chair said that officers were looking to save £2million but the task Group was more concerned with political accountability. He noted the references to channel shift and said that the Task Group could make references to this but it was not a focus.

The Chair said that of the four key transformers listed, service redesign was the key consideration for the group; the others followed on from that. He noted that the idea of the impact of service redesign on the community had not come through in the scope.

The Vice Chair added that Members wanted to be able to direct services strategically as well as being able to intervene when there were problems.

The Task Group agreed to add these two areas to the scope.

**ACTION-** The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to draft a questionnaire for other local authorities using the scope.

Councillor Johnson expressed his concern that the timescale for the review was very short.

The Chair said he understood the concerns but wanted the Task Group to undertake some serious work to achieve the aims.

Councillor Bell felt that by the end of February the Task Group would have a view even if there was more to be done.

The Chair said that the Task Group would be able to alert officers if the review became unmanageable within the timescale.

In response to a question from Councillor McLeod, the Chair advised that the outcomes of the review were not easily measured. There would be an element of subjectivity in the Task Group's views of accountability.

Councillor Jeffree said that they needed to ask what success looked like.

The Chair asked the Task Group to consider Members' current levels of political accountability and whether they wanted levels of accountability to be the same or better in the future.

Councillor McLeod referred to the questionnaires that were regularly sent to the Citizens' Panel. She asked whether there was historic data on the Panel's views on services. She suggested that this kind of data could be used as a baseline for the review.

**ACTION-** The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to discuss this with the Partnerships and Performance Section Head

Councillor Jeffree informed the Task Group that this issue was more than just political and they needed to consider the qualitative impact of different routes. How well were services delivered and were they good value for money?

The Task Group agreed the scope as amended.

#### **4 DISCUSSION OF DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME**

The Task Group agreed to invite the Executive Director Services and the Executive Director Resources to the next meeting.

**ACTION-** The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to circulate past reports by the Call-in and Performance Committee on SLM and WCHT

The Chair suggested that before the second meeting the Task Group consider which other local authorities to look at, including one which was similar to Watford.

Councillor Bell suggested looking at the authorities in Watford's CIPFA family.

The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer asked what questions Members had for the Executive Director Services and the Executive Director Resources. It was decided to use the seven bullet points in the Managing Director's briefing as a guideline and that the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer would circulate them for general comment before submitting them.

The Chair suggested asking how much influence the Council had in its current contracts.

The Vice Chair said that one example could be whether the Council could decide to change the pricing structure at the leisure centres.

**5 DATES OF NEXT THREE MEETINGS**

It was agreed that the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer would circulate the dates.

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm  
and finished at 8.20 pm

Chair  
The Way Ahead for  
Council Services: Task  
Group