MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

20 JANUARY 2014

PRESENT:

Members of the Board:
Councillors Dr Shera (Chairman), Mrs Avis, Buckley, Butlin, Miss Lawrence, Mahoney and Roodhouse

Councillors Humphrey, Leader of the Council and Ms Edwards, Mistry and Sandison

Officers:
Ian Davis, Executive Director; Andrew Gabbitas, Executive Director; Matthew Deaves, Communication, Consultation and Information Manager; Paul Ansell, Scrutiny Officer; Debbie Dawson, Scrutiny Officer; Linn Ashmore, Democratic and Scrutiny Services Officer

22. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 October 2013 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

23. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Francis and Helen Walton.

24. TO NOTE THE MINUTES OF CRIME AND DISORDER COMMITTEE, CUSTOMER AND PARTNERSHIPS COMMITTEE AND CORPORATE PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

The minutes of the meetings held by Customer and Partnerships Committee on 14 November 2013, Corporate Performance Committee on 21 November 2013 and Crime and Disorder Committee on 28 November 2013 were noted.

25. DISCUSSION WITH THE LEADER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

Councillor Humphrey gave a verbal report on where we are now and the future direction of the council, and also including the recent peer review. The main points were as follows:

The biggest change in the near future is the retirement of Andrew Gabbitas (Executive Director) in September this year and the selection process to find his replacement. In December Council considered a report on the future management structure that outlined the timescales and arrangements for the selection process.

The process of determining the job profile, and appointing a third party to provide assurance, has already begun and the interviews will be held in March.
It was anticipated the role would be filled by one of the current Heads of Service. The two other group leaders would receive advance notice of the job specification and selection process by the end of the month.

The senior management team will ensure a smooth transition period takes place following the elections in May, and this will be followed by a phased handover period with the new post holder through to September ensuring there are no spikes in performance.

The budget is due to be set in February. The Council is in a healthy financial position with a surplus on its general fund. There is a three-year medium term financial plan in place and there are no issues expected in the coming year. A spike is anticipated in 2015/16 but this will be manageable.

Recent projects the Council has successfully carried out include the new leisure centre, the crematorium (still in the process of being built) and the Diamond Jubilee Wood. These will enhance the quality of life of local residents and are further evidence of the stable position of the authority.

Staff briefings are currently being held which have provided the opportunity to give employees the good news that there is no requirement for service cuts or compulsory redundancies to achieve a balanced budget, making Rugby rather unique in comparison with other local authorities.

Tribute was paid to council staff, who have adapted well in the face of the recession and subsequent changes, and also the flexible manner that has helped them cope with the changing financial landscape.

There has always been a level of mistrust by central government in local authorities’ abilities and a number of processes for inspecting performance have been in place. The current coalition government has established a sector led approach headed by the Local Government Association that has set up peer reviews.

The recent Peer Review found this was a good council, delivering good services and outcomes for local people, and staff should be proud of the part they have played.

Rugby Borough Council has weathered the recession well and maintained strong performance levels with a strategy for change.

A good relationship between officers and members exists and this was a key factor in the success of the council.

Another finding of the Peer Review was that the council was coy about its achievements and does not celebrate and communicate its success. The Prime Minister had written that Rugby was an example to other authorities and his statement was also endorsed by the Secretary of State. To receive such acclaim from Whitehall was remarkable.

The Peer Review identified four areas to focus on:
• Articulate a clear ambition and vision for Rugby (as a council and as a place). Cabinet is working on this. Rugby as a place is changing its identity, particularly with regard to the level of development that includes over 6,000 homes at the Mast Site.

• Clearly define the council’s culture

• Celebrate and communicate successes

• Put appropriate succession planning in place.

The Leader concluded that, while there has been some criticism of the current management structure, it works well here. The authority is financially sound with a management structure fit to take the council forward in the medium term.

Members raised the following points and questions for the Leader and Executive Directors:

**The current senior management structure works well due to the personalities involved and this may not be the case when Andrew Gabbitas retires.**

It is true a level of trust exists between the Leader and both Executive Directors and there is no ‘them and us’ culture.

The role of a Chief Executive could be reintroduced and issues of mistrust could still occur. Appointing the right candidate will be key, and there is confidence that the talent exists in-house to fill this role. The potential candidates have all worked within the current system for a number of years and senior leaders have worked hard to ensure that the culture of trust runs deep within the organisation.

**Is it possible that fracking may take place locally?**

There is no appropriate geology in the borough so it is unlikely this will happen.

**A spike in performance is expected in 2015 but what about financial stability in the medium-term?**

There is a three-year plan in place and, barring anything untoward on the horizon, the short term future is secure. The Leader had informed employees at the briefings that he expected the council to be financially sustainable in just five years, regardless of any cuts to grants from central government. This is a unique position to be in.

**With regard to future succession planning, what impact will the appointment of one of the current heads of service have on the wider management team and morale, and is there a strategy in place to cope with this?**

This was difficult to say as the post has not been advertised yet but it was possible there would be competition for the position. It was hoped that anyone who was disappointed by not being appointed would handle this in a professional manner. The senior management team and the heads of service
had been in post for a number of years and a good working culture exists which is unlikely to be affected.

There are a number of key developments which will affect the identity of the town. How do you see the town centre in the future? Does Rugby BID provide value for money services in marketing the town? Does the role of the BID need to change?

It is not for this authority to define the role of Rugby BID. They decide their manifesto for businesses in the town centre and how marketing is carried out.

It is difficult to say how the town centre will look in the future. All towns are likely to change as they adapt to external forces. In the past the shops in the town used to meet the needs of the local population, but there is evidence that since the 1960s bigger purchases were being made out of town. Travel is even easier now and there are a number of big shopping centres in other towns within easy reach. The internet has also had a huge impact on the way people shop causing retailers to change the way they sell their products.

At the current time the best performing stores are those that sell both on the internet and via shops. Groups such as Arcadia have changed their business model to close town centre stores in favour of selling online or opening larger stores on retail parks.

In Rugby out of town shopping has grown and the retail offer in the town centre will focus more on leisure with cafés, coffee shops, bars and restaurants becoming established. There will still be shops for goods you cannot buy online and the independent shops which provide more of a leisure shopping experience.

The Council does not own town centre property or set rents or business rates but it can have some influence through its policies and its relationship with the BID. The level of housing development means Rugby will be bigger and more affluent and should make the town centre more viable.

It is easy to underestimate the level of change in the town. The building of the art gallery and museum, the new Asda shopping area and improvements to Caldecott Park are real assets to the town and have encouraged behavioural change in shoppers and visitors. The town will remain resilient to change in the future.

The national average for vacant premises on the high street is 13 per cent compared with 5 per cent in Rugby showing that the town compares well.

The town centre wards such as Benn and New Bilton are experiencing a number of issues including provision for car parking, pollution and criminality. How can these problems be eased in the future?

Victorian housing was obviously built before cars were introduced and there are pressures on these streets. A culture exists to try and find solutions to problems so if any proposals to improve parking in town centre streets are put forward these will be looked into.
Similar issues have occurred in other towns and cities changing the traditional character of areas. The lack of on street parking was a difficult issue and laws allowing the change of use of properties that could be used to address issues relating to multiple-occupancy no longer exist. There is a need to work with communities by indirect ways.

There has been a rise in social tensions in some areas and it was suggested that ward representatives meet with officers to discuss this further.

The new developments will have modern infrastructure incorporated in the design aspect and good transport schemes.

**The Pavilions estate was an example of poor design with inadequate car parking and access for refuse vehicles and it was important lessons are learned from this.**

Any development is a circumstance of its time. While the council is not blameless, in the past central government had put an emphasis on building higher density housing and development of brownfield land, which has since been relaxed. The Eden Park project is based on the level of density that existed 20-30 years ago.

**The queue of taxis at the town centre taxi rank often extends along Church Street which is potentially hazardous and blocks the road in town centre. Is there any plan to address this?**
The Leader undertook to look into this matter.

**Is systems thinking now embedded across the authority?**
Not totally. A large cross section has taken on the spirit of the changes but there are still some areas that have not got on board. Systems thinking is based on cultural change and there is enough commitment to date for this to continue with support from senior management. This will form part of the handover before Andrew Gabbitas retires. Increasingly managers are seeking support to make changes happen, but where this is not the case senior leaders are now communicating robust messages to middle managers that they need to “get on board or get off”.

**When developing the future vision of Rugby the place, it will be important to get all stakeholders on board. Developers needed to share the same vision when they were promoting the town.**
It was agreed that this was an important point and the council would look to bring developers on board as they developed the strategy for the borough.

**It is important to consider those on lower incomes and ensure there is a value for money offer in the town.**
It was suggested that the lower social economic groups are well catered for in the town. Around 70% of the borough’s residents fall into A,B, or C1 social categories that will go out of the town to shop. Those living on the Eden Park or Mast Site developments may travel to places such as Fosse Park. In terms of leisure activities the night-time offer out-performs the day time because people want to stay close to home when going out to eat or drink at night. The aim is to improve the day-time offer.
Are there any succession plans in place should there be a change in leadership of the Council?

There are many individuals who could perform the role but it involves a significant cost in time and this may be a barrier for members who work full time. The current model is right for Rugby but the present level of remuneration should be considered.

**RESOLVED THAT** – the Leader and Executive Directors be thanked for attending the meeting.

26. **PUBLICISING AND PROMOTING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK**

The Board considered the report (Part 1 – agenda item 7) concerning the way the council website publicises and promotes the scrutiny function and work of members.

The Communication, Consultation and Information Manager informed the Board that the content of the website was moving away from its use as an information repository and more as a tool to enable people to do things. Work is underway to remove several thousand pages of information.

Some general information on scrutiny was required but it is more important to focus on ways to involve the public in scrutiny.

There were a number of measures that could be taken to better promote overview and scrutiny work on the website that were based on shifting information back to engagement with the community rather than publicity. These suggestions included:

- An explanation, in two or three sentences, of the purpose of the task group and how residents can get involved.
- Online forms or requests for evidence, for residents to feed into the task group and influence its findings.
- For longer-running reviews, a blog giving regular updates can be set up, with posts from the Chairman or task group members.
- Audio or video blogs can also be created, though if members are interested these will take longer to set up.
- Announce the start of every task group, and report its outcomes. Template news releases can be created to make it easier to produce these in a timely manner.
- Opportunities could be taken mid-review to invite resident participation along similar lines to the recent Twitter engagements “#askpickles” and “#askgove”.

An example of the proposed change in focus to a greater use of social media was that it would enable people to offer their thoughts or comments on topics, such as those being discussed at tonight’s meeting. Use of Twitter could be more risky.
During discussion the following points were made:

Both members and officers could be set up on Twitter.

The council already has around five or six Facebook pages set up, predominantly based around places (eg RAGM). The content is clear and they usually moderate themselves. An individual Facebook page would require little additional resource.

There is an existing ‘Rugby Communities’ Facebook page, used by a number of agencies, that benefits from having a good number of users.

Community forums are used as a means to engage with the public but these can be exploited by a few individuals. A wider use of social media should have the right checks, balances and filters to ensure subjects are not monopolised.

Negative posts on Twitter can be filtered out but striking a provocative note often achieves a better response. It is important to get the balance right.

Facebook would be a useful way of engaging with particular groups such as the under 20s and women aged 25-45.

An initial rollout could be carried out based on key priorities. Care is required to manage the resource implications of increased use of social media.

The Leader and Portfolio Holders should also be included for appropriate topics.

There was a good opportunity in the near future to use new approaches to engage the public in advance of the overview and scrutiny work programme workshop in March.

RESOLVED THAT –

(1) a phased roll out of new approaches be carried out in the first instance and the situation be reviewed on a regular basis; and

(2) existing and new task groups include the use of social media and ways of engaging with the public in their work programmes and also their one-page strategies.

27. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME PROGRESS

The Board considered the report (Part 1 – agenda item 8) concerning progress in task group reviews, the work programmes of the Board and scrutiny committees and the work programme workshop format.
Neighbourhood Planning
This light touch review has been deferred and will be scoped by the Customer and Partnerships Committee at its meeting on 14 June as progress on the Coton Park pilot has been slower than anticipated.

Alcohol and health in Rugby
The one-page strategy has been agreed and membership of the sub-group will be agreed at the next meeting of the Customer and Partnerships Committee on 30 January.

The scrutiny work programme meeting with parish councils that was due to be held on Monday 27 January had been set up following a suggestion from Monks Kirby Parish Council at past years' workshops to review the disparity between urban and rural services. The idea was to identify where the matters of real community concern lay. In March 2013 the Board had agreed to discuss at this meeting how to deal with an additional three proposals from parish councils. These were mainly about planning, which was not a permissible topic for scrutiny. The scrutiny officer asked for confirmation that planning matters should therefore not be discussed at the meeting.

Monks Kirby Parish Council had since withdrawn its proposal, though the council will still be represented at the meeting.

Members commented there was a robust complaints process in place to deal with planning issues.

A suggestion was made that parish councillors would benefit from attending the training on planning to help them to improve their understanding of the national planning policy framework.

The meeting with parish councils would not be open to the general public. A number of parish councils had indicated that they would attend. There would be an introduction about scrutiny and an explanation of scrutiny reviews and what they aimed to achieve. Then the parish council delegates would be invited to discuss matters of concern which might lend themselves to scrutiny review. The outcomes of the meeting would be fed into the work programme workshop on 3 March.

Any councillors were invited to attend but it was important not to outnumber the guests too much so it was suggested that it was likely to be of most interest to members of the Board and councillors for rural wards.

The Scrutiny Officer agreed to email a reminder about the meeting date to members.

RESOLVED THAT –

(1) progress in the work programme be noted; and

(2) the scrutiny officer inform the parish councils that had submitted proposals on planning matters that such matters were not permissible topics for scrutiny and would not be discussed at the meeting on 27 January.
The Board considered the report (Part 1 – agenda item 9) concerning an exception report of overview and scrutiny review action plans.

Four reviews were still live and for two there were no overdue actions. Explanations had been provided in the report for the overdue actions in the other reviews and no areas of particular concern were reported.

RESOLVED THAT – the report be noted.