

CORPORATE RESOURCES

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

THURSDAY 7 MARCH 2002 AT 2.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor Guest (Chairman), Councillors Blackadder, Bradley, Joscelyne (substitute for Councillor Parsons), Morton (substitute for Councillor Jefferson), Styth and Toole (substitute for Councillor Bain).

ALSO PRESENT :

Councillors Firth, L Fisher, Geddes and Pattinson attended the meeting as observers.

Councillor Mitchelson was present at the meeting to answer questions on the call-in.

Mr C Wright (Head of Personnel) had been requested by the Chairman to attend the meeting as a witness.

CROS.36/02 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf on Councillors Bain, Jefferson, Parsons and J Prest.

CROS.37/02 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING

DECLARATIONS OF "THE PARTY WHIP")

There were no declarations of interest or declarations of "the Party Whip" relating to any item on the Agenda.

CROS.38/02 CALL IN OF INDIVIDUAL PORTFOLIO HOLDER DECISION

PF.005/02 – EXECUTIVE – "AWAY DAY" EVENT

Prior to formal consideration of this matter, a Member indicated that he noted that this had been an all party call in and that it was related to an Executive "Away Day" event which should have been held on 6 March 2002. The discussion at this meeting would, therefore, relate to an event which hadn't actually happened. He considered that Officers present at the meeting could be better employed on more constructive work.

The Chairman indicated that this special meeting had been called to question the decision taken by the Individual Portfolio Holder. The City Solicitor and Secretary indicated that the call in had been made in accordance with the City Council's Constitution. The call in procedures required a meeting of the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held within five working days.

A Member referred to the fact that one of the Members who had been party to the call in was not present at the meeting, and that he found it insulting to the Committee that the Member hadn't the decency to turn up and give their arguments.

Other Members did not concur with this view and the Chairman asked the Member whether he wished to withdraw his comments.

The Member indicated that he did not wish to withdraw his comments.

The Chairman then welcomed to the meeting Councillor Mitchelson, whose decision, taken as an individual portfolio holder, was the subject of the call in. The Chairman also indicated that he had invited Mr C Wright (Head of Personnel) to attend the meeting. Both were present to answer Members' questions.

Mr Wright was asked what the budgetary implications for the City Council were if training events were held outside of the Civic Centre but still on City Council owned premises.

Mr Wright indicated that for most of the venues there would be an internal transfer within budgets to deal with the charge. In most cases this would involve a transfer from one Council budget to another, except in the case of Morton Manor which was separate from the Council.

A Member questioned the wisdom of the choice of the Crown Inn at Wetheral when Council owned facilities could be used, and which would promote City Council facilities rather than those of the private sector.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that the point of an "Away Day" was for the event to be held away from the Civic Centre so that the training session could be held with no interruptions. The training event was for the Executive to discuss with the City Treasurer and a member of his staff the three year financial plan for the City Council. Some Council owned facilities had been suggested to stage the event along with the Crown Inn at Wetheral. Councillor Mitchelson indicated that he had agreed to hold the event at the Crown Inn which has conference facilities and paid into the Conference Group.

Reference was made to recent press articles regarding the Overview and Scrutiny Workshop held in Tullie House on 27 February 2002. Members of the Committee pointed out to Councillor Mitchelson that the Workshop had not been a formal Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting. The Workshop had been set up with the agreement of the three Group Leaders and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairmen and Vice Chairmen to promote better understanding and working between the Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that this event had been put to him as an Overview and Scrutiny Workshop organised by the Officer responsible for the Overview and Scrutiny function.

A Member asked that if an Officer had made the decision could it have been subject to call in.

The City Solicitor and Secretary clarified that the call in procedures related to decisions of the Executive or individual Members of the Executive. This was an Individual Member's decision and could therefore be called in. The only Officer decisions which could be called in related to key decisions and Officers did not currently have delegated powers to make key decisions.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that the "Away Day" was the first such event the Executive had wished to have since the new structures had been implemented. He could have asked an Officer to make the necessary arrangements, but had decided to be up front in making the decision himself as an Individual Portfolio Holder.

A Member referred to the fact that, in the period 1995 to 1998, the sum of £8,777 had been spent on JMT meetings in country house hotels in Scotland, and pointed out that the event proposed for the Crown Inn at Wetheral would have cost approximately £250.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that he considered spending £250 on the event would have been a worthwhile investment for what was to have been achieved on the day.

A Member considered that the decision should be looked at from the point of view of standards of the Council, how the public viewed decisions and in terms of Best Value. The Member considered that if the Executive had met in the Executive Suite in the Civic Centre they could have ensured no interruptions.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that Executive Members and Officers were often called out of meetings held in the Civic Centre. In addition, he felt that holding the meeting off the Civic Centre premises could have provided a more productive environment.

The Member considered that City Council owned premises should be used for these events wherever possible, and pointing out that £21,500 had been spent on the Executive Suite to make it appropriate for meetings and functions. Councillor Mitchelson was asked whether he would consider using the Executive Suite for similar events in the future.

Councillor Mitchelson indicated that the Executive did use the Executive Suite facilities frequently and that all things would be taken into consideration when arranging future training events. He would consider the most appropriate place to have training events at the time they were being arranged.

A Member referred to a training event held at Morton Manor on Friday 1 March 2002, and indicated that he understood the cost to have been £376 which was £120 more than the Executive "Away Day" event arranged for the Crown Inn, Wetheral.

The Chairman considered that the call in did not relate solely to the amount of money spent but about whether such events ought to be held in Council premises or the private sector.

A Member noted that no information had been provided to Members about the training event on 1 March 2002, so it was impossible to compare this event to the Executive's "Away Day" event.

Following questions, Members of the Committee debated the matter.

It was moved and seconded that the Decision PF.005/02 relating to the Executive – "Away Day" event be not referred back to the decision maker, and that the decision take effect from the date of this meeting, subject to the Leader being asked to give a reason for his choice of venue when making decisions on training events in the future.

Councillor Mitchelson accepted that he would give reasons why a particular venue had been chosen in any future decisions on training events.

RESOLVED – That Decision PF.005/02 be not referred back to the decision maker and, therefore, the decision takes effect from the date of this meeting, it being noted that Councillor Mitchelson has agreed to give reasons why a non-corporate resource had not been chosen in any future decisions on training events.

(The meeting ended at 3.08 pm)

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