

## **Council Excellence Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21<sup>st</sup>** **September 2010**

This Committee notes that, under the Council's Constitution, it is charged, amongst other things, with scrutinising; the maintenance of a sustainable and stable budget; providing value for money; improving the Council's budgeting process to fully reflect its priorities; development of the Council's approach to Community engagement and the Council's Community Strategy and public relations.

It therefore expresses its deep concern that the Council's normal structures, including this committee, appear to have been totally bypassed through the appointment of Independent Task Forces which then act outside the normal range of Council Meetings and procedures.

In particular, this Committee expresses concern that:

- ◆ The Task Forces were presented with budgetary information on the services they were considering, without those papers being presented either to Cabinet or to this Committee, where the information could have been questioned.
- ◆ No information has been given on the appointment of the members of these Task Forces and the way in which they were selected.
- ◆ It is unclear whether or not there is a register of interests of those individuals sitting on the Task Forces, or whether there is any procedure for a declaration of interest on any items discussed.
- ◆ The consultation procedure, including the way in which Task Forces would be used, was announced in a press release, and not through Cabinet, where it could have been called into this Committee for further examination.
- ◆ The questionnaire for public consultation that was drawn up following the initial Task Force meetings was not taken to Cabinet as a draft, which would have allowed it to be questioned or called in to this committee for further examination.
- ◆ The questionnaire itself is fundamentally flawed, for example, in failing to provide any comparative costings, in failing to provide complete lists of alternatives, including the provision of services by the Council, and in failing to make it clear to the public whether questions about the provision of alternative services from the voluntary sector refers to the Council commissioning services or actually stopping services and hoping the voluntary sector will fill the gap without any extra resources.
- ◆ The way in which the subsequent public consultation would be carried out was again announced in a press release, stating the timetable of events, and was not subject to question or scrutiny either from Cabinet or this committee, which is specifically charged with scrutinising both community engagement issues and issues around public relations.
- ◆ It has been made clear that this process, which has not been open to democratic scrutiny, will actually be used to inform Wirral's budget setting.

This Committee therefore asks that:

1. The Chair of each Task Force be asked to make a presentation to this committee on their findings which informed the questions contained within the questionnaire.
2. There should be a standing item on this committee containing the minutes of all the Task Forces for the duration of their existence.
3. The Monitoring Officer presents a report to this committee setting out the process that was followed in the selection and appointment of Task Force members.
4. A copy of any register of interests or declaration of interests of Task Force members is presented to this committee.
5. The Director of Finance provides a report or presentation to this committee summing up the financial information and budgetary options provided to the different Task Forces and gives a detailed explanation of the exact meaning and budgetary implications of the questions within the public questionnaire, including relevant costings as appropriate.