

Extract from Cabinet minutes – 18 October 2011

Property & Facilities Procurement - Scope of Contract - Food with Thought/Quest Cleaning Service Strategy Paper

Cabinet considered a report informing the decision on the inclusion of the cleaning and catering services provided by Quest Cleaning Services (QCS) and Food with Thought (FwT) within the scope of the proposed integrated Property & Facilities external services contract. The contract will provide a Total Facilities Management service including the delivery of hard and soft FM services, as well as professional and construction services.

Councillor Alan Armitage, Shadow Cabinet Member for Finance & Property indicated that he had asked to speak as the Liberal Democrat Group was not convinced by the arguments. He did not agree that bigger is better and felt that with one contract there was more risk. Neither did he see that it saved money. The Atkins contract was not without problems and the model should not be expanded until it was proven to work fully. Referring to the benefits of inclusion in the contract set out on pages 164 and 165 Councillor Armitage commented that with regard to replacing new equipment this could be done anyway. He queried the outcome once the customer care line was outsourced. FwT was popular with schools so why change it. He did not believe that the contract would maintain and improve service and quality and queried how take up would be improved.

Councillor Armitage responding to a question from Councillor Robertson stated that the contract did not state that there would be outsourcing but that he believed this was implied in the process.

Mrs Ruth Lyster, spoke against the recommendation. She was a school cook with 5 ½ years of experience. In recent years the quality of schools meals had improved vastly with increased take-up. Over the last two years a profit had been generated. Most kitchens had been refurbished; training levels and health and safety standards were high. Mrs Lyster noted that her school had the highest take-up of meals at 67%. She believed that the service provided was of very good value at a low risk. Current involvement of school cooks made plans more practical and progress was jeopardised by plans to include in the contract. She believed it was the odd one out and that the goals set out in the report were either already achieved or could be achieved under the existing system. She believed that the main reason for inclusion was to make the contract more attractive. She was concerned as a mother that the welfare of her children would be affected by the deterioration of the food. As a cook she was concerned that portions would shrink and that the achievements so far would be jeopardised and that inclusion was not necessary or desirable.

Responding to questions from Cabinet Members as to what proof there was that there would be less money for food, portions would shrink, and whether the new contract could bring in some efficiencies, Mrs Lyster replied that the only way to increase profit was to reduce costs. The service had already done

everything it could do in terms of efficiencies and she could not comment on any other company.

Councillor Couchman introduced the report setting out the background to the need for a new contract and the move to bring in a total facilities management service. He acknowledged that FwT had made a great deal of progress since 2005 but pointed out that there had been the benefit of a grant for school meals. The service was not fully self-operating as it did not pay towards energy or back office charges. He supported inclusion in order to test the market.

Martin Tugwell referred to the detail of the report noting that the inclusion of Quest brought efficiencies as part of a comprehensive service. With regard to FwT there had been considerable relative success but looking forward there were risks associated with the service. There was a grant; a small number of schools (10) generated the majority of the surplus and he questioned whether this was resilient. The success to date did make it attractive. All bidders saw scope to grow the market and to maintain and build on standards. They were able to provide levels of investment greater than Oxfordshire County Council had been able to make. The model that would be tested would see the Council keep control of key aspects of the contract such as price and quality.

Councillor Robertson stressed that this was not the final decision. FWT had made remarkable progress: the service should be in the contract but if it did not meet his expectations he would expect the Council to renegotiate with it excluded. There was support expressed for this view. Councillor Tilley stated that the crux was to see the specification and to ensure that everything was the same or better and to carefully monitor.

Cllr Chapman in sympathising with the speaker commented that previously the decision had been taken that if FWT met its business case the service should continue. The food and value provided was very good and exceeding minimum specifications. She highlighted the need for Cabinet Members to be kept informed on matters such as who would put specifications together; on local sourcing of food; on how scrutiny would be provided and on the future of current workers. She queried whether there would be a need for rebranding and commented that FWT was not broken and did not require fixing. She was uneasy and queried whether if profit was made it would be fed back into the school meals service.

Following a vote by a show of hand it was

RESOLVED: (by 9 votes to 0, with 1 abstention) to include the current catering and cleaning services provided by Food with Thought and QCS within the scope of the Property and Facilities Contract.