

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMISSION
15 SEPTEMBER 2005
(7:30 pm to 9:40 pm)

Present: Councillors Sargeant (Chairman), Beadsley, Mrs Birch, Browne, Edger, Grayson, Harrison, Leake, McLean and Worrall

Parent Governor Representative:
Mr Dempsey

Apologies for absence were received from:
Councillors Earwicker and Thompson
Mr Anderson

In attendance: Chris Herbert, Borough Treasurer
Calvin Orr, Group Accountant
Robin Taylor, Policy & Performance Officer

16. Substitute Members (Item 1)

The Panel noted the attendance of the following substitute Member:

Councillor Baily as a substitute for Councillor Thompson

17. Minutes and Matters Arising (Item 2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission held on 21 July 2005 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip (Item 3)

None

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

19. Quarterly Operations Reports (Item 4)

Chris Herbert introduced the Quarterly Operations Report (QOR) for the Corporate Services and Resources Department for the first quarter of 2005/06, highlighting:

- o Significant progress on the window renewal programme for council properties;
- o Continuing work to drive forward the Council's community cohesion agenda;
- o The successful recruitment of the Council's re-launched Citizen's Panel, the Bracknell Forest 1500';
- o Further development of the Council's online customer services and the award of a 'Crystal Mark' for the use of 'Plain English' on the public website pages;

- Continued success with the Corporate Procurement Team, which had already gone a long way to covering its own costs;
- Reduced levels of sickness absence compared to the previous year;
- Excellent performance on the payment of invoices during the quarter and the highest rate of council tax collection recorded since the system was introduced.

Issues arising in discussion included:

- Corporate procurement of IT hardware: Members noted that the Council negotiated a fixed discount rate for IT purchases rather than a fixed price, enabling it to take account of reductions in market prices;
- Call handling statistics: Telephone callers who hung up before receiving an answer were logged, although the QOR did not give a break down of these statistics.
- Staffing figures: Members appreciated that staffing figures varied greatly between departments due to the differing nature of their work;
- Implementation of new IT systems: Since the QOR had been published the new Revenues & Benefits system (Pericles) had gone live. Payments had continued to be made whilst the new system was installed and much of the backlog of claims had already been cleared. In addition, testing of a new housing repairs system (Task) was virtually complete.

As the Chief Executive had been unable to attend the meeting, questions and issues were invited on the QOR for his Department. Members were particularly interested in the issue of public consultation. Chris Herbert explained that it was important for the Council to obtain information from local people, however this had to be balanced against any risk of 'consultation overkill'. To assist with this an external company had been used to select the 'Bracknell Forest 1500' on a reasonably representative basis.

The Chairman thanked Chris Herbert for his contribution to the meeting.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY REVIEWS

20. Contributing to Work on the Efficiency Plan (Item 5)

Calvin Orr gave a presentation to Members outlining the background to the efficiency agenda (driven by the Government's 'Gershon' efficiency review) and bringing the Commission up to date on Council activity to release resources to the front line (copy of slides attached at Annex A). It was acknowledged that a focus on efficiency was a priority for all political parties and therefore here to stay. The efficiency agenda also included some confusing concepts. In simple terms, efficiency could include any combination of:

- Reduced inputs for the same outputs;
- Reduced prices for the same outputs;
- Additional outputs or improved quality;

- Improved ratios of costs to outputs.

In conclusion, Calvin Orr explained that the next area of work for the Council was to provide a mid-term report to the Government on progress against efficiency targets. He suggested that this would also be a useful time for the Commission to look at the issue again.

Chris Herbert reminded Members that a focus on efficiency was not new for the Council. Indeed over successive years around £1m a year had been identified in efficiency savings and this had been reflected in good CPA ratings. There was a more serious question about how long this could be sustained but the Gershon efficiency agenda provided an opportunity to recognise the cashable and non-cashable savings made by the Council.

Key issues raised in discussion included:

- Concern about the potential impact on the Council of the continual pressure to find financial efficiency savings, particularly when the Council already faced significant challenges including bringing its housing up to the decent homes standard and funding shortfalls from the Supporting People initiative;
- Members were also concerned that the Government would claw back savings through grant reductions leaving the Council with little ability to meet shortfalls through rent, fee or tax increases. It was acknowledged that as a relatively small but efficient unitary authority such reductions could lead to difficult decisions around spending less on staff or services and potentially have an adverse impact on local people.
- On a related matter, Chris Herbert reminded Members that local authorities' initial fears that the introduction of Gershon efficiency savings would result in lower budgets had not transpired. Indeed the Government's stated intention was to release money for front line services;
- Clarification that increases in fees or cuts in services could not be counted as efficiency savings. However the Council was taking a creative approach and learning from other local authorities e.g. in relation to audit fees, rate revaluations and VAT treatment;
- In light of Members concerns about the prospect of Government funding reducing or being clawed back over time as further efficiency savings were delivered it was suggested that the council's draft consultation response to Government on the financial settlement be circulated to the Commission;
- Recognition that central government funding requirements and regulation could be a constraint to local authorities seeking to make financial savings or manage services in more innovative ways. Also that staff costs frequently formed a large proportion of council budgets which potentially increased the significance or impact of any major service changes;
- Noting that whilst there may be opportunities to generate savings by sharing service provision with another organisation, the service would still have to provided more

efficiently to qualify against the efficiency targets, rather than simply sharing existing costs;

- It was suggested that Commission Members could play a useful role in emphasising and encouraging the delivery of non-cashable efficiency savings across the council. This was an area that received little public recognition and it was a particular challenge to make it part of the normal budget or financial processes (e.g. highlighting non-cashable as well as cashable savings resulting from best value reviews).

AGREED that Cllrs Edger and Leake would act as an informal 'sounding board' on the efficiency agenda on behalf of the Commission, liaising with officers developing and implementing efficiency plans and targets.

21. **Update on Overview & Scrutiny Working Groups (Item 6)**

The Chairman invited Overview & Scrutiny Panel Chairmen to provide a brief update on current or planned overview & scrutiny reviews and working groups.

Cllr Harrison informed the Commission that Members of the Environment & Leisure Overview & Scrutiny Panel would be looking at the council's policy on the management of trees. This involved considering difficulties of dealing with large or old trees in Bracknell Forest and the use of Tree Preservation Orders.

Cllr Mrs Birch noted that Members of the Lifelong Learning and Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Panel would be considering their future work programme at the forthcoming panel meeting. In the meantime the working group on Performance in Relation to School Transfers was due to report at the December meeting of the Panel. Members of the working group on School Exclusions were intending to visit Charters School and also schools in Brent, Balham and Reading prior to producing their report.

Cllr Edger explained that the Adult Social Care and Housing Overview & Scrutiny Panel had yet to identify key issues for working groups. However they had an extensive work programme including:

- CCTV – the Chairman was due to meet officers for sustainable communities to consider how best to take this issue forward;
- Housing stock – this would depend on the outcome of the Better Homes Commission's work;
- Older People's Issues – a cross-cutting issue which might be taken forward jointly with members of the Health Overview & Scrutiny Panel;
- Supporting People;
- Anti-Social Behaviour – the Chairman would be discussing this issue with Linda Wells.

In relation to health scrutiny Cllr Leake mentioned that progress continued to be made on the review of coronary heart disease, part of a wider action learning project with other councils in the Thames Valley. A report was now being drafted, focussing on what BFBC could do to assist health partners and residents to utilise resources more effectively. Whilst the Health Overview & Scrutiny Panel did not set up any working groups at the initial meeting, it did identify several issues where input might be needed, including:

- The potential impact of the proposed reorganisation of PCTs in East Berkshire;
- The effect or impact on Social Services of financial cuts on PCTs and other health partners;
- Commenting on changes in maternity services and in the approach to preventative services in Bracknell Forest;
- Heatherwood & Wexham Park NHS Trust's application for foundation trust status;
- Responding to statutory consultation requests or Commission for Social Care Improvement.

In addition, in Cllr Thompson's absence, Cllr Leake introduced a brief note from the Members of the working group on Members' Information Needs. Having introduced a Members' Information Bulletin earlier in the year in response to recommendations of the Commission, the working group had subsequently met again to consider how effective the bulletin was and whether further improvements could be made. Whilst recognising that this could be a subjective issue for individual members, the group had sought to focus more clearly on what was happening within the council and what major issues were coming up for consideration.

The group's key recommendations were that:

- The bulletin be recast as a digest focussing on key Departmental or council wide issues and policies;
- The feasibility of creating a specific intranet area for Members to assist them with their role should be explored;
- The possibility of producing a small loose leaf version of the staff telephone directory for Members should be investigated;
- Proposed major policy and legislative changes should be highlighted for all Members before finding their way on to a critical point on the Executive work programme.

In discussion Members expressed mixed views about the amount of information already provided (electronically) via the press office, with some finding Press Notices and photographs interesting and helpful whilst others commented about difficulties with downloading bulky electronic files. It was clarified that the working group had confined itself to looking at what information Members received rather than how they received it.

AGREED that the issues raised by the working group be taken up with officers to explore the possibility of introducing them on a trial basis.

Finally there was a brief discussion about whether the Commission should undertake a review relating to anti-social behaviour and the current state of policing in the Borough given the cross-cutting nature of this issue. This reflected some of the concerns Members had raised with the Chief Constable at the Council meeting earlier in the month.

The importance of addressing appropriate concerns to the Police was stressed, although several members noted that whilst the Police had a remit to deal with criminal behaviour, some of the issues and concerns that had been raised by Members could be outside their responsibility.

Members also raised the question about whether there might be a need to do some more work to identify what was happening across the Borough and where. In that context it

was suggested that the recently established 'Bracknell Forest 1500' may be a useful vehicle for assessing local concerns and obtaining feedback. Members also recognised the read-across to possible work on anti-social behaviour by the Adult Services & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Panel.

AGREED that initially a closed briefing meeting be arranged for scrutiny members, to involve representatives of the Police and the community safety team as well as the relevant Executive Members.

CHAIRMAN