

**ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
PANEL
18 DECEMBER 2008
7.30 - 9.05 PM**



Present:

Councillors Beadsley, Burrows, Finch, Mrs Fleming, Leake, McLean and Simonds

Executive Members:

Councillors Birch, Mrs Hayes and McCracken

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Brunel-Walker, Finnie, Browne, Mrs McCracken, Mrs Pile and Mrs Ryder

Also Present:

Andrea Carr, Policy Officer
Shanaz Alam, Benefits Services Manager
Richard Beaumont, Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Mark Devon, Chief Officer: Leisure & Culture
Jane Eaton, Chief Officer: Performance & Resources
Simon Hendey, Chief Officer: Housing
Emma Silverton, Administrator, Overview & Scrutiny
Katharine Simpson, Democratic Services Officer

25. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Leake be elected Chairman of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the duration of the meeting.

26. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Panel noted the attendance of the following substitute member:

Councillor Simonds for Councillor Browne

27. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 22 September 2008 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

28. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest nor indications that members would be participating whilst under the party whip.

29. Urgent Items of Business

There were no urgent items of business.

30. Performance Monitoring Report

The Chief Officer: Housing gave a presentation in respect of departmental performance with reference to the Performance Monitoring Report (PMR) for the 2nd quarter of 2008/09. The presentation outlined the Department's finances as at October 2008, highlighted variances on revenue and identified capital projects that would be carried forward. Staffing issues, key highlights and a forward look were also included.

The Panel noted that the capital projects identified for carrying forward included: the Choice Based Lettings IT system which was expected to go live in July 2009, a programme of Section 106 leisure schemes, the South Hill Park grounds restoration project, the Special Protection Area Mitigation Strategy and improvements to the junction at Three Legged Cross, Warfield.

The Panel was advised that the Department had a staff turnover rate of 19.11% as at 30 September 2008 and an average vacancy factor of 10.08%, an increase from the 8.91% vacancy rate in the last quarter. The two areas giving most significant cause for concern were Environment and Public Protection and Planning and Transportation which had vacancy rates of 14.29% and 8.79% respectively. There were shortages nationally in the areas of environmental health, licensing, planning and engineers. Staff were often recruited by other local authorities and the Department were working to address this issue.

Key highlights for the Department included: the introduction of the 'Scores on the Doors' scheme to help maintain standards in food businesses, an improvement in recycling rates which meant the Council was currently exceeding its targets, winning an award for Britain in Bloom, the Northern Parishes Arts Week, the launch of a new Cultural Strategy, the award of a £659,000 grant in recognition of the Council's completion of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy and the achievement of the Leisure Chartermark for major resources for the fifteenth year in a row.

Arising from members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- The limitations of the Council's buildings and the amount of investment that would be required meant that it was unlikely that there would be significant step changes in their energy ratings
- The Scores on the Doors database would be regularly updated as part of a food business' regular inspection regime and would therefore incur no significant additional cost to the Department
- Details of the capital schemes carried forward to 2009/10, and in particular those involving Section 106 contributions would be circulated to the Panel
- The Government's Primary Authority scheme would create a regime where local authorities that were home to the headquarters of large organisations would become a clearing house for questions that other local authorities might have about that organisation. It was stressed that any decision that the Council took on progressing with the scheme would be subject to very careful consideration and an Executive decision would need to be sought. If Bracknell Forest did progress with the scheme and became a clearing house for enquiries, relating to Waitrose, whose headquarters were located in the Borough, that firm would be obliged to

- provide appropriate funding to the Council however the national shortage of Trading Standards officers would make recruitment difficult
- Concern was expressed over the use of Section 106 funding to support a bus service to The Parks development that was not being used by the public

31. **2009/10 Draft Budget Proposals**

Jane Eaton, Chief Officer: Performance and Resources gave a presentation on the Department's draft budget proposals for the financial year 2009/10. The presentation included an overview of the department's commitment budget, service pressures and developments, proposals to balance the budget and an overview of the capital programme.

It was predicted that the main service pressures and developments in 2009/10 would include: purchase of additional smart cards to meet increased demand from concessionary fare applications, Smartconnect, improving the library stock, introduction of the free swimming programme and land charges.

The savings proposed in the draft budget had been well planned and had been generated through good management of resources and not as a result of service reductions. The areas that savings would be made included: a reduction in the volume of consultation required for the new Local Development Framework scheme, changes to the way that the Council was billed under the concessionary fares scheme, changing service providers for the Smartcard, using leased accommodation instead of bed and breakfast accommodation for those classified as homeless, development of the traffic modelling system and savings in general running costs.

The Panel's attention was drawn to the absence of the proposed fees and charges from the budget proposals which were currently being finalised. Details of the proposed fees and charges would be sent to all overview and scrutiny panel members in January for information and comment. Any comments should be sent to the Panel's Chairman and these would then be fed into the Overview and Scrutiny Commission's budget scrutiny session on 22 January 2009.

Arising from members' questions and comments the following points were noted:

- The majority of the additional income from proposed increases to Cemetery and Crematorium charges would be generated from the provision of optional services that could be purchased when planning a funeral
- The resurfacing of roads and footways was based on a visual audit of all the Borough's highways carried out by engineers on an annual basis with work being targeted at the roads where need was greatest
- Clarification would be sought over the reasons for carrying out the proposed improvements to John Nike Way and London Road during the 2009/10 financial year
- Further information concerning the virement to create additional conference facilities at Easthampstead Park Mansion would be circulated
- A member sought further details of virements associated with bus contracts
- The closure of the post office in Little Sandhurst had caused a significant increase in the number of people using the Yorktown Road branch and the proposed extension of the nearby car park was essential for safety reasons

The Panel indicated their acceptance of the 2009/10 draft budget proposals.

32. **The Benefits Service**

Simon Hendeby, Chief Officer: Housing, and Shanaz Alam, Benefits Services Manager, gave a presentation on the Benefits Service. The presentation included an overview of the Benefits Service in Bracknell Forest and the results of two recent benchmarking and mock inspection exercises.

The Panel were informed that under the Benefit and Fraud Inspection (BFI) regime the Benefits Service had, in 2006, been rated as being a level four service and this had contributed to the Council's overall Comprehensive Performance Assessment score of four. However the BFI regime had been replaced by a new harder test administered by the Audit Commission and a recent mock inspection had rated the Benefits Service as a one star service. The Council had also participated in a CIPFA benchmarking exercise that had rated the Benefits Service to be a high performance-low cost service.

An improvement plan had been drawn up to address areas of weakness that had been identified during the mock inspection. This would run until the end of the financial year when it would be refreshed and a new plan drawn up.

The Panel agreed that a working group would be set up to monitor the implementation of the Improvement Plan and Councillors Beadsley, Burrows and Finch volunteered to be on the group.

The Panel congratulated the Benefits Service on the excellent work they had done.

33. **A Clean Sweep**

The Panel noted the report of the review of street cleaning undertaken by a working group of the Panel, which had now been adopted by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission.

34. **Supporting People Working Group**

Councillor Mrs Shillcock presented a report providing an update of the work of the Supporting People Working Group.

The Working Group had been implemented following a critical Audit Commission inspection of the Council's Supporting People programme in 2005. Following the inspection, a significant amount of work had been carried out to improve the service and the Audit Commission were no longer monitoring the Supporting People programme as stringently.

The Working Group had been delighted with the progress that had been made over the past two years. Despite this the Working Group acknowledged that retendering the contracts of a number of service providers and the loss of ring fenced funding would provide the Supporting People programme with significant challenges over the next year or two. The Panel agreed that the Working Group would continue to monitor the Supporting People programme and update reports would be brought back to the Panel.

The Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing thanked the Working Group for all their work and continuing support.

35. **Update on Working Groups**

The Panel noted a report providing an update on the Panel's Working Groups.

36. **Overview and Scrutiny Quarterly Progress Report**

The Panel noted a report outlining the activities of all the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels and the Commission.

37. **Attendance of Executive Members at Overview and Scrutiny Meetings**

The Panel noted a report clarifying when Executive Portfolio Holders were to attend meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels and the Commission. The panel agreed that each Executive Member would attend its meetings whenever the agenda of the meeting included a matter which fell within the relevant portfolio of the Executive Member, unless the Chairman had confirmed that there were no matters which required the Executive Member's attendance.

38. **Executive Forward Plan**

The Panel noted the items on the Executive Forward Plan relating to the Environment, Culture and Communities Department.

Item I013639: S106 Parks and Countryside

More information was requested about the proposed programme of works to enhance the Council's parks and countryside areas.

Item I013519: Bracknell Railway Station Forecourt Improvements

More information was requested about the proposed improvements to Bracknell Railway Station's forecourt and the allied release of Section 106 funding.

CHAIRMAN