

**ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
PANEL
12 JANUARY 2010
7.30 - 8.50 PM**



Present:

Councillors McLean (Vice-Chairman), Beadsley, Finch, Leake, Mrs McCracken, Mrs Angell (Substitute) and Brossard (Substitute)

Executive Members:

Councillor McCracken

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Finnie, Mrs Barnard and Mrs Fleming and Mrs Hayes

Also Present:

Andrea Carr, Policy Officer (Scrutiny)
Mark Devon, Chief Officer: Leisure & Culture
Simon Hendey, Chief Officer: Housing
Bev Hindle, Chief Officer: Planning & Transport
Steve Loudoun, Chief Officer: Environment & Public Protection
Vincent Paliczka, Director Environment, Culture & Communities
Emma Silverton, Democratic Services Officer

VICE-CHAIRMAN, COUNCILLOR MCLEAN, IN THE CHAIR

43. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Panel noted the attendance of the following Substitute Member:

Councillor Mrs Angel for Councillor Finnie
Councillor Brossard for Councillor Mrs Fleming

44. Minutes and Matters Arising

It was reported that the Waste Satisfaction Survey results were being analysed and would be circulated to the Panel once available.

The Panel was advised that work on the connecting path development at Ringmead was scheduled to commence in January 2010 and finish in February 2010.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 08 December 2009 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

45. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Mrs McCracken declared a personal interest as the spouse of the Executive member for Culture, Corporate Services and Public Protection and the Chairman of the Cultural Partnership.

46. Urgent Items of Business

There were no urgent items of business.

47. 2010/11 Draft Budget Proposals

The Panel received extracts from the proposed 2010/11 Revenue Budget and Capital Programme reports relating to Environment, Culture and Communities which were presented to the Executive on 15 December 2009.

The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities introduced the budget proposals which included detailed information on service pressures and developments, key decisions, fees and charges risk areas and contingency.

The budget for 2010/11 was under extreme pressure due to the present economic circumstances, which was unusual for the Council. An in year savings package and contingency fund would reduce projected overspend. In year savings identified by Departments amounted to £1,639,000 of which £478,000 would be a result of spend reduction and savings made in Environment, Culture and Communities (EC&C).

Changes in Commitment Budget 2010/11-2012/13 included; Local Development Framework adjustments in accordance with the timetable change and funds brought forward for the South Hill Park Grounds maintenance due to early approval from the government for the associated restoration project.

Service pressures and development amounted to £726,000 for EC&C with a total of £1,524,000 for Bracknell Forest Council. Whilst EC&C were responsible for the most significant service pressure it was noted that the Department were also responsible for the greatest service economies with savings of £1,318,000 out of a total Council saving of £3,243,000.

The Panel noted that the Contingency Budget had been increased to try to cover risks identified if they were to occur. In total, £1.7 million of potential risks had been identified but it was highly unlikely that these would all occur at the same time.

The Council had an estimated £9.3 million available in General Reserves at 31 March 2010.

Arising from the subsequent discussion it was noted that:

- It would be helpful in future budget proposals to include percentages against figures referred to, to allow the amount to be seen in context of the entire departments' budget.
- The Panel expressed disappointment that the Government's proposed changes to the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive scheme would result in no payment of grant to the Borough.

Key Revenue Budget Pressures relating to EC&C included a statutory change to the accounting of Land Charges resulting in a loss of income totalling £35,000, a loss of leisure income as a direct result of the recession, an increase in the number of domestic waste properties where waste had to be collected leading to increased cost, and a review of the contract for line rentals for the borough's library computers.

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

- The saving proposals for highway maintenance of £315,000 related to surface dressings and did not take in to account winter maintenance.
- Concern was expressed by the Panel that the proposal to discontinue the resource to collect stray dogs and patrol for dog fouling issues was potentially damaging for partnership working in the borough. Discussions would be held with Partners to look at the possibility of joint support for this service. Details would be reported to the Panel once discussions had taken place.
- Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside had a budget reduction which would result in less frequent grass cutting, litter clearance and general maintenance, however it was expected that a good standard would be maintained across the service area. The Council would welcome any proposals from Parish and Town Councils regarding joint working to maintain greens spaces in the borough.
- Dog control had been discussed recently by the Parish and Town Councils' Liaison Group and Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside were the subject of an agenda item for the forthcoming meeting of the Liaison Group.
- Savings from Planning were as a result of a reduced service as there had been a reduction in planning applications. No redundancies had been made in this department, however the hours of certain posts had been reduced.
- Savings resulting from Housing Options, Transport Development and Road Safety were a result of efficiency savings.
- Budget savings including the reduction of opening hours at some sites, were proposed for library services across the borough, reflecting the different use of, and less frequent visits from the public to the facilities. Concern was expressed that reduction of opening hours would limit use of valuable community facilities. The responsible department were planning to develop a strategy for the borough's libraries to look at multi-functional use and to provide a wider more accessible range of facilities at some sites.

The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities introduced the proposed Fees and Charges for 2010/11 relating to the Department. Due to the current economic climate the majority of charges had been held at their previous level as there was no scope to increase fees.

It was noted that research and comparisons to national and nearest neighbour fees and charges for services were looked at when fixing prices for services in Bracknell Forest. Surveys of user satisfaction and value for money were also used to monitor prices. Fixed leisure prices were typically at least as expensive as near by authorities, with a concessionary scheme in place.

The Panel expressed appreciation of officers on low car parking charges in the borough.

The change to the VAT level had created increased work for staff. It was noted that all Fees and Charges in the proposed budget reflected the increased level of VAT.

Clarification on the proposed reduction in the Hackney Carriage / private hire business licence transfer fee would be provided to the Panel.

It was noted that the increased Pest Control Charge was to bring the service in line with the commercial sector and meet costs.

The Panel noted that it was regretful that in some cases maintenance of valuable Council assets would need to be deferred in order to balance the budget for 2010/11 due to the current economic circumstances.

The Panel thanked the Director and officers for the presentation and responses to members' queries.

RESOLVED that the following comments be submitted in response to the 2010/11 budget consultation process:

- (i) The Panel was disappointed that the Government had seen fit to change the basis on which the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive scheme operated to the extent that the Borough had been financially penalised;
- (ii) Following an interim report from the Highway Maintenance Working Group, the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel recommend to the Executive, via the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, that the proposed reduction of £315,000 on highway maintenance is applied instead to highway improvements;
- (iii) the Parish and Town Councils be urged to work in partnership with Bracknell Forest Council to support dog control and the maintenance of Parks, Open Spaces and Countryside in the Borough; and
- (iv) opportunities to maximise the usage of libraries, which could also improve income to the service be investigated.

48. **Review of the Strategic Housing Partnership**

As part of the agreed approach to Overview and Scrutiny of the Bracknell Forest Partnership, the Panel received a completed questionnaire detailing the Strategic Housing Partnership's (SHP's) governance, performance management, financial management, and related issues. The Partnership's terms of reference were also received which included details of the SHP's membership.

The Panel received a presentation from the Chief Officer for Housing in respect of the Strategic Housing Partnership. The presentation included details of the main aims of the SHP and the work it undertook across the Borough.

The terms of reference of the SHP had been recently reviewed and a list of membership created. The election of a Chair for the Partnership would be held on 25 March 2010.

The main aims of the SHP were to:

- Enable the efficient operation of the housing markets in Bracknell Forest;
- Regularly assess housing market intelligence in Bracknell Forest so as to establish interventions to improve the operation of the housing markets;
- To identify market weaknesses or failures and propose partnership solutions.

The Strategic Housing Partnership reported on 11 National Indicators and 2 Local Area Agreement target National Indicators, NI 154 and NI 155.

It was noted that the SHP needed to be more strategic to identify where partners could intervene to improve operation of the housing market e.g. rent in advance deposit process and Council mortgage provision and work closely with other partnerships such as the Climate Change Partnership.

The Panel noted that the SHP would promote any development in the borough regardless of who the development was provided by.

It was noted that representatives from the various industries would be representing the industry as a whole and not their particular organisation. There were industry forums in place which could feed back to the SHP on specific issues.

The Panel thanked the Chief Officer for his presentation and looked forward to seeing the Strategic Housing Partnership evolve.

49. **Executive Forward Plan**

The Executive Forward Plan items relating to Environment, Culture and Communities were noted.

The next meeting of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel would be held on 09 March 2010 at 7.30pm in the Council Chamber, Easthampstead House.

CHAIRMAN