

**ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
PANEL
22 JUNE 2010
7.30 - 8.31 PM**



Present:

Councillors Beadsley, Bowers, Finch, Finnie, Mrs Fleming, Brossard, Mrs Shillcock and Thompson

Executive Members:

Councillors Mrs Ballin and Mrs Hayes

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Mrs Barnard, Leake, Mrs McCracken and McLean

Also Present:

Richard Beaumont, Head of Overview and Scrutiny
Jane Eaton, Head of Environmental Services
Simon Hendey, Chief Officer Housing
Bev Hindle, Chief Officer: Planning and Transport
Steve Loudoun, Chief Officer: Environment & Public Protection
Vincent Paliczka, Director of Environment, Culture and Communities
Emma Silverton, Democratic Service Officer

60. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Finnie be elected Chairman of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the municipal year 2010/11.

COUNCILLOR FINNIE IN THE CHAIR

61. Election of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor McLean be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel for the municipal year 2010/11.

62. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Panel noted the attendance of the following Substitute Members:

Councillor Brossard for Councillor Mrs Barnard
Councillor Thompson for Councillor McLean

63. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 9 March 2010 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

There were no matters arising.

64. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest.

65. Urgent Items of Business

There were no urgent items of business.

66. Performance Monitoring Report

The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities gave a presentation in respect of departmental performance with reference to the Performance Monitoring Report (PMR) for the 4th quarter of 2009/10 ending 31 March 2010. The presentation outlined the Department's revenue and finances as at March 2010. Staffing, key highlights, fees and charges and the forward look were also included.

It was reported that there was a £409,000 change in the Gross Revenue Budget. The Net Revenue Budget was £35,939,000 with major variances totalling £827,000 which included; the extra cost of the severe weather conditions experienced in January 2010, lower than expected waste payment fees, a change from revenue to capital of planned and highway maintenance revenue and building control and land charge ringfenced accounts operating at a surplus which was higher than predicted.

Capital finance as at March 2010 was £11,642.30 with an anticipated spend of 58.74%. Capital schemes identified for carry forwards included:

- South Hill Park Restoration Project
- Building maintenance
- Programme of Leisure S106 schemes (budget only)
- SPA Mitigation Strategy
- Help to Buy a Home (Enabling more affordable Housing)
- Bridge strengthening

The average vacancy factor for the Department was low at 11.60%; overall vacancies had increased by 16 in the quarter with Leisure and Culture accounting for 11 of the vacancies. The Panel noted that recruitment of some posts had been delayed by up to a month to contribute towards savings for the Department. Staff turnover was at 2.20% for the quarter which was lower than for the same period in 2009/10. Staff sickness for the quarter was 1.66 days which was lower than for the same period in 2009/10 and reflected active management. The Director noted that the amount this equated to in monetary terms would be reported at the next Panel meeting in October 2010.

It was reported that the Director had exercised his delegated authority in making a number of mid year changes to Fees and Charges which were:

- An increase in the cost of a Senior Persons Rails card from £6.00 to £6.90
- A reduction in the disabled railcard from £3.70 to £3.40
- A skip operator license fee charge of £60 to cover the administration costs of operating checks
- Changes in pre application charges;
 - a reduction in the cost of 1 dwelling from £260 to £130
 - reduction in up to 40sq m commercial miscellaneous from £260 to £50
 - reduction in 41sq m – 250 sq m commercial from £360 - £160

The Director highlighted key areas in the Department's forward look. It was noted that the Department was experiencing a period of change as a result of the new Government which included announcements for planning and further in-year savings amounting to £300,000 of Capital expenditure. The Housing and Planning Delivery Grant and the Supporting People Administration Grant amounting to £258,000 would no longer be received. The Panel noted that judging of Bracknell in Bloom would take place on 13 July. A mapping exercise of planning was underway to allow a root and branch assessment of the service.

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

- Officers across the council had made exceptional efforts to cope with the effects of the severe winter weather.
- The cost for refurbishment of Edgbarrow Sports Centre was covered by insurance. The insurance also covered loss of revenue incurred during the period the centre was closed.
- The Council's mortgage scheme for shared ownership was launched in June. 1 application had been received to date.
- There was no cap relating to the value of a home for the mortgage scheme, however there was a minimum and maximum % of ownership shares allowed by an individual applying for the scheme.
- Forest care was still working on the upgrade to PNC6 which would be completed in the quarter. PNC6 referred to the version of the Tunstall Lifeline Monitoring system which was used.

The Panel congratulated officers and the Director on their successful work undertaken across a wide array of functions.

67. **Supporting People Working Group Update Report**

The Panel received from Councillor Mrs Shillcock, lead member, the Supporting People Programme Update report undertaken by a working group of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The Supporting People programme was a Government funded initiative which required local authorities to provide housing related support, enabling people with specified and assessed need to live independently in their own accommodation. The funding was ringfenced until April 2009, from April 2010 the funding had been included in the Area Based Grant, and had reduced each year by approximately 12%.

A House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee was established to look into the delivery of the Supporting People programme and expressed strong support for the programme which had proved to be extremely good value for money, providing low level and joined up support to retain people's independence or help people to move out into more independent lives. The Working Group concurred with this view.

The Supporting People service in Bracknell Forest had received a poor inspection in 2005, however the team had now made steady progress with the Audit Commission satisfied with progress made. The Working Group had received positive feedback from people who used the service and concluded that good progress had been made in the Supporting People Team with the service now well embedded.

RESOLVED that the report of the Supporting People Programme Update report, be agreed and commended to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for adoption and for sending formally to the relevant Executive Member.

68. Council Tax and Housing Benefits Working Group Report

The Panel received from Councillor Finch, lead member, the review of the Council's Housing and Council Tax Benefits Improvement Plan report undertaken by a working group of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The report provided further monitoring of the Benefits Service following on from the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Improvement Plan, June 2009.

RESOLVED that;

- a) the conclusion of the Working Group's review of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Improvement Plan be noted;
- b) the Working Group's work was now concluded;
- c) the report of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits inspection be brought to the Panel's meeting in October 2010;
- d) the report be commended to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for its consideration;
- e) the Panel invite the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to consider reviewing the progress on procuring and implementing the new IT system for Benefits administration.

69. Severe Weather Working Group Report

The Panel received the Severe Weather report undertaken by a working group of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Commission.

The working group had met on several occasions and spoken to a number of Council staff and contractors to understand how the severe weather had affected service areas from across the Council.

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

- That a recommendation be added to the report suggesting that officers look at the possibility of contracts with local plant hires and businesses who had equipment that may be of use during severe weather, to allow access to greater resources during future severe weather events.
- Staff across the departments had worked well and put in extra effort to ensure service delivery where possible during the severe weather. Overall Bracknell Forest Council had coped well during the severe weather. It was agreed that this would be reflected in the conclusion of the working group report.
- Some schools had used a text messaging service to keep parents informed of decisions to open and close the school for the day which had proved successful. It was agreed that recommendation 6.7 of the report would be expanded to include the use of text messaging.

RESOLVED that the report of the Severe Weather report with amendments, be agreed and commended to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for adoption and for sending formally to the Executive.

70. "Be Prepared" - Report on Preparedness for Public Health Emergencies

The Panel received a report by a working group of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel which reviewed the preparedness of the Council and its partners for public health emergencies which was timely as it coincided with the outbreak of Swine Influenza A/H1N1 (Swine Flu).

The Working Group found that the arrangements in place to prepare for a public health emergency were sound and effective. The report had been agreed by the Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel subject to two adjustments to recommendations as set out in the supplementary paper circulated to the Panel.

The Panel noted the 'Be Prepared' review of preparedness for public health emergencies with adjusted recommendations, undertaken by a working group of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel noted that there had been four working group reports on the agenda which reflected the good work and effectiveness of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel. The Chairman thanked Members of the Panel who had participated in the working groups.

71. **Executive Forward Plan**

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

The Panel noted that officers were waiting for direction from Government on whether or not to take forward the current Local Development Framework Site Allocations Development Plan. Although there was currently uncertainty in planning it was likely that the Warfield Supplementary Planning Document would continue to be progressed as scheduled in the Executive Forward Plan. The Panel noted that the planning department were keen to receive direction from Government on the way forward.

CHAIRMAN