

**ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
PANEL
5 OCTOBER 2010
7.30 - 9.00 PM**



Present:

Councillors Finnie (Chairman), McLean (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Angell, Mrs Barnard, Beadsley, Bowers, Finch, Mrs Fleming and Leake

Executive Member:

Councillor Birch

Also Present:

Andrea Carr, Policy Officer Overview and Scrutiny
Mark Devon, Chief Officer: Leisure and Culture
Jane Eaton, Chief Officer: Performance and Resources
Simon Hendey, Chief Officer: Housing
Bev Hindle, Chief Officer: Planning and Transport
Steve Loudoun, Chief Officer: Environment and Public Protection
Vincent Paliczka, Director of Environment, Culture and Communities
Sue Boyce, Communications Officer
Katharine Simpson, Democratic Services Officer
Kim Stevens, Human Resources Manage

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Mrs McCracken

72. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Panel noted the attendance of the following Substitute Member:

Councillor Mrs Angell for Councillor Mrs McCracken

73. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 22 June 2010 be approved as a correct record, and signed by the Chairman.

There were no matters arising.

74. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest relating to any items on the agenda, nor any indications that Members would be participating whilst under the party whip.

75. Urgent Items of Business

There were no urgent items of business.

76. 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 for the 1st quarter (April to June) of 2010/11. The presentation outlined the Department's revenue and finances as at June 2010. Staffing, key highlights, fees and charges and a forward look were also included.

Major variances on revenue included £30,000 income from the Cemetery and Crematorium, £100,000 received from planning applications, £32,000 from the Safer Roads Partnership. Additional rates at Longshot Lane and Smallmead resulted in a £56,000 loss.

The Panel was advised that the Department's year end staff turn over rate as at 6 June 2010 was 10.84%, a 3.4% reduction on the same period last year. Sickness rates averaged 1.14 days per fulltime employee for the quarter, compared to 2.31 days during the same period in the previous year. This fall in sickness levels was attributed to better staff management particularly in those cases where there was a risk of long term sickness for example through the use of earlier referrals to occupational health services.

Key highlights for the Department included: the removal of Regional Planning Strategies, the removal of Area Based Grants, a reduction in income from car parks and Downshire Golf Course, the re-opening of Edgbarrow Sports Centre, the extension of funding to continue the free swimming scheme over the summer holidays, Trading Standards' identification of over 100 items in a store that were past their 'use by date', continued work on the Severe Corporate Weather Plan, the replacement of over 100 litter bins across the Borough and the use of a felled tree to provide a giant picnic table in Lily Hill Park.

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

- Planning pre application enquiry fees had been reduced significantly for applications of less than 250square metres
- The maintenance of verges on derestricted roads required lane closures to protect those working on the verges and due to budget constraints the frequency of these operations had been reduced
- Clarification would be given on the nature of the offence that resulted in a local company contravening the Consumer Credit Act and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations
- Contact would be made with all applicants who haven't yet bid for property through the BFC My Choice system to find out their reasons for not doing so
- Work on the forecourt of Bracknell Railway Station was now complete. Any decisions on additional improvements to the station's frontage or the development of possible retail opportunities on the forecourt were the responsibility of the rail operator and Network Rail
- Traffic Managers had a monitoring role to ensure that street works were completed within stated timescales. The Department endeavoured to get contractors to give as much advance notice of potential works as possible to enable sufficient advance publicity to occur
- It had been felt that there had been insufficient time to give residents notice of plans to switch off street lights and the project had been delayed until next summer
- Clarification would be sought over the length of time parks had held Green Flag Awards and which ones had been entered for awards this year

- A varied programme of arts events had been run in all libraries and details would be forwarded to the Panel
- Two Arts Posts were being held vacant as part of the budget savings
- A number of arts projects had been put on hold pending the outcome of the budget review
- Approval had been received for the purchase of a salt barn. This would be located in the Bracknell Lorry Park
- Clarification would be sought over the complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman
- Following the abolition of the Playbuilder Scheme the Government expected local authorities to return the money they had received for projects that had not yet been started
- It was confirmed that Queen Anne's Gully was located near Caesar's Camp

The Panel thanked the Director for his report.

77. **Report of the Inspection of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service**

The Panel received a report presenting the results of the Audit Commission's recent inspection of the Housing and Council Tax Benefits Service.

The Benefits Services had received a ranking of 'Fair with Promising Prospects for Improvement'. This ranking was the best score received to date by a Berkshire Unitary Authority. Nationally only three local authorities had received a higher score. Recommendations on how to respond to the inspection report would be made to the Executive.

The Panel expressed disappointment with the report particularly in light of the complimentary comments that inspectors had made during their unannounced inspection. Disappointment with the score had been discussed with the Audit Commission who had responded that the ratings covered a broad range and that there were significant differences between those services at the top and at the bottom of the bandings.

Arising from the subsequent discussion the following points were noted:

- The processing of benefits applications would be suspended between 10 October and 2 November to enable the installation of a new IT system and the transfer of records from the old system
- The switch to a new IT system would impact on processing times. In the worst case scenario it was envisaged that applicants would have to wait for an additional twenty days before they received a decision.
- To minimise disruptions during the three week hiatus in the processing of applications all pending applications would be processed before the old IT system was shut down on 10 October 2010
- Sample testing was carried out on processed claims and staff training and support was offered where necessary to reduce the number of revised claims
- It had been difficult to run monitoring reports off the old Pericles system. This situation was not unique to Bracknell Forest and had resulted in the noted difficulties in understanding how much of the Services overpayments debt was recoverable
- Following the introduction of the new IT system any overpayment debts older than 6 years would be written off. Those debts under 6 years old would be pursued. Debt collection agencies would be used if necessary

- A Members Briefing Session had been held to improve knowledge of the Benefits Service and this would be repeated as required

The Panel congratulated the Benefits Service on the positive outcome of the inspection.

78. **RE3 Update and Recycling Figures**

The Panel received a report providing an update on the re3 waste and recycling partnership including an overview of the background to the re3 project, achievements to date and progress made towards meeting targets.

It was noted that whilst there had been an overall fall in waste tonnages the Council was performing well against targets and there had been significant improvement in the percentage of waste land-filled, assisted by the use of an energy from waste plant. In an effort to reduce the volumes of recyclable waste being disposed of with non-recyclable waste and decrease levels of contamination of recyclable waste two areas of the Borough, Great Hollands and Crown Wood, had been targeted for education by Waste Watch. As a result of this work more blue recycling bins had now been distributed in these areas. It was noted that the most common form of recycling contamination was plastic bags and plastics such as margarine tubs which could not be recycled locally.

The Panel noted the report.

79. **Planning Policy Update Following the Revocation of Regional Strategies**

The Panel received a report setting out the implications of the Government's revocation of Regional Planning Strategies and advising that the Government was urging councils to reduce street clutter.

It had been expected that the new Government would revoke some plans and strategies however, the speed at which this had occurred had caught many unawares and the report sought to clarify matters.

Arising from the subsequent discussion the following points were noted:

- Short term drivers for the proposed housing numbers included local government office projections, the Council's own projections and the evidence base used to inform the development of the South East Plan
- The Government would be developing a new national planning framework
- The Council's Core Strategy quoted housing figures were the same as those in the draft South East Plan. A figure that was 2,000 lower than the figure in the final plan
- A number of local authorities had stopped, or delayed, work on their Planning Policies until further guidance was made available however, Bracknell Forest already had a Core Strategy in place and it had been considered by the Executive that delaying or stopping work would not be beneficial to the Borough
- Information about proposed planning policies had been shared with non-Executive Members as the policies had been developed
- On 19 October 2010 the Executive would be invited to approve a Preferred Option of the Site Allocation Development Plan Document for consultation purposes
- The possibility of revisiting housing numbers to see if they might be reduced was raised

The Panel noted the report.

80. **Working Group Update Report**

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

Highways Maintenance Working Group

Completion of other Overview and Scrutiny work had freed up resources and the Highways Maintenance Working Group had now been reconvened. A first meeting was being arranged and work would recommence shortly.

Commercial Sponsorship Member Reference Group

A first meeting of the Commercial Sponsorship Member Reference Group had been held on 20 September 2010 when it had been agreed that a commercial sponsorship scheme would be acceptable in principle and that the possibility of introducing a viable scheme would be explored. Further meetings were being arranged and the Working Group welcomed ideas about the kinds of things that might be sponsored.

81. **Overview and Scrutiny Bi-annual Progress Report**

The Panel considered a report outlining the activities of all the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels and the Commission and summarising significant national developments in overview and scrutiny. A Member commented that the report showed the importance of the Overview and Scrutiny function and the need to fully resource it.

The Panel noted:

- i. Overview and Scrutiny activity over the period February to August 2010 set out in Section 3 and Appendices 1 and 2 of the report.
- ii. The developments in Overview and Scrutiny set out in section 4 of the report.

82. **Work Programme 2011/12**

The Panel considered a report containing the indicative work programme for the Environment, Culture and Communities Panel for 2011/12.

The Panel agreed its 2011/12 work programme without change for commending to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for adoption and expressed a wish to establish a working group to look at the Streetscene Supplementary Planning Document in the meantime. Councillors Mrs Barnard, Finch, Finnie and Leake agreed to form the Working Group.

83. **Executive Forward Plan**

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

CHAIRMAN