

**ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE AND
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY
PANEL
23 JUNE 2008
7.30 - 9.05 PM**



Present:

Councillors Beadsley, Browne, Brunel-Walker, Burrows, Finch, Finnie, Mrs Fleming, McLean, Mrs Pile and Mrs Ryder

Also Present:

Councillors Mrs Ballin and Mrs Hayes

In Attendance:

Vincent Paliczka, Director of Environment, Culture and Communities
Simon Birch, Chief Officer: Planning and Transport
Mark Devon, Chief Officer: Leisure and Culture
Ben Funning, Communications Officer
Steve Loudoun, Chief Officer: Environment and Public Protection
Stuart Mudie, Interim Head of Housing
Richard Beaumont, Head of Performance and Scrutiny

1. Election of Chairman

RESOLVED that Councillor Brunel-Walker be elected Chairman of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Councillor Brunel-Walker in the Chair

2. Appointment of Vice-Chairman

RESOLVED Councillor Finnie be appointed Vice-Chairman of the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

3. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Leake.

4. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 3 March 2008, the meeting of the Adult Social Care and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 11 March 2008 and the meeting of the Lifelong Learning and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 26 March 2008 be noted.

5. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or indications that members would be participating whilst under the party whip.

6. **Co-option of Panel Members**

The restructuring of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels to reflect the Council's new departmental structure had resulted in the Environment Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel assuming responsibility for scrutinising the Council's housing function. Traditionally, the Tenants and Leaseholders Panel had a co-opted representative sitting on the Social Care and Housing Panel however the continuation of this practice following the recent housing stock transfer would result in one registered social landlord (RSL), Bracknell Forest Homes, having representation while other RSLs did not.

RESOLVED that no external representatives would be co-opted onto the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

7. **Urgent Items of Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

8. **Progress Briefing on the Council's Housing Role**

The Interim Head of Housing gave a presentation outlining the functions of the Council's housing service. The Panel noted that following the housing stock transfer the Council had retained responsibility for Strategic Housing and Support Services, Housing and Council Tax Benefits, Housing Options and Forestcare. The new Chief Officer for Housing, Simon Hendey, would be joining the Council at the end of July.

The following points arose from members' questions and comments:

- The biggest contributory factor to homelessness was relationship breakdown; either as a result of people splitting up or children being ejected from the family home. Rent arrears were the main cause of homelessness in the smallest number of cases.
- There are approximately 100 households accepted as homeless, which were included in the approximately 4,000 households currently on the housing register.
- Out of hours calls to the Housing Team would be diverted to Forestcare who would either provide advice or refer the matter to another agency for example the police.
- If a request for emergency accommodation was received out of hours then Forestcare would liaise directly with the Emergency Duty Social Work Team.

The Panel thanked Stuart Mudie for all his work over the past year and wished him well for the future.

9. Departmental Overview and Performance

The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities gave a presentation in respect of departmental performance with reference to the Performance Monitoring Reports (PMRs) for the fourth quarter of 2007/08. The presentation outlined the Department's finances as at March 2008, highlighted variances on revenue and identified capital projects that would be carried forward. Staffing issues, changes to the Department following the Council restructure, key highlights and a forward look were also included.

The Panel was advised that 74.31% of the Capital Budget had been spent, compared to the 75% estimate in March, and it was expected that this figure would increase as the Department became better at predicting cash flow. The significant changes in the Capitalisation Highway Maintenance and Capitalisation Planned Maintenance revenue budgets had been caused by changes to the way the calculations were worked out. A total of £17 million had been added to the Capital Budget as a result of the Housing Stock Transfer and strategies to maximise this investment were being developed.

Staff vacancy rates were 8.42%. The Department was actively recruiting to fill vacant posts and had successfully recruited to a number of posts in Housing Standards, Environmental; Health, Trading Standards and at Easthampstead Park Conference Centre. Staff turnover rates for the year end stood at 13.66%, compared to 21.14% for the previous year. The total number of sickness days for the quarter was 2.30, a decrease of 97% on the previous quarter.

The fourth quarter of the 2007/08 municipal year had seen the restructuring of the Council and this had resulted in the Department losing responsibility for the Market and Corporate Health and Safety and assuming responsibility for the following areas: Housing Register, Temporary Accommodation, Housing Strategy and Enabling, Supporting People, Forestcare, Housing Benefits, Libraries, Smartcard and Energy.

Key highlights in the last quarter featured the recruitment of Chief Officers for Housing and Planning and Transport, the successful introduction of 8,000 new smartcards for the National Concessionary Fare Scheme with only a 0.25% error rate in the data transfer process, successful public relations work to ensure that residents were aware of the improvements being made to Longshot Lane Amenity Site, the installation of a new footbridge over Mill Lane, a successful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant of £2.5million to contribute to the restoration of South Hill Park and the allocation of an additional £100,000 to be used for the maintenance of verges along high speed roads, deep cleaning neighbourhood centres, attending to subways and improving grounds maintenance.

The following points arose from Members' questions and comments:

- The work carried out by Pricewaterhouse Coopers on the proposed formation of a leisure trust had identified estimated savings to the Council of £85,000 or less. This had not been considered sufficient enough to forego the risk of losing control of the leisure facilities and it had been agreed that the Council would retain control of them. This decision would have an impact on future years' budget plans.
- The Director would circulate a note outlining the reasons for the delay in signing the Punctuality Improvement agreement with First Buses.

- Bracknell Forest Homes would be asked to draw up protocols detailing how residents can raise concerns about the amenity land they own.
- The establishment of a Planning and Building Control Sub-group would provide developers with a method of giving feedback on Council services while residents submitting smaller planning applications, for example for house extensions, would be able to give feedback through questionnaires and focus groups.
- School travel plans were tailored to individual schools and a range of initiatives were used to reduce the number of children travelling to school by car including walking buses, bike weeks and walk to school weeks. The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities agreed that future PMRs would give the reduction in the number of journeys to school made by car in both percentages and actual figures.
- The mystery shoppers employed to test the quality of the Council's leisure facilities looked at a range of indicators including the quality of the facilities, the quality of the information available online and the quality of information given over the phone. As a general rule, the indicators remained the same each year and the Department were able to use this information to plot trends. The findings were published as a report to the Executive, which had also been considered by the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
- The Council had negotiated a single contract to cover catering across all its leisure facilities however market forces meant that the contract had not been immediately beneficial in a couple of areas and this had resulted in the noted budget variance. Positive discussions had taken place with the contractor and it was hoped that the variance would be eliminated.

10. **Housing Strategy**

The Panel were informed that the Council had started work on the development of a new Housing Strategy. Consultation on the Strategy would take place in the early autumn and the Panel agreed that a small working group would be formed to make a formal response on their behalf. Councillors Finch, Finnie and Mrs Fleming agreed to be in the Working Group and an initial briefing meeting would be set up with a member of the Housing Strategy Team.

11. **Update on Overview and Scrutiny Working Groups**

The Panel received a report providing an update on the progress that had been made to date by the Panel's working groups and the following points were noted:

Waste Review Working Group

The Waste Review Working Group's review was progressing well with good collaboration taking place with the Town and Parish Councils. A visit to Longshot Lane Amenity Site had been planned and further visits to Planers Farm and Smallmead Material Recycling Facility would be arranged.

Street Cleansing Working Group

The Street Cleansing Working Group's review was progressing well and work was now taking place to develop the review report. The Working Group had been asked to provide input into the development of the Environmental Amenity Action Plan and a consultation response was being formulated by the Group.

Road Traffic Casualties Working Group

The Road Traffic Casualties Working Group's review was drawing to a close. The Group's report had now been sent to the Executive Member for Planning and Transportation and a formal response would be given at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission meeting on 17 July 2008.

Members mentioned that the success of reviews had depended on the high quality work and professionalism of officers, who must be adequately resourced.

12. Report of Working Group on Road Traffic Casualties

The Panel received the final report from the Road Traffic Casualties Working Group. The report would be discussed at the Executive meeting on 24 June 2008 and the Executive Member for Planning and Transportation would be giving their formal response to the report at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission meeting on 17 July 2008.

The Panel expressed its thanks to the Working Group for all the work that they had done on the review.

RESOLVED that:

1. The work of the Working Group be regarded as concluded.
2. A separate and substantive review of operational issues affecting road traffic casualties would be considered as a low-priority review for the Environment, Culture and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.
3. The final report is copied to all Thames Valley Highway Authorities for their information and interest.

13. Overview and Scrutiny Progress Report

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

14. Executive Forward Plan

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

15. Work Programme for 2008/09 Municipal Year

The Panel considered a report detailing the indicative work programme for Overview and Scrutiny for the current municipal year. The Panel noted the Overview and

Scrutiny Commission's view that reviews already underway should be completed before new work started.

The Panel agreed that their initial work would focus on completing the Street Cleaning and Strategic Waste Reviews and that the Housing Strategy Review would be added to the indicative work programme for 2008/09. The review of developments on the potential Leisure Trust should be deleted as the Trust would not be created. An additional review of S106 arrangements should be considered. The priority ranking of the reviews would be considered in a few months time, but the Parking review would probably have a high priority.

The Director of Environment, Culture and Communities offered to provide briefings on the framework for S106 arrangements and Council measures regarding climate change to inform the Panel's deliberations on their programme.

CHAIRMAN