

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
20 JULY 2006
(7.30 - 9.30 pm)

Present: Councillors Sargeant (Chairman), McLean (Vice-Chairman), Beadsley, Mrs Birch, Browne, Edger, Leake and Worrall

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Earwicker, Harrison and Thompson (Councillor Kendall substituting) and Mr G Anderson.

In attendance: Jan Haunton, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Damian James, Head of Transport Provision
Alan Nash, Head of Finance
Alison Sanders, Director of Corporate Services

7. Minutes and Matters Arising (Item 2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, held on 18 May 2006, be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

8. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip (Item 3)

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

9. Urgent Items (Item 4)

There were no urgent items intimated.

10. Corporate Performance Overview Report (Item 5)

The Commission considered a report by the Chief Executive to inform the Executive of the performance of the Council over the fourth quarter of 2005/2006 which covered the months of January to March 2006. The Corporate Performance Overview Report was appended as Annexe A to the Chief Executive's report.

The Commission welcomed Alison Sanders, Director of Corporate Services, to the meeting. She stated that where answers could not easily be provided, officers would be asked to provide the information for circulating amongst Members.

The Corporate Performance Overview Report was the fourth and final report of the Chief Executive for the 2005/2006 financial year and the summary contained therein was based on more detailed information arising from each Director's Quarterly Operations Reports for the period January to March 2006 which had been previously circulated to Members.

The Overview report provided the Executive with a high-level summary of progress and performance in respect of the Council's services and, in doing so, identified both the achievements and those areas where there may have been concerns raised.

It was reported that, overall, the quarter showed continued good performance across the Council's services and, at a corporate level, the report drew Members' attention to work which had, or was currently being undertaken, in respect of:

- The Town Centre Redevelopment Programme
- Elected Member Development Charter Mark
- Budget 2006/2007
- Older People's Services Inspection

The report highlighted some areas of notable performance at departmental level over the last quarter, however, the following three areas had not performed as well as expected:

- Risk-based Inspections in Environmental Health
- Housing Benefits
- Reported Crime

The Commission noted that the Council continued to make sound progress towards the achievement of its objectives and that the report served to highlight the Council's successes and to focus on some of the more challenging issues the Council faced.

The following points emerged from discussion around the report.

- It was welcomed that the decision to grant outline planning permission in respect of the Town Centre Redevelopment Project had not been called-in by Ministers and that this was good news.
- On the matter of the £717,000 pump-priming grant, the Director of Corporate Services was requested to seek an explanation as to how this money was to be spent and to identify the ten targets agreed by the Government and partners, as referred to in the report. The Head of Finance advised Members that the funding was in addition to the budget allocation and would be used to support the delivery of the targets set and that the process had been discussed with partners. He added that the report to the Executive showed how the money was to be allocated amongst departments to achieve targets set.
- A Member sought clarification as to the difference between "recorded" crime and "reported" crime and how, if different, these were measured.
- The Commission was advised that LPSA II Targets had been worked on with Bracknell Forest Partnership Service Board and that some had been led by the Police. The Director of Corporate Services offered to have a copy of the targets circulated to members of the Commission in due course.
- A Member expressed concern regarding the time taken to process Council Tax and Housing Benefits Claims and, given the deterioration from last year's performance, asked what the Council was doing to improve processing time.
- In respect of teenage pregnancy rates, the Commission was advised that in collating the figures, no distinction was drawn between those teenagers who were married and those who were not. In addition, Members were asked to be mindful of the fact that small numbers reported could equate to big swings in related percentages.
- A Member expressed concern given the problem of mathematics success rates within the Borough and asked what the Council was doing to support schools in this area. The annual indicator had set a target of 83% of pupils in schools maintained by the LEA

achieving Level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 Mathematics test and that the actual progress to date was 77%. In the absence of a representative from the Department of Education, Children's Services and Libraries, the Director of Corporate Services stated that Key Stage 2 Targets set were particularly challenging and that Bracknell Forest had objected considerably to those targets which, nationally, very few schools had met.

- In response to a concern raised by a Member as to whether the 2003 figure should be reflected in the report under MTO 15, the Commission was advised that there were two key ways in which to survey citizens. One was by way of a survey being conducted by the Audit Commission and the other by way of being carried out separately. The Member went on to express his concern that whilst the Council had good customer services figures, the good work being done was not being reflected in the figures.
- Members raised concern regarding the outcome of the internal audit of the Agresso system and asked when the system would be working properly. The Commission was advised that the system was working well and that Internal Audit's recommendations related to the operating system access controls. The expectation was that improvements would be made ahead of the next audit.
- A Member sought clarification as to the 3 stage complaint process, upon which clarification was given. A request for comparative information from the previous year was sought as it was felt that this would help to put current performance data into context although it was recognised that it would not reflect recent organisational changes.

11. Implementing the Best Value Review of Transport Provided by the Council (Item 6)

The Commission was introduced to Mr Damian James, the Council's Head of Transport Provision.

The Commission considered a report by the Borough Treasurer updating the Commission on the progress that had been made to date in respect of the implementation of a Best Value Review of transport provided by the Council.

The Commission recalled that, at a meeting held in January 2005, the Executive approved, in principle, the recommendations arising from the Best Value Review of Transport provided by the Council, subject to a more detailed feasibility study on the work necessary to establish a centralised transport unit.

The following points emerged from discussion around the report.

- The Commission noted that the Council was confident that it could achieve savings phased over time and that the primary focus was to establish a unit and to obtain financial results.
- Members raised concern about a working group which was to be set up following previous discussions and how this Group would be taken forward. Members argued that a decision had been taken to establish a Member Officer monitoring group to monitor progress of transport provision and to ensure the anticipated savings were achieved. Since this appeared not to have been set up, a Member sought clarification as to which Executive Member was monitoring the matter and asked that the appropriate Member be invited to address the Commission as to progress hitherto.

- The Commission was advised that, given that Social Services Transport was more fragmented than Home-to-School Transport, the Council would be commencing with a review of Home-to-School provision, followed by Social Services provision.
- The Commission was also advised that there were under utilised vehicles within the Council's fleet. The establishment of a centralised transport unit would help to ensure these vehicles were utilised more effectively.
- In response to a question from a Member in respect of the size of the Council's fleet, the Commission was advised that this comprised some 142 vehicles, of which, the vast majority of these (up to 3.5 tonnes) were specifically for use by Bracknell Forest Services. The next largest groups comprised mini-buses, landscape vehicles (up to 3.5 tonnes) and eight over 3.5 tonnes.
- In response to a question from a Member in respect of the establishment of a Transport User Group and the make-up of the membership, the Commission was advised that the Group comprised Officers from the Departments of Education, Children's Services and Libraries; Social Services and Housing and Environment and Leisure. Members were concerned that there was no provision for external representatives, transport users or Members on the Group. In response, the Commission was advised that the reason for it being set-up was to enable Mr James the opportunity to ascertain how the Council worked in respect of transport provision, however, Officers understood Members concerns regarding the need for a wider membership in the future.
- A Member raised concerns as to the level of expenditure (£2.1m) spent by the Council on the provision of taxis. The Commission was advised that the majority of this spend (£1.9m) was in respect of residents with special needs and Home-to-School transport provision. The remainder was made up of ad hoc taxi arrangements.
- A Member raised concerns having read the original Best Value Review report, which he regarded as very accomplished He and others were concerned, given that the report contained 26 detailed appendices and that all the necessary information was there, as to why any significant progress had taken so long and the possibility of the Council not achieving the anticipated savings.

It was **AGREED** that

1. the Executive Member with responsibility for the provision of the Council's Transport Services be invited to address the Commission and to address the concerns raised by Members; and
2. that a Sounding Board be established to comprise 3 Members of the Commission and that it report to the Commission periodically.

12. Audit Committees - Current Developments (Item 7)

The Commission considered a report (discussion document) by the Borough Treasurer which reviewed the Council's existing arrangements, considered the advantages and disadvantages of Audit Committees and identified an alternative approach following the publication of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA's), "Audit Committees – Practical Guidance for Local Authorities (2005)", which favoured an independent Audit Committee for local authorities. CIPFA did, however, acknowledge that other approaches taken by local authorities were valid.

The Commission was advised that, although local authorities were not obliged to have a separate Audit Committee, such Committees were increasingly seen as good practice and independent forums to receive reports on the progress of Internal Audit and External Audit were also gaining prominence through the requirements of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process.

Members' views were sought on the proposals and the following points emerged from discussion around the report.

- In response to a question by a Member regarding the formal status of the Council's Final Accounts Committee (FAC) and how audit fitted in with this, the Commission was advised that the FAC served a completely different function and had no role in relation to audit.
- A Member stated that, whilst he was averse to increasing bureaucracy and demands on Member and Officer time he did, however, feel there would need to be extremely compelling reason(s) to go against the advice of CIPFA and the Audit Commission given Bracknell Forest's stance as a leading local authority for financial management.
- In response to a suggestion from a Member that an Audit Committee be combined with the FAC the Commission was advised that there were problems in combining the two as these had to be seen as independent of each other.
- It was recognised that the Council would, in time, be required to establish an Audit Committee and, until that time, the Commission could amend its terms of reference and use a sounding board as a means of addressing issues as these arose and to feed these back to the Commission. Members were reminded that any review of the Commission's terms of reference would require the approval of the Council and the Council's Constitution duly amended.

13. Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity (Item 8)

Councillor Beadsley announced that he had prepared a bike report on cycling in the Borough and added that the report had been passed to the Director of Environment and Leisure and that he intended to also pass it to the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Adult Social Care and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Edger reported that a report on antisocial behaviour had been circulated and that this was to be presented to the next meeting to be held on 14 September 2006. He added that the final report was due by the end of this municipal year and he took the opportunity to commend the work undertaken by Members on the report.

Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Browne reported that the Council's Tree Policy Review Group had prepared a report and advised the Commission that it would receive a copy of this prior to it being submitted to the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Lifelong Learning and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Mrs Birch advised that "Vision for Youth" had provided a good scoping meeting and that dates had been secured for future meetings.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Leake reported that, at its last two meetings, the Panel had been focussing as a working group on changes affecting Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and that over the next 12 months, the Panel would be asked to focus upon budgetary aspects of the PCTs given their pending reorganisation. He added that there was a need for a greater interface and understanding with the Health and Social Care Partnership Board as its work – and vice versa – would be affected by the reorganisation.

CHAIRMAN