

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION**  
**9 MARCH 2006**  
**(7:30 pm to 9:30 pm)**

Present: Councillors Sargeant (Chairman), Beadsley, Mrs Birch, Browne, Earwicker, Edger and Thompson

Church Representatives:  
Mr Anderson

Also Present: Councillors Birch and McCracken

Apologies for absence were received from:  
Councillors McLean, Leake and Worrall  
Mr Dempsey

In attendance: Victor Nicholls, Assistant Chief Executive  
Alan Nash, Assistant Borough Treasurer

**37. Minutes and Matters Arising (Item 2)**

Minutes of the Meeting held on 23 November 2005

Arising from Minute number 27 concerning the Efficiency Plan, the Commission was advised that the progress report referred to was based on the original return to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and that the Council had met its Gershon efficiency targets.

Minutes of the Meeting held on 19 January 2006

In response to a Member's query arising from Minute number 32, the Assistant Borough Treasurer clarified that it was possible to set capital receipts against revenue and that revenue balances could also be utilised.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission held on 23 November 2005, 19 January 2006 and 14 February 2006 be agreed as correct records, and signed by the Chairman.

**38. 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.

**39. School Performance/Transfer Working Group Report (Item 6)**

Having been considered previously by the Lifelong Learning and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel, the report of the School Performance/Transfer Working Group, which had been established by that Panel, was before the Commission for final approval.

The Chairman of the Panel, who was also a Member of the Working Group, introduced the report and thanked the remaining Working Group Members and relevant officer for the time and effort they had dedicated to undertaking the review. Review activities had included visits to all secondary and some primary schools in Bracknell Forest together with some schools outside the Borough and interviewing relevant officers and witnesses. The report respected the confidentiality of schools and witnesses who had provided valid and candid information towards the review. Having acknowledged that some matters raised in the report had now been overtaken by events owing to the duration of time since the commencement of the review, the Chairman of the Panel explained and elaborated upon the findings and recommendations contained in the report. The recommendations concentrated on the need for secondary school teachers to receive complete, timely and consistent Key Stage 2 information, including personal details, to facilitate secondary transfer and stated that opportunities for increasing interaction and liaison between teachers of Year 5, 6 and 7 pupils should be considered. The provision of a central learning resource in each school was highlighted as good practice to assist pupils to tackle the increased amount of homework received following secondary transfer. The establishment of learning support units at all secondary schools in the Borough was welcomed to assist those pupils who struggled with the change from Year 6 to 7 both to boost numeracy and literacy skills and to tackle behavioural problems. Financial implications of some of the recommendations were acknowledged by the Working Group.

The report was well received by Commission Members who commended it as an excellent and thorough piece of work. The following points emerged from discussion around the report:

- Although secondary school teachers had sufficient planning and preparation time with which to observe Year 6 teaching in preparation for secondary transfer without the incurring of additional costs, this was not usually the case with primary schools and the use of supply teachers would be necessary to free primary teachers to observe Year 7 teaching.
- Although some primary schools allocated additional homework to Year 6 pupils in readiness for secondary transfer, review findings indicated that many pupils were not sufficiently prepared or equipped to deal with the increased amount of homework allocated by secondary schools.
- A Member endorsed the recognised good practice of providing primary pupils with a named folder in which to collect their best items of work to take with them to secondary school to build their confidence and demonstrate their academic achievements.
- Although the report had taken some time to complete, it had been influential during its preparation and had prompted a trail of change including the implementation of new initiatives such as the data transfer calendar attached at Annexe 4 to the report.
- Interviews with pupils as part of the review indicated that many found the edge smartcard useful as it saved them the need to carry money.

Having noted that the report would be submitted to the relevant Executive Member for a response, it was suggested that progress against adoption of the report be measured in six months and **AGREED** that an additional recommendation be added to the report to the effect that the Local Education Authority send a copy to all headteachers in the Borough in order to spread good practice and encourage implementation of recommendations.

#### 40. **Performance Monitoring and Review (Item 4)**

##### Quarterly Operations Report (QOR) – Chief Executive's Office

The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the Chief Executive's Office QOR for the third quarter of 2005/06 which detailed progress during the previous quarter, addressed staffing issues and adopted a forward look. The QOR included capital monitoring and outlined progress towards objectives and against performance indicators.

Continuing work on the regeneration of Bracknell town centre was highlighted and the Commission noted that development of the specification and brief in respect of replacement civic accommodation had involved work across all departments of the Council. The Community Plan had been published during the last quarter and the Council had won a Chartered Institute of Public Relations award for improvements to its internal communications via the internal communications strategy. The forward look section of the QOR identified the need to keep pace with expanding work relating to the regeneration of the town centre, including the renewable energy project and the completion of a technical brief for the Council's future accommodation requirements. In order to progress the Local Area Agreement with Bracknell Forest Partnership and others during the next quarter, a project team would be established and it anticipated that related guidance would be published by the end of the month. Although work towards the negotiation of all outstanding targets with a view to signing off Local Public Service Agreement 2 had not been completed by the end of February due to some delays, it was hoped that this would be achieved by the end of March.

Comments and points of clarification arising from consideration of the QOR included the following:

- A Member requested that consideration be given to the re-naming of the Syrret Suite, the wedding/civil ceremonies suite at Easthampstead Park Mansion, prior to production of a new promotional and marketing brochure. The Executive Member for Leisure and Corporate Services and Resources agreed to discuss the matter with the Member at a later date. Although the Commission felt that the Syrret Suite was an excellent facility, its access route was thought to be poor.
- Although there were some legal issues in respect of the Renaissance Project, the renewable energy initiative forming part of the regeneration of the town centre, there were options to solve these and discussions were taking place with Bracknell Regeneration Partnership.
- It was thought that the Government's 'Change Up' initiative designed to enhance the voluntary sector had distracted Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action from leading on the Voluntary Sector Compact and promoting the associated service level

agreement. A re-launch of the Compact to renew interest and increase attendance was suggested.

- The Commission was advised that the residents' satisfaction survey referred to was a bi-annual general survey of residents' satisfaction with Council services which was issued in a prescribed way with questions set by the Government.
- It was noted that the term 'qualified' as applied to audited performance indicators implied an error or omission.
- Detailed plans to create the new civic hub, including a new library and arts provision, were progressing well and a design team had been selected. A development agreement with the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership was required before matters could progress further and strategic and technical briefs were being developed. In addition to the input of several architects, a Council cultural project group and the Town Centre Public Arts Strategy, a Member suggested that councillors be given the opportunity to contribute towards the cultural and artist aspects of the civic hub.
- The Best Value review in respect of community leadership had been abandoned due to changes in the resources directed to deliver a large part of the sustainable communities remit.
- Having regard to the performance indicator relating to local concentration of deprivation, it was noted that progress against the associated strategy was being reviewed and this involved the measurement of figures against indices of deprivation.

#### Quarterly Operations Report (QOR) – Corporate Services and Resources Department

The Assistant Borough Treasurer highlighted a number of aspects of the QOR for the Department of Corporate Services and Resources for the third quarter of 2005/06 which followed a similar format to that of the QOR of the Chief Executive's Office. These included continuing work and support to further the Council's plans to comprehensively develop and regenerate the town centre and to assist with planning for the new civic hub. Work towards meeting the Government's 'Decent Homes Standard' was progressing with the window programme and associated composite door installation works nearing completion and rewiring contracts shortly commencing. Excellent progress had been achieved in Customer Services in terms of both current performance and the development of services for the future. Improvements on already good rates of Council Tax and Business Rate collection had been achieved during the last quarter. Significant pieces of work to develop proposals for consultation on the reorganisation of both Bracknell Forest Services and ICT Services had also taken place.

Looking forward, the drafting of the Section 106 Agreement relating to the development of the town centre remained a priority of the Department before its focus turned to supporting negotiations with the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership. Following the selection of the preferred supplier for a Customer Relationship Management system, the Department would concentrate on successfully planning for and implementing the product, commencing with a base build of the system.

Comments and points of clarification arising from consideration of the QOR included the following:

- The Council's ability to meet the Government's 2010 'Decent Homes Standard' was largely dependent upon future decisions concerning the addressing of a budget gap of £8m.
- With regard to the Council's customer service centre, the design of the proposed civic hub included a shared single customer reception area which would endeavour to respond to the majority of queries at the first point of contact. The switchboard would remain located in Time Square.
- It was intended that service standards relating to responses to enquiries was applied throughout but the nature of a query would dictate the response time.
- Although the recent recruitment exercise to appoint to the post of Head of Audit and Risk Management had been unsuccessful, the vacancy had been filled on an interim basis and it would now be possible to pursue initiatives such as implementing recommendations arising from the recent benchmarking exercise.
- Resource issues had delayed progress with the introduction of performance management software following the resignation of the officer involved in the process.
- Measures were being taken to overcome problems associated with implementation of the repairs and stores element of the new housing ICT system.
- Further to a question concerning work streams associated with the new civic hub, the Assistant Chief Executive acknowledged that it was now timely to provide Members with a presentation in respect of the current civic hub programme. He agreed to raise the matter at the next meeting of the Regeneration Committee, to be held on 20 March.
- The Assistant Borough Treasurer undertook to circulate to Members a brief progress report in respect of implementation of the recommendations arising from the Best Value review of transport.
- Members noted that the latest upgrades to the 'Agresso' financial management ICT system had significantly improved the functionality and operating speed of the system.
- Negotiations with third party landowners as part of the regeneration of the town centre were progressing and related matters would be referred to the Planning and Highways Committee in coming months.

## Corporate Performance Overview Report (CPOR)

The CPOR, which provided a strategic overview of the Council's performance over the past quarter, indicated that overall there had been continued good performance across Council services. Notable developments during the quarter included progress towards the regeneration of the town centre and the excellent emergency response to the recent power failure affecting Council offices which had enabled normal services to be resumed within 24 hours. Against the general picture of good progress and high achievement were a small number of areas giving some cause for concern. These included the Department of Transport's assessment of the Council's provisional Local Transport Plan 2 as requiring substantial improvement. This response had been disappointing in terms of partnership work with the Government Office of the South East (GOSE) as advice received from GOSE during the preparation of the Plan was not as helpful as on previous occasions. However, GOSE had subsequently provided helpful feedback on the process enabling improvements to be made to the Plan and giving grounds for optimism that the final Plan would receive a more favourable rating. Implications for the Council arising from the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA), such as impeding disposal of assets, were noted. Members were advised of the resource impact of the forthcoming inspection of Council services for older people by the Commission of Social Care Inspection.

Comments and points of clarification arising from consideration of the CPOR included the following:

- Actions to promote and improve public transport included the provision of modern and efficient buses, sheltered bus stops, real time bus information and a new bus station as part of the redevelopment of the town centre.
- The Assistant Chief Executive undertook to arrange for a Member to receive information concerning improvements to the disabled access to Bracknell Library.
- The Commission noted that the Thames Basin Heaths SPA was a Europe-wide protection initiative pursuant to regulation and subject to individual definition by each member country. The interpretation placed on the regulation by English Nature, which was based on scientific evidence relating to Dorset, was not felt to be appropriate for the Thames Basin Heaths area.
- It was agreed that officers should give consideration to the best method of providing Members of the Environment and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel with an opportunity to consider the proposed revisions to the Local Transport Plan prior to its adoption by the Council.
- The Assistant Borough Treasurer agreed to arrange for Members to be provided with further details concerning measures to reduce the backlog in the processing of Housing Benefit and Council Tax claims resulting from issues associated with the introduction of the 'Pericles' ICT system.
- Targets relating to risk-based inspections of local food outlets had not been met owing to staff vacancies resulting from continuing difficulty in recruiting qualified environmental health officers, which was being experienced on a national scale.

- A Member requested clarification of the data definition and comment associated with performance indicator 53 that related to the receipt of intensive home care.
- The Commission was advised that the form of reporting and monitoring staffing matters was closely defined in a Best Value performance indicator in order to indicate the nature of any related issues. In response to concerns that the staff turnover rate was high, Members were advised that there was a package of measures in place to enhance staff recruitment and retention.

41. **Service Planning 2006/07 (Item 5)**

The Commission was invited to consider and comment on a report setting out the Service Plans for 2006/07 prior to its submission to the Executive on 14 March 2006. Service Plans formed part of the Council's financial and policy planning process and were fundamental to the delivery of its Medium Term Objectives for 2003-2007 and its budget plans. They were also an important element in the Council's performance management system and supported the preparation of the statutory annual Corporate Plan and provided the basis for regular performance monitoring through Quarterly Operations Reports. In addition to setting out each Department's key objectives for the year in the context of the Council's Medium Term Objectives, Service Plans detailed actions to be taken to achieve these and underpinned the Bracknell Forest Sustainable Community Plan.

The following points arose from discussion around the Service Plans:

- The action under Medium Term Objective 3 which sought to ensure that children were safe through timely and proportionate intervention and that all children 'at risk' had a designated social worker, was an aspiration to work towards and sustain becoming part of the Social Services and Housing Department's core business.
- Medium Term Objectives for 2007-2011 would be agreed by the new Council following the Borough elections in 2007.
- Having noticed that both Medium Term Objectives 2 and 14 contained a similar objective concerning disabled facilities grant, a Member requested that the officers check the Service Plans for any unintentional duplication.
- Members welcomed the Service Plan action which sought to address negative perceptions of young people in the community by extending opportunities for involvement in voluntary activities and accredited award schemes. The action linked to Local Public Service Agreement targets and would dovetail into the schools healthy eating initiative.

**CHAIRMAN**