

**COUNCIL  
28 APRIL 2004**

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**EXECUTIVE REPORT**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Since the Executive report to the Council meeting on 3 March 2004, the Executive has met twice, on 16 March and 20 April 2004.
- 1.2 The decisions taken on 16 March have been summarised by reference to the relevant portfolio within which they fall in this report. A supplementary report detailing decisions taken on 20 April 2004 will be issued as soon as possible.

**2. COUNCIL STRATEGY**

**2.1 Corporate Performance Overview Report**

- 2.1.1 The Executive received the Chief Executive's latest report on the performance of the Council during the period 1 October-31 December 2003.
- 2.1.2 It was noted that performance had again been generally good across all of the Council's services, with all major targets being broadly met. At a corporate level the only significant issue reported was the revised CPA score that was announced on 18 December 2003. In 2003 the Council's Core Service points increased from 37 to 44, making Bracknell Forest one of the ten highest service improvers in the Country during the year. Given that the starting point was comparatively high, this is a significant achievement and led to the Council increasing from the category of 'Fair' to 'Good'. As a result the Council automatically qualified for a reassessment of Council Ability in 2004, which has subsequently been set for 11-15 October. The focus will now be on the Council achieving a category of 'Excellent'.
- 2.1.3 There are no major financial issues to report at this stage. All departments are reporting good progress against budgets and have actively reduced areas of overspend to the extent that an underspend against the approved budget was anticipated at year end. This was reflected in the budget for 2004/05 which was agreed in February. The Housing Revenue Account is reporting a slight overspend (£25k), although management action is being taken to achieve a 'break-even' position by the end of the year.
- 2.1.4 At a departmental level some significant areas where performance improved over the third quarter are:
- The percentage of Special Educational Needs statements prepared continues to improve through pressure and partnership with other agencies.
  - The increased rating (to 'Average') for Annual Progress Report on Transport. This directly led to the allocation by the Government of an additional £0.9m to fund transport capital schemes in 2004/05
  - Corporate Asset Management Plan received 'good' rating from GOSE

- The percentage of secondary school attendances has increased in the last quarter to exceed targets. It also shows an increase on last year.
- The action plan to ensure that performance improves in the payment of invoices has resulted in a dramatic increase in performance so that in December 80% of invoices were paid in 30 days (compared to 40% previously). Performance subsequently increased further to 86% in the first two weeks of February.
- The number of planning applications being dealt with under delegated powers has increased substantially and this now is leading to the predicted increase in the speed in which planning applications are being processed.
- There has been a steady increase in the numbers participating in leisure activities
- The percentage of Legal searches carried out within 10 days (99.7%) and 5 days (91.4%) has improved
- The Education Department received the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rating in England in a survey undertaken by the Audit Commission to assess for schools' satisfaction with the services provided by the LEA. Again this is a major achievement of which Members and others can be proud.

2.1.5 The Executive noted, however, that the following areas had been identified as of concern to the Corporate Management Team:

- Benefits

The introduction of Tax Pension and Savings Credits by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) has caused further problems for the processing of benefits claims particularly as there have been major problems with the quality of information provided by the DWP. At the same time the new Credits have resulted in a 20% increase in new claims and a 68% increase in documentation received from the DWP. This coupled with difficulties encountered with the processing software and three full-time vacancies has had a negative effect on performance in an area which Members will be aware has been causing concern. The Director of Social Services and Housing is currently developing a remedial action plan along the lines used to transform the performance of the invoice payments within the Corporate Services Department and a number of temporary staff have been appointed. In addition, all staff are working additional hours to try and clear the backlog and resolve the problems, many of which are externally caused. To reinforce this, monthly data is being submitted to the Head of Performance and Improvement to ensure that the sustained efforts of the staff involved begin to show through the performance data. The Chief Executive has also raised the issue of DWP performance problems with the Council's Audit Commission Relationship Manager.

By April 2004 it is hoped that the permanent positions will have been filled and the service will be able to consolidate improvements in service performance that are within local control. Further discussions with the Benefits & Fraud Inspectorate are anticipated to try and improve performance of agencies outside of the Council's control.

- Length of stay in B&B accommodation

The average length of stay in Bed & Breakfast accommodation has increased substantially in the last quarter. This is due to a number of factors. There has been an increase in single applicants, particularly 16-18 year olds, as a result of the Homelessness Act 2002 where numbers have increased from 6 in 2002/03 to 28 in this financial year, to date of these 14 had to be placed in B&B accommodation. Temporary accommodation has had to be made available in B&B for applicants who have appealed against decisions, pending the outcome of the appeal.

To counteract this, a new Young Persons Resource Panel has been set up to identify the most suitable housing options for vulnerable young people. A Young persons Accommodation Scheme is also being considered with a view to expanding current supported accommodation to include vulnerable single people with housing needs. This scheme will work in conjunction with the Resource Panel.

A new PACT house has also been set up which has placements for 7 young single mothers, which is an increase on 5 at the old house.

- Local Public Service Agreement

Progress on 2 targets is behind schedule (reducing vehicle crime and reducing repeated domestic violence), although it is improving from the previous quarter. These targets require collaboration with Thames Valley Police (TVP) but have also suffered from the vacancies within the Community Safety Team. Corporate responsibility for community safety has been transferred to the Social Services and Housing Department as part of the current restructuring exercise and recruitment to these key posts is now underway. The Director of Corporate Services has also been meeting with TVP to ensure that the partnership is working effectively and to ascertain what actions need to be taken to bring the targets back on schedule. In addition, revisions to the CDRP structure, including increasing Member involvement are being developed.

Further meetings of the LPSA working group will continue to review the targets in-depth and put forward recommendations about the desirability of the Council continuing to invest in targets that may not be achievable by 2005.

- Street Scene Best Value Review

Another area of concern at this stage of the year is progress of the Street Scene Best Value Review. This review is needed to inform decisions of the new street works contract that is due to be let from 1 October 2004. It will also be subject to external inspection when it is complete. A consultant has consequently been appointed to assist in undertaking the review so that it should now be completed in May.

2.1.6 In conclusion, despite the concerns outlined above, the vast majority of targets are being met and the Council is making sound progress towards the achievement of its objectives. This report serves to highlight our successes and focuses on some of the more challenging issues that we face. Although there is no room for complacency,

we remain well placed to move forward and continually improve the services that we provide.

### **3 ENVIRONMENT**

#### **3.1 Highways Term Works Contract 2004-2014**

3.1.1 The Executive also noted the action being taken to re-let the highways maintenance contract for a further ten year period.

3.1.2 Four companies have been invited to tender for the work and have also been invited to become involved in the Best Value Review of Streetscene and development of the Improvement Plan during May 2004.

### **4 LOOKING AHEAD**

4.1 The next Forward Plan will be published on 1 April 2004 and will be available for public inspection at Easthampstead House in the usual way and is also regularly updated online at [www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk](http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk), where you can also find full details on decisions taken by individual portfolio holders.