

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION
1 JULY 2013
7.30 - 9.25 PM**



Present:

Councillors Leake (Chairman), Angell (Vice-Chairman), Baily, Mrs Birch, Ms Brown, Gbadebo, Harrison, Mrs McCracken, McLean, Turrell, Virgo and Worrall

Reverend Cannon Nick Parish, Church of England Representative

Executive Members:

Councillor McCracken

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Finnie and Heydon

In Attendance:

Richard Beaumont, Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Victor Nicholls, Assistant Chief Executive
Alison Sanders, Director of Corporate Services
Steve Booth, Principal Surveyor
Steven Caplan, Chief Officer: Property
Abby Thomas, Head of Community Engagement and Equalities

4. Apologies for Absence/Substitute Members

The Commission noted the attendance of the following substitute members:

Councillor Mrs McCracken for Councillor Heydon
Councillor Worrall for Councillor Finnie

5. Minutes and Matters Arising

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission held on 2 May 2013 and 15 May 2013 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

There were no matters arising.

6. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillor Mrs Birch declared an interest in that she was the spouse of the Executive Member for Adult Social Care, Health and Housing.

Councillor Mrs McCracken declared an interest in that she was the spouse of the Executive Member for Culture, Corporate Services and Public Protection.

7. **Urgent Items of Business**

There were no urgent items of business.

8. **Appointment of Church of England Representative**

RESOLVED that Reverend Canon Nick Parish be appointed as the Church of England Representative on the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel for an open ended term of office until such time as his nomination is withdrawn.

9. **Public Participation**

There were no representations submitted under the public participation scheme.

10. **Commercial Property Portfolio**

Steve Caplan, Chief Officer: Property, gave a presentation in respect of the Council's Commercial Property Portfolio. The presentation included: details of the number and types of properties in the portfolio, data relating to rental income and void properties, benchmarking data, an overview of the key functions of the Property Services Team managing the portfolio and a summary of the disposal process.

The Council's Commercial Property Portfolio included all Council owned properties that were non residential, not occupied for the corporate service of the authority e.g. Easthamstead House and were not occupied or used for the general benefit of the public e.g. libraries, leisure facilities, schools and community centres. The Council operated a decentralised model, whereby each department managed the properties in use for their operations, drawing on technical support from the corporate team as necessary.

In Bracknell Forest the portfolio included 11 neighbourhood shopping centres, 106 shops and 95 industrial and business units with a current approximate value at April 2013 of £29million, though this could be as high as £35million, and gross rental income of approximately £2.5million. All the retail properties were currently let and discussions were taking place with organisations interested in renting the four empty business units currently on the portfolio. The Council's performance compared favourably to the private sector, particularly as there were more onerous obligations on the public sector, for example in relation to the EU Public Procurement directives.

The performance of the portfolio was currently good with premises only being void for as long as it took for the legal formalities to be completed. Between 2010/11 and 2012/13 income from the portfolio had risen by 2% a figure that compared well to other local authorities. The rent charged on retail properties varied between £10 and £15 per square foot amounts that were considered sustainable in the current climate.

The tenant was responsible for maintaining and repairing the shop and shop front and service charges were used to maintain common areas. Regular condition surveys were conducted for all premises and maintenance requirements were incorporated into the Capital Programme. Limited funds to cover the cost of repairs and maintenance were also available through the Revenue Budget.

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

- The empty retail unit in Great Hollands Shopping Parade was currently subject to a lease with Londis who had plans to extend the unit by combining it with their adjacent current store. Officers would contact Londis about the unit's usage
- The 9% return rate on the portfolio would be lower if the portfolio's value rose
- If a tenant was not in breach of their lease then the local authority had limited powers to compel the tenant to take work forward or keep the retail unit open to the public however the possibility of incorporating a clause into leases that required a tenant to maintain an active shop would be explored
- The Corporate Property Team provided support to individual directorates as required to ensure that those Council properties that were not part of the Commercial Portfolio were adequately maintained
- There were currently no plans to either increase or decrease the size of the portfolio
- The minimum of 1,000 households were required to sustain a parade of shops
- If new shopping parades were to be developed then this would be carried out through the Capital Programme
- Information would be provided to finance officers on the legal limitations on the raising of finance by secured debt on the property portfolio
- Promotion and signage of the shopping parades formed part of the Corporate Property Team's remit however this was subject to budgetary restrictions. Officers would review the signage to Birch Hill shops
- Periodic reviews of the management of all Council properties were carried out through the Asset Management Group. To ensure that the best possible value was obtained from the entire property portfolio a Facilities Capital Management Strategy was currently under development

The Commission thanked Steve Caplan for the informative presentation.

11. **Residents' Survey 2012**

Abby Thomas, Head of Community Engagement and Equalities presented a report containing a draft of the action plan devised to address areas of improvement identified from the results of the Residents' Survey 2012.

The Action Plan had been designed to address areas of improvement in five cross cutting areas:

- Involvement and influence over local decisions
- Residents' attitudes towards their local area
- Use of and satisfaction with specific council services
- Perceptions of the Council overall
- Communication with the Council

In response to Members' questions the following points were made:

- QA Research, the company commissioned to conduct the survey, defined older people as people aged over fifty
- Results would be broken down to show satisfaction rates at ward level
- Dissatisfaction levels, particularly over parking in and around the town centre, were likely to increase as the town centre regeneration progressed
- In future surveys, alternative incentives to supermarket vouchers would be explored to appeal to differing age groups
- There was a significant amount of confusion amongst the public with regard to where responsibility lay for different services and joint working would be

necessary to ensure that customer service provision was seamless between the Borough and Parish Councils

- The possibility of including a telephone survey with a statistically representative sample of residents would be explored for future surveys
- An extensive communications plan to provide feedback to residents had been developed and implemented
- Work would take place to further develop engagement with schools and the College
- More needed to be done to raise awareness of the wide variety of volunteering work that took place across the Borough
- The grading of wards according to deprivation levels was carried out by the Office of National Statistics using a range of indicators. It was acknowledged that across the Borough there were areas of great affluence adjacent to areas that were classified as deprived and care would need to be taken to ensure that this was dealt with appropriate sensitivity
- Consideration would need to be given to how the results might be supplemented with the views of young people
- Consultation planning had become more explicit, for example in terms of the scope and objectives of the consultation, and there was greater transparency over the results of surveys

It was noted that detailed, measurable specific actions would be developed to support the key actions in the draft action plan and the updated action plan would be circulated to members for consideration.

The Commission thanked Abby Thomas for the update.

12. **Executive Forward Plan**

The Commission received a report summarising the Executive Key and Non-Key decisions relating to corporate issues.

I039715: Use of Bailiff Service in Revenue Services Annual Report – It was confirmed that the report would include benchmarking of the service against both previous years and other local authorities.

13. **Quarterly Service Reports 2012/13**

The Commission considered the latest trends, priorities and pressures in terms of departmental performance as reported in the Quarterly Service Reports for the fourth quarter of 2012/13 (January to March) relating to the Chief Executive's Office and the Corporate Services Department.

The Chief Executive's Office

Tackling domestic abuse was a complex process that required partnership working with multiple agencies and a range of different approaches. Work was also taking place to expand the cohort of households being worked with to approximately 100. Members would be sent a note setting out the various factors influencing the number of reported cases and clarification would be sought on how the effectiveness of work undertaken to tackle domestic abuse was measured.

Corporate Services

The implementation of the new Automated Operator system and the transfer of work relating to benefits changes back to the Benefits Team would have a positive impact on the length of time taken for phone calls to the Customer Contact Centre to be answered. The Director of Corporate Services stressed that the majority of phone calls were answered within 20 seconds.

14. **Corporate Performance Overview Report**

The Commission considered the Corporate Performance Overview Report detailing Council performance during the fourth quarter of the 2012/13 financial year (January to March 2013). Arising from Member's questions and comments the following points were noted:

- Data relating to households in all types of temporary accommodation would be circulated
- Detailed analysis of data relating to those staff leaving within one year of started was being carried out and the outcomes would be reported in the Workforce Monitoring Report scheduled for consideration by the Employment Committee in September. It was agreed that this report would be circulated to the Commission
- Information pertaining to the work taking place to secure sufficient secondary school places in the Borough to meet forecast demand would be circulated
- Concern was expressed that the performance of indicators OF2a.2: Older people admitted to residential or nursing care on a permanent basis and L172: Timeliness of financial assessments were not on track and it was agreed that the reasons behind the apparent poor performance would be provided to the Commission

The Commission noted the report.

15. **Overview and Scrutiny Progress Report**

The Commission noted a report providing an update on Overview and Scrutiny activity during the period September 2012 to April 2013.

16. **Work Programme Update**

The Commission received a report providing an update on the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2013-14 with particular reference to Working Groups of the Commission

The Commission was informed that the work of the Delegated Authorities Working Group was nearing completion with the report currently being drafted. The next significant piece of work would be to review the impact of the relocation of business rates and a request for volunteers to participate in the working group would be made shortly.

The Commission noted the report.

17. **Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next planned meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission would take place on 5 September 2013.

CHAIRMAN