

Review Committee – 5 December 2006

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **5 December 2006** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr K H Hudson
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs R Brown

Cllr K J Gordon
Cllr Mrs S A Harper
Cllr T Livings

Cllr Mrs J R Lumley
Cllr P K Savill
Cllr P F A Webster

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren - Chief Executive
R J Honey - Corporate Director (Internal Services)
J Bostock - Principal Committee Administrator

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from P Gowers, Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

416 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21 November 2006 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

417 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr T Livings declared a personal interest in the bus services review by virtue of being a user of public transport.

418 PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Members discussed and assessed the performance of the Review Committee to date, covering lessons from current projects, the size of project teams, the setting of time scales and the approach with regard to witnesses. Observations were made as follows:-

- The bus services review highlights how significant the availability of resources can be if needs are to be addressed and to how the concerns of members of the community about a service sometimes only come to light through relatively intense probing.
- The contents of the Government White Paper on Strong and Prosperous Communities and discussion during the current Access to Services Inspection has confirmed the value of local authorities reflecting customer needs in all that they do. In this context, there could be merit in the draft bus services review report (which should be available by the next meeting of the Review Committee) being

considered by one or more focus groups representing different age profiles.

- Evidence gathered during a review could prove of value in a number of ways. For example, a Transport Bill may confer powers on local authorities and evidence identified during the bus services review could be of value.
- Whilst work on the operation of planning enforcement review was currently ongoing, it could be observed that workload levels can be associated with the level of appeals and that other authorities were facing service problems. Given that resources are finite, value can be associated with a local authority being clear about which cases to pursue. There could also be value in considering if public facing documentation/arrangements should be reviewed to minimize the need for a relatively scarce planning officer resource to respond to frequently asked straightforward questions.
- Planning enforcement was a discretionary service and offenders are only committing criminal offences once formal notices have been upheld. The Council has previously lobbied for arrangements that increase service profile and strengthen the recourse available to authorities. Requirements associated with building case evidence/carrying out surveillance can mean that cases take a long time.
- Whilst press releases can be issued, the media usually concentrates on cases that they consider to be a good story. Publicity is unlikely to influence individuals who plan to manipulate procedures where they can.
- Whilst the monitoring of the committee system review was at a relatively early stage, a number of aspects had been of note such as the introduction of executive summaries for Audit Committee related documentation, the introduction of an additional Policy, Finance and Strategic Performance Committee meeting to replace the meeting of another Committee that had been scheduled but cancelled due to a lack of business and the commencement of a survey of both Members and officers. The project team had reached a view that there could be merit in Committee Chairmen working more closely with lead officers to develop ownership of their own committee's business both before and after meetings. It was observed that the inclusion of Committee Vice-Chairmen in such an approach could be a value. The review would now include consideration of the role of "Champions" and would need to be mindful of issues emanating from the Government White Paper on Strong and Prosperous Communities as they relate to the decision making process.

- There would be value in ensuring that, where individuals are invited to participate as project advisers, expectations associated with their role are clearly specified.
- The arrangements with regard to project team sizes were working well and the flexibility to adjust team size according to circumstances and the strengths of individual Members was useful. Whilst all Members had been involved in the anti-social behaviour review, individual team members had attended specific events. The indication from members of the Centre for Public Scrutiny was that smaller teams can be particularly effective at reaching sound recommendations.
- Whilst it is important to be cognizant of a project's timescale at the scoping stage, it is appropriate to be able to be flexible to account for changing circumstances. Effective project prioritisation and being clear about the Committee's role are key to ensuring that there is not work overload for, say, the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.
- Useful information can be gained from the practice of visiting/discussing project aspects with individuals and groups out in the field. A good example has been the visits to groups of young people in the context of the anti social behaviour review.
- Recent changes to the arrangement for seeing witnesses in terms of developing/supplying effective questions in advance have been effective.
- In terms of effective outcomes, two items of Policy Committee business had already been the subject of 'call in' and change following consideration by the Review Committee.

The Committee was pleased to hear that County Cllr Mrs T Chapman, the County Portfolio holder for Children and Families, together with a County Officer, would be attending the January meeting of the Committee to respond to questions relating to the anti-social behaviour review.

The Chairman invited Members to submit questions that they would like raised with Cllr Mrs Chapman to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer as soon as possible.

The Chairman also advised that, further to the last meeting of the Committee, he was now in receipt of statistics from Alison Spalding, The Team Manager of the Basildon Youth Offending Team. These would be furnished to all Members of the Committee.

419 TRAINING NEEDS

The Committee agreed that the training undertaken during the current Municipal Year had been appropriate to needs.

In terms on the next Municipal Year, Cllr T Livings commended the type of overview and scrutiny training that had been delivered by the Improvement and Development Agency at Warwick University earlier in the year. It would be possible for officers to liaise with the Agency on the possibility of a course for Review Committee members. Considerations could include the merits of a course being run locally.

It was recognised that training for Review Committee members could be seen as distinct from induction training for new Councillors where overview and scrutiny can be covered and training that may be appropriate for all Council Members to facilitate understanding of how overview and scrutiny has developed through the work of the Review Committee.

It was observed that it could be appropriate for Members with experience in the work of the Review Committee to participate in training aimed at the overall Council membership. It was also observed that, notwithstanding that there may be merit in appointing members to the Review Committee who have had experience of the role of Councillor for at least one year, such an arrangement would be impracticable in the context of membership changes at election time combined with the parameters associated with overall committee appointments. Reference was also made to the fact that all Committees could benefit from the input of experienced Councillors.

420 CONTRACT DEVELOPMENT SESSIONS

The Committee considered the identification of a Member to attend the contract development sessions for refuse collection and recycling with bidding companies in accordance with a Full Council decision of 31 October 2006 (minute 374/06).

Responding to questions, officers advised that:-

- It would be appropriate to be mindful of Council practice whereby, if a Member is involved in an executive decision, they should not then be present/serve on the Review Committee if that Committee has 'called in' or is scrutinising that decision.
- If the Committee proceeds on its previously determined basis whereby its role is one of overview of contract content and process rather than direct involvement with contract tendering sessions, then Review Committee members undertaking such an overview would not be precluded from involvement with the 'calling in' or scrutinising of a Policy Committee decision relating to contracts.

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- Whilst the Council has yet to determine whether an appointment of Deputy Leader should be introduced, technically, there is no reason why a Member appointed to such a role should be precluded from appointment to the Review Committee. However, this would give rise to difficulties if that Member was directly involved in the formulation of policy decisions subsequently called in for scrutiny by the Review Committee.

The Committee agreed that, on the basis that open dialogue associated with the refuse collection and recycling contracts was due to take place in March/April 2007, it would be appropriate for Cllr K H Hudson (the previously agreed project leader for new contracts overview) to be involved in overview. Mindful of the value of consistency and the fact that contract overview activity would continue beyond the next elections, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to identify a Deputy who will not be subject to election.

Resolved

That Cllr K H Hudson represent the Committee in overview of the refuse collection and recycling contract process with Cllr P F A Webster to deputise.

Prior to the close of the meeting, the Chairman confirmed he would be attending a two day neighbourhood improvement workshop run by the police next week.

The meeting closed at 9.20 pm.

Chairman

Date