

Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 28 June 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Procedures Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **28 June 2005** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr K H Hudson
Vice-Chairman: Cllr P K Savill

Cllr Mrs S A Harper
Cllr T Livings

Cllr P F A Webster

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R G S Choppen, K J Gordon, D Merrick and R A Amner.

POLICY COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN/VICE-CHAIRMEN PRESENT

Cllr T G Cutmore	-	Chairman of the Policy & Finance Committee
Cllr M G B Starke	-	Chairman of the Environmental Services Committee
Cllr Mrs L Hungate	-	Vice-Chairman of the Environmental Services Committee
Cllr S P Smith	-	Chairman of the Community Services Committee

OFFICERS PRESENT

P Warren	-	Chief Executive
R J Honey	-	Corporate Director (Law, Planning & Administration)
R Crofts	-	Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
S Fowler	-	Head of Administrative and Member Services
S Clarkson	-	Head of Revenue and Housing Management
J Bostock	-	Principal Committee Administrator

ALSO PRESENT

Ian Davidson	-	Audit Commission Relationship Manager
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250 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 June 2005 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

251 INTERVIEW WITH CHAIRMEN/VICE-CHAIRMEN OF POLICY COMMITTEES

The Committee held interviews with the Chairmen/Vice-Chairmen of the Council's Policy Committees to ascertain their views on the performance of Overview and Scrutiny Committees, including the role of Overview and Scrutiny Committees in policy development and their effectiveness as a

vehicle for the challenge of executive decisions. An objective of the interviews was to identify information that would assist the Committee in developing an understanding of the Council's requirements of Overview and Scrutiny and the way forward for Overview and Scrutiny in Rochford.

The Chairmen/Vice-Chairmen of each Policy Committee were interviewed in turn.

In responding to questions, interviewees offered the following observations:-

- The venue for meetings can be important. Formal locations, such as the Council Chamber, do not necessarily provide the intimacy that is best suited to the work of Overview and Scrutiny Committees. A table arrangement where everyone is seen to be working together can help maximise the willingness of all present to contribute.
- There could well be more scope for Overview and Scrutiny Committees to introduce 'challenge'. This may be a more natural feature of authorities that operated a cabinet model and perhaps had to be engendered in fourth option authorities, particularly where one party has significant overall political control. Challenge should be seen in the context of looking to ensure that an authority is constantly mindful of the best ways for moving forward and its presence should not be dependent on the political make-up of a Council. In terms of the Council's overall workload, areas that can be identified as purely political are few and it can be seen as important for the Council to be open to receiving advice from all possible sources.
- The current mechanisms available for call-in appeared appropriate. Whilst it was acknowledged that some matters were discussed in group meetings, the potential for forming views on a subject was there for all Councillors in that all had the opportunity to read Committee reports on issues to be determined by the Council. Generally, call-in was viewed as a mechanism to be operated for the benefit of the Council rather than as a vehicle for delaying the decision-making process.
- Whilst Members can have every confidence that officers and appointed consultants would develop recommendations that are in the Council's best interests, mechanisms need to be available that are capable of challenging Members in their executive, decision-making capacity.
- There could be merit in review of the current arrangement whereby three Overview and Scrutiny Committees reflect the activity areas of the Policy Committees. The number/nature of Overview and Scrutiny Committees might perhaps be linked to actual levels of workload.

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- There were a number of examples of Overview and Scrutiny Committees working with partners and others in developing policy for the way forward on an issue. The development of partnership working can be seen as particularly important for smaller authorities looking to maximise service scope.
- There would be merit in guarding against a situation whereby a Policy Committee would consider referring a matter to an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, say, to avoid a contentious decision or to facilitate its own agenda. It may be that, when the latest political structure was first introduced, there was a perception that Policy Committees should not spend too much time considering matters in depth. Historically, Overview and Scrutiny could be seen as being in its infancy.
- The ability of Overview and Scrutiny Committees to formulate options on tackling a subject and developing a policy, of its own volition and in advance of consideration by a Policy Committee, should be seen as a strength. If Policy Committees remained mindful of the value of only referring items to Overview and Scrutiny where clearly appropriate, this could help in freeing up Overview and Scrutiny Committees for such work.
- In that the work of Overview and Scrutiny Committees can be resource intensive, the review being undertaken by the Committee would contribute to Best Value.

In addition to hearing from Policy Committee Chairmen/Vice-Chairmen, the Committee also sought the views of officers present at the meeting. It was observed that a key challenge in providing reports and other information for Overview and Scrutiny projects was that of ensuring the amount was appropriate for purpose. For large overlapping subject areas there is clear merit in considering the possibilities for cross-cutting work between Committees and with other authorities/partners. The nature of the forum established to consider subjects perhaps, at times, needs to be a matter of pragmatism

Specific reference was made to some of the messages that had emanated from the recently attended Third Annual Public Scrutiny Conference. These included:-

- That roles/intended outcomes need to be clear and the right subjects chosen for scrutiny. Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny should be followed up by those Committees themselves.
- Overview and Scrutiny Committees have a role as a 'critical friend' to Policy Committees.

- Best results have been obtained and Overview and Scrutiny found to be most rewarding in authorities where it is properly resourced, including dedicated officer input.
- No one size fits all.
- Invoking call-in can, to some extent, be seen as failure.
- Overview and Scrutiny activity should not interfere with the momentum of the Council achieving its outcomes.
- Despite indications in the guidance, there is more than one school of thought on whether the Chairmen of Overview and Scrutiny Committees should be from a majority group.
- Notwithstanding that real-life situations can bring issues, party politics/whipping should not be part of Overview and Scrutiny.

The Chairman thanked all those who had contributed to the Committee's investigative work.

252 COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT IMPROVEMENT PLAN: UPDATE ON PROGRESS

The Committee considered the report of the Chief Executive which provided an update on progress in connection with the Corporate Performance Assessment (CPA) Improvement Plan. The Committee also considered the addendum report of the Head of Revenue and Housing Management on scoring against the new Housing Benefit performance standards that were launched in March 2005.

(1) Update on Progress

Responding to questions on the Improvement Plan Progress Report, officers advised that:-

- The April 2008 deadline associated with the Housing Option Appraisal process was a worst case scenario, the best case scenario being 16-18 months.
- A key stage in the stock option appraisal process would be the ballot of tenants. In terms of staff information and communication, it was important that staff were kept aware during the process. Staff had been appointed to the Stock Options Appraisal Board and a staff observer would be present at meetings of the Joint Transfer Steering Group.
- A progress report on Key Plans and Actions for 2005/06 was to be submitted to the Policy & Finance Committee on 12 July.

- The Improvement Panel would be concentrating on the subject of housing at its next meeting in September.
- The Member Training session on 'visioning' is to be held on 13 July 2005.
- The dedicated Publicity and Projects Officer within the Revenue and Benefits Service had specialist knowledge of benefits administration that could be relayed at events attended by the public.
- Member questions on the pilot outsourced telephone service being provided by Capita Plc should be addressed to Council Officers direct.
- It had just been announced that a sum of £43,500 was available for expanding fraud partnership joint working via the Department of Work and Pensions.
- There would be merit in the Committee giving specific consideration to the draft self-assessment document on the CPA progress review at the September meeting.

During discussion it was observed that the fact that the 2006/07 aims for the Revenue and Benefits Service were team aspirations was pleasing.

The Committee concurred with the view of the Chairman that it would be appropriate for Members to give individual consideration to the key areas that they would like to focus on at the next progress meeting in September. These could be fed back to the Chairman over the coming week in the first instance. The Chairman would then liaise with officers.

(2) The New Housing Benefit Performance Standards

Responding to questions on the addendum report, the Head of Revenue and Housing Management clarified aspects of the calculation mechanism.

Resolved

- (1) That the Improvement Plan and its monitoring over a six monthly cycle, be endorsed.
- (2) That the self-assessment score of 3 (good) be endorsed. (HRHM)

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Prior to the close of the meeting, Ian Davidson gave a verbal update on forthcoming assessments relating to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. A progress assessment would take place in the Autumn. Two positive progress assessments would trigger a corporate assessment. The use of resources had become a prevalent aspect of CPA reporting, as had value for money.

There are set standards for the quality of services. If an authority introduces additional resource to an area, it is important to be able to provide a tangible measure of what has been achieved. Inspectors will be commencing the CPA progress assessment during September/October, although dates had yet to be fixed. There would also under the CPA regime be a Direction of Travel judgement. This would be published for all Districts next March.

The meeting closed at 9.17 pm.

Chairman

Date