

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

31st March 2003

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Rose (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Mrs. Mead and Stone.

Conservative Group

Councillors Bladen and Douglas.

In Attendance

Councillors Harrington, Southerd, Southern and Wilkins (Labour Group).

COS/53. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 10th February 2003 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/54. **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT BEST VALUE REVIEW**

Further to Minute No. COS/45 of 10th February 2003, the Committee received an update from the Personnel and Development Manager. The Officer had attended meetings with the Corporate Best Value Working Group and there were a number of issues to resolve with the final report and improvement plan for this Best Value Review. The detail of these issues was still awaited. It had been agreed to arrange a further meeting between representatives of the Corporate Best Value Working Group, the Review Team Leader and two other Review Team members, to clarify the issues that the Corporate Group had with the Review documents. A follow-up meeting would then be held involving the Chief Executive to seek resolutions to the rationalised list of outstanding issues. At this stage, it was difficult to predict when the Review would be finalised and a further progress report would be provided to the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair asked when the draft Improvement Plan would be available. The Personnel and Development Manager explained that the Review Team's draft Plan had been submitted to the Corporate Group in January. There were approximately twelve issues to be addressed and some of these were of a more general nature. Dialogue was needed with the Corporate Group to assess the amount of work required to complete the Improvement Plan. The Chair referred to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and he felt that progress was needed with the Improvement Plan. The Review Team had implemented a number of the initiatives identified through the review process and these were now included within the Service Plan for the Division. A recent example was work with District Audit on Equal Opportunities.

The Chair asked for an update on the Investors in People accreditation. Assessment interviews were being held at present and it was expected that this further appraisal would be completed and the report issued within approximately two weeks.

Note: At 4.15 p.m. Councillor Mrs. Mead joined the Meeting.

COS/55. **MONITORING COUNCIL PLANS AND STRATEGIES**

At the last Meeting, it was agreed that the Committee's review of arrangements for monitoring plans and strategies should be progressed by means of a report to each policy committee. Draft reports had been prepared and were circulated for consideration. The Chairs of the three policy committees had been invited to the Meeting, to participate in discussions on the draft reports.

The Chair introduced this item and explained the work undertaken by Officers and the Scrutiny Committee. He referred to the Government's aims for local authorities to rationalise the plans and strategies they produced. The Policy and Best Value Manager referred Members to a summary of the guidance and explained that there were approximately one hundred Council plans and strategies at present. It was recognised that certain documents were required by statute and others might need to be retained. The Chair of the Housing and Community Services Committee, Councillor Southern felt that the Government's objective contradicted requirements under Best Value. He explained the range of departments that reported to this policy committee and each had to produce plans and strategies. He also spoke of the role of policy committees generally.

Councillor Southerd, Chair of the Environmental and Development Services Committee commented on the monitoring arrangements for plans and strategies. He referred particularly to tourism strategies and the Local Plan, noting that external monitoring took place for statutory documents. He felt that rationalising the plans and strategies produced might be more suited to larger local authorities and he gave specific examples to demonstrate how it could prove difficult to rationalise certain strategies.

Officers suggested a structured approach to managing this task. For example, Members might wish to monitor key strategic documents and consider alternate methods to monitor other plans and policies.

The Chair proposed that the reports be submitted to each policy committee after the May elections. He felt it would be opportune, with a new Council, to look at the policies in place. Councillor Southerd agreed that this could be useful and each new policy committee could examine and review the plans and strategies in place. It was noted that certain policies could be brief, but these were usually supported by other documents. Some policies might appear to be dated. An example was the Health and Safety Policy, which was first drafted in 1975. However, there were periodic updates and revised guidance was issued. Councillor Southern felt that it might be possible to merge some of the strategies under the Housing and Community Services Committee's Terms of Reference. The policy chairs were thanked for their contribution.

Note: At 4.30 p.m. Councillors Southerd and Southern left the Meeting.

COS/56. FINANCIAL SERVICES BEST VALUE REVIEW

The Committee received an update on progress with this Best Value Review. The Financial Services Manager advised that the final report and Action Plan for the Finance Services elements of the Review had now been completed. The documents would be circulated to the Review Group and the Corporate Best Value Group. Officers were seeking to combine the Finance and Revenue Services elements of this Review and there were some cross-cutting issues. The Chair enquired about the completion of this Review and whilst it was slightly behind timetable, there was no cause for concern.

The Revenue Services Manager confirmed that the review documentation for the Revenue Services elements had also been drafted and these should be available for the next Scrutiny Committee Meeting. He reported on a Focus Group arranged with the Service's professional partners on 26th February 2003. This included presentations on the Service's current performance and its vision for the next 12-18 months. Partners were informed of the opportunities provided by the new Information Technology system, the scope for joint working and the various challenges faced by the Service. This was followed by Focus Group activities and feedback was sought on a range of issues. Appended to the report were details of the questions posed to partners and the feedback received. Officers felt that this exercise had helped improve relationships with other partners.

An update was sought on the new Revenues and Benefits computer system and it was hoped that this would be operational in September 2003. An update was also provided on the information kiosks and it was hoped that by October 2003, the kiosks would be established at four locations in the District.

COS/57. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Chair reminded Members that an Annual Report was due to be submitted to the Council. For this year, it was proposed to submit a combined report with sections for each of the three scrutiny committees. Officers had prepared a draft report and this was circulated. Members were asked to review the document and to submit any comments or suggestions to the Policy and Best Value Manager, in order that the document could be considered by the Overview Committee at its Meeting on 7th April. The report would then be submitted to the Council Meeting on 17th April 2003.

The Policy and Best Value Manager explained the format of the report. It looked back over the last ten months and for this Committee, it included details of those Best Value Reviews, policy framework documents and the three special projects that had been considered.

For the year ahead, it was expected that working arrangements would continue to evolve. A detailed work programme had not been prepared, but suggested main priorities and key areas of work were included within the report. Comment was made on the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and it was felt that the experience of Scrutiny Committees could add value to this process. It might be possible to pursue the special project "How Green is the Council" in addition to those identified within the report.

Note: At 5.00 p.m. Councillor Wilkins joined the Meeting.

Members discussed the benefit of the annual review process and felt it might also prove useful to policy committees. In the main, policy committees tended to be reactive although there were specific examples of a more structured and proactive approach to preparing documents such as the Housing Investment Programme. A Member commented that policy Chairs seemed defensive and unaware of how scrutiny committees could assist. Councillor Wilkins responded that policy committees received six-monthly Service Plan reports and this might provide the impetus for a wider review. He did not feel defensive towards the scrutiny process and recognised, for example, the value of the call-in process to ensure that correct decisions were reached.

The Chair thanked Officers for preparing the Annual Report and for their terrific work over the previous year. He paid tribute to Members for their assistance and particularly to Councillor Rose, his Vice-Chair who would not be seeking re-election at the May Council elections.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.10 p.m.