

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

12th September 2005

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Murphy (Chair), Councillor Lane (Vice-Chair) and Councillor Mulgrew.

Conservative Group

Councillors Atkin and Bale.

In Attendance

Councillor Harrington (Labour Group).

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the Meeting were received from Councillor Isham (Labour Group) and Councillor Bladen (Conservative Group).

COS/11. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 1st August 2005 were received. With regard to Minute No. COS/7 (b), regarding the special project to assess the Council's Best Value Review Process, the Chair requested an amendment. This concerned the final sentence of the first paragraph of the Minute and the Chair advised that he had expressed his disappointment that the Officers concerned did not attend nor had tendered their apologies.

Subject to this amendment, the Minutes were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/12. **STRATEGIC PLANNING PROJECT – UP-DATE**

The Chair gave a verbal up-date on the feedback received to the draft report on this special project. He had received contributions from the Deputy Chief Executive, the Director of Corporate Services and Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration, together with a joint response from that Officer and the Policy and Best Value Officer. The Chair explained those comments received regarding the Corporate Plan process. He referred to a specific section of the report about the process and responsibilities for formulation of the Corporate Plan. This was not intended to be critical of any Officer. There was a discussion about the process to formulate the Corporate Plan and the proposals for the next Corporate Plan, including the use of Inlogov as consultants. The Vice Chair reported that he had received some verbal feedback and he would discuss this with the Chair.

The Deputy Chief Executive was asked if he wished to present his feedback to the Committee. The Officer highlighted a number of issues. He recognised the importance of long-term planning for the Council,

spoke about certain issues around the format of the report and with regard to its conclusions and recommendations. He felt that the report should look both backwards and forwards and used consultation as a particular example of this. The report examined what had been done previously and perhaps it should make recommendations for future consultation. The Chair asked whether the Officer felt this aspect of the report was not balanced or could be considered negative. He had anticipated feedback on the consultation section of the report. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that consultation would be a key role of the Principal Policy Officer's post.

There was a discussion about the aims of the review and the consultation section in particular. It was not intended to have caused friction and was hoped that this was an open process with no surprises. The importance of the consultation section was recognised as key to the whole process. The Principal Policy Officer explained the opportunity for external consultation via the Local Strategic Partnership.

The Committee then discussed the Council's vision, the links to the Community Strategy and the three-year corporate planning timeframe. There was recognition of the importance of the Corporate Plan in linking a number of other longer-term strategies. The Council's Vision was compared to a number of long term objectives, with a specific example used in relation to Council housing. The Director of Corporate Services explained her views about the Vision, specific objectives and the links to other plans and strategies. The relationship of the Council to the Local Strategic Partnership was also touched upon.

The Committee then had a discussion about the approach to change, the role of a small shire District Council, the risks and perceptions about the Council's previous "middle ground" approach. The Chair felt there was a need to drive forward and maintaining the status quo was not sufficient. He made a comparison to the private sector and felt that if the Council was complacent it would slip back in real terms. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed and quoted from his reply, particularly about performance management. He commented on the actual progress made, but relative to other local authorities, performance was falling back. The Council needed to look at how it achieved the important "building blocks", whilst keeping an eye on the progress being made by other authorities. The Director of Corporate Services referred to changing culture and having a constant review process, which was a fundamental part of performance management.

Councillor Bale questioned whether the Council moved forward from continual review, as he felt some services had slipped back. The Deputy Chief Executive repeated that performance management was about focussing on key issues to achieve a stepped change.

The Chair commented on the role of Members in performance management. He referred particularly to the role of this Committee, the Improvement Panel and the approach taken in Policy Committees and at the Council Meeting. He spoke about the alignment of resources to key issues and about engaging Members in the process to produce such key documents as the Corporate Plan. The Deputy Chief Executive felt that the process being commenced for the next Corporate Plan would assist in

this. He then commented on mechanisms to gauge community feedback and the approaches adopted to engage different sectors by organisations like the Primary Care Trust and the Constabulary. The Director of Corporate Services referred to the links between the Council's Vision and its strategies, the need for a driver and possibly to become a "learning organisation". She felt this would give a positive message and would aid a change of culture. Councillor Lane pursued this issue and felt that staff needed to be comfortable to enable change to be achieved and it did not always have to be lead from the top of the Organisation.

A summary was given on the proposed way forward. The comments received would be reflected in the report. The Vice Chair considered that whilst the report had some good messages, there were other, harder messages and he was concerned about how these would be delivered. He felt it would be better to deliver the findings as part of a presentation and this view was supported by the Chair. All Members would be invited to contribute to the presentation and the Vice Chair felt that Officers could also contribute to this process. The Deputy Chief Executive asked the Committee to think about the mechanisms to engage other Members of the Council.

COS/13. **REVIEW OF OUTSTANDING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PREVIOUS REPORTS**

A baseline position statement was circulated showing those special projects undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee since August 2004. For each item, the matrix showed the Corporate Scrutiny Committee's recommendations, the progress or actions taken by the Policy Committee, further consideration by the Scrutiny Committee and other comments and actions. The special projects involved were the Review of the Budget proposals and the Best Value Review Process. It was agreed that Members would consider the information circulated and discuss this further at a future meeting of the Committee.

A report had been circulated by the Director of Corporate Services to provide an analysis of Council spending. The report provided in pictorial form, an analysis of Council spending across its main service areas and in particular how this was aligned and divided over the Council's current key aims, as set out in the Corporate Plan. The report also provided some trend analysis of spending over these areas and compared spending with other 'like' authorities, based on the Audit Commission's profile.

In introducing the report, the Director of Corporate Services explained that the information provided was at a high level. The Deputy Chief Executive felt it might be worth holding an informal meeting of the Committee to look at the issues raised within the report in greater depth. The Committee gave consideration to the various charts submitted. The Chair asked when a comparative report could be provided on performance, so this could be linked to the financial comparison that had been circulated. Officers were asked to consider this request and produce a suitable report for the next Committee meeting. The Chair asked that the information be provided prior to the meeting, so that it could be considered and an informal meeting arranged. The Director of Corporate Services outlined her plans, ultimately to produce a report based on three year rolling data and the Chair felt this would be useful.

COS/14. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Vice-Chair referred to the Scrutiny Committee “away day” and he felt it would be useful to review the Work Programme. The Chair reminded of a proposed project to look at the roles fulfilled by the Member Champions. He outlined his thoughts on how this could be progressed and Officers agreed to pursue this. There was a desire to follow on from the current special project, to look at performance management. Another issue touched upon was shifting resources, but the Vice-Chair felt it might be premature for the Scrutiny Committee to look at this issue at the present time.

The Chair referred to the review of the scoring system and he commented on the exercise undertaken for the previous budget round. There was an opportunity to seek feedback from those that had used the scoring system. The Director of Corporate Services felt that the system provided a good business planning process. The Chair asked whether there was a quality audit process and it was confirmed there was no mechanism for an independent check on the use of the scoring system. There would be the opportunity to report back to the Scrutiny Committee early in the new year on this issue. A related discussion took place on the application of the scoring system to service developments and with regard to zero base budgeting. The Director of Corporate Services commented on the difficulty of applying zero base budgeting to priorities, but it might be possible to apply it to lesser priorities. This issue could again be discussed further at a future meeting of the Committee. The Director of Corporate Services offered to supply supporting information on this topic to the Chair. The Vice Chair commented that this could provide the area for the Scrutiny Committee to focus on for this year’s budget consultation.

Councillor Harrington highlighted a number of issues for the Work Programme. The Overview Committee wished to look at more cross cutting issues like procurement. He also referred to information technology and the use of Members’ laptop computers.

S. MURPHY

CHAIR

The meeting terminated at 5.45 p.m.