

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30th October 2006

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair) and Councillors Jones and Tilley.

Conservative Group

Councillors Atkin, Bale and Bladen.

APOLOGY

An apology for absence from the Meeting was received from Councillor Mulgrew (Vice-Chair)(Labour Group).

COS/20. MINUTES

The Open and Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 18th September 2006 were taken as read, approved as true records and signed by the Chair.

COS/21. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS AND REPORTS

The Chair referred to the Scrutiny Committee's report on sickness absence and questioned how this had been received by the Finance and Management Committee. Councillor Bladen had presented the report and he confirmed that it would be determined within the next three months. Officers discussed the timescales for the report back to the Scrutiny Committee and provided further information on how the report was received at the policy committee.

COS/22. BUDGET 2007/08

The Director of Corporate Services submitted a report to follow on from the earlier discussions about a mid-term scrutiny review of the budget. It also touched on the Committee's involvement in the budget process. Appended to the report were details of the first quarter budget monitoring figures, that had been submitted to the September meeting of the Finance and Management Committee.

The Chair discussed how the Scrutiny Committee could be involved in the budget process. It was noted that the budget consultation was now undertaken as part of the corporate planning process, but there was a Special Scrutiny Committee Meeting to look specifically at the budget. For the benefit of new scrutiny Members, the Chair thought it would be useful to have an overview and information on the projected financial position for the current year. Officers referred to the medium-term financial plan which would provide much of the background sought. The circulated report gave the position at the end of the first quarter. Previously, the Committee had expressed an interest in looking at out-turn figures and guidance was sought on the information required.

Councillor Bladen asked whether there were any issues that the scrutiny committee should be made aware of at the present time. Officers explained

that the short and medium-term financial position was satisfactory. The Committee might wish to look at the longer-term position, as currently there was a gap between levels of income and expenditure, which was being funded by the use of balances. If ongoing revenue commitments were made, this might widen the gap between expenditure and income in the future. Reference was also made to efficiency savings, the comprehensive spending review and the potential impact of the Government's financial settlement. The Council was facing additional costs associated with the Single Status Job Evaluation Scheme and potential equal pay claims. Members were also reminded of the ambitious Corporate Plan, which could have an impact on the budget position.

With regard to the difference between income and expenditure levels, the Chair noted that traditionally income levels were higher and had resulted in significant reserves. He stated the need for realistic assessments of income and staffing costs. Work was being undertaken with Planning Officers on the anticipated level of planning and building control fee income, but there was a need for a prudent approach in assessing likely income. The budget accounted for a full staffing establishment and an outline was given of the various factors which could affect this. Information could be provided to Members on budget underspends.

Councillor Tilley questioned whether the Auditors commented on the level of reserves. Auditors were concerned if insufficient reserves were maintained and the Council could justify the current £1 million of reserves held. The Officer suggested that the Committee might wish to look at the out-turn figures as compared to the original budget, to enable an analysis of underspends. The timing of such a review exercise was discussed and it was proposed that further information be considered at the next Meeting.

Councillor Atkin referred to the budget monitoring report and particularly a summary section on relatively larger variances. With regard to energy costs, Officers explained that the Procurement Officer had secured a competitive price for energy supply. However, it was noted that the Council Offices could be more energy efficient. Through replacement of such items as central heating boilers, these issues were being addressed. There was also a discussion about the decrease in the cost of the concessionary travel scheme.

In response to a question from Councillor Jones, information was provided on the proportion of underspends, reasonable underspend levels and the amounts carried forward to fund expenditure in future years. A further area raised was slippage on capital expenditure.

Councillor Atkin sought further information about the funding of affordable housing schemes. It was noted that the Council could utilise a proportion of capital receipts for such projects, rather than having to return these funds to a central government 'pool'. Officers agreed to supply further information on this to Members. The Council's lending policy was also discussed.

It was agreed that a report be submitted to the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee to compare the budget and out-turn figures.

#### COS/23.CORPORATE PLAN – "IDEAS INTO ACTION" UPDATE

The Deputy Chief Executive circulated a copy of the report that would be presented to the next round of Area Meetings. This would give feedback on

the “Ideas into Action” initiative. Sixty-four ideas had been submitted, including:-

- Specific complaints about issues such as untidy land,
- Requests for improved services to the whole district, such as collecting plastics for recycling,
- Ideas for local initiatives that required funding or other support, to get the idea launched and
- Suggestions where the Council had little influence, such as dismantling electricity pylons and laying the cables underground.

The service development process would be used to consider larger schemes, and it was hoped that smaller ideas could be implemented sooner, to show that the public’s feedback had been taken on board.

Councillor Atkin asked how issues for the County Council had been actioned. This Council would receive its responses and then reply to individual residents. Councillor Bladen asked about the funding issues associated with these schemes. Whilst some of the proposals were not that expensive, others had significant capital and revenue implications, for example, to provide additional play equipment. Related to this, Councillor Bale spoke about the amount of expenditure per head of population on play equipment and noted that no provision was made in some rural areas. Officers confirmed that the Council provided relatively low funding for play equipment.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

#### COS/24. “SHIFTING RESOURCES” – BUSINESS PROCESS RE-ENGINEERING

The Head of Planning Services had circulated a copy of the presentation slides for this project. The Chair sought an overview of the process completed by the consultants and staff, which was duly provided. It was considered that employing a consultant to facilitate the project had been of great benefit. Officers explained the development phase and the different stages completed as part of process implementation. The Head of Service was pleased with the staff involvement and they had also felt the process useful.

Councillor Bladen referred to the implementation plan timescales for the Building Control and Planning aspects of the Division. In response to a question from the Chair, there was a discussion about how customer enquiries were handled previously and the revised arrangements. Staff in the Customer First section now handled some of the enquiries and scripts were being developed to assist them in this role. Planning administrative staff dealt with certain enquiries, so that the planning specialists were able to concentrate on more technical and appropriate enquiries. A further issue being considered was a duty rota for professional advice.

The Chair explained that he had queued for service at the Customer First helpdesk. He compared this to the previous service provided at the dedicated planning reception. Officers explained how the current arrangements would be developed further, confirmed the other responsibilities of the planning administrative staff and recognised the need for Building Control customers to receive a high level of service, given the market competition in this area. The Chair spoke about these processes from a quality management perspective.

It was agreed to note the report.

COS/25.SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS – UPDATE ON REVIEW

Further to Minute No. COS/9 of 7th August 2006, a report was submitted to update Members on progress with the review of support for the voluntary and community sector. Since the last report to Scrutiny, a draft action plan had been prepared and considered by the review team. A copy of the action plan was submitted for the Committee's information. Details were also provided of a planned Member briefing on 29th November 2006, to be led by the Council for Voluntary Services. This would inform Members of the nature of the sector and the current support provided by the Council. It would allow a properly informed discussion around some of the complex issues arising from the draft action plan. Following the briefing, the Review Team would reconvene to agree a final draft action plan, to go to Committee.

Councillor Atkin referred to the implications of the recent Government White Paper and asked when this would be taken into account as part of the review. Officers had predicted some aspects, whilst others would need to be included and an outline was given of how this would be undertaken.

The Chair questioned whether the District Council did enough for the voluntary sector. Officers spoke about the relative support provided by this Council as compared to others. There was a need for an open and accessible system to give a clear understanding of the decisions taken regarding support. The Chair recognised the endeavours of the Council for Voluntary Services and felt that support to it could be increased.

He asked whether there was a need for further involvement from the Scrutiny Committee in this process, or whether it would duplicate work being undertaken by the Review Group. Councillor Atkin questioned whether the Scrutiny Committee should look at the implications of the Government White Paper. Members were referred to the detailed action plan and particularly the potential impact of changes to the core funding arrangements. It was understood that the Review Group was looking at these issues and perhaps the Scrutiny Committee could consider this again, after the review had been carried out.

It was agreed not to pursue this item further at the present time.

COS/26.SERVICE STANDARDS – NEXT STEPS

Further to Minute No. COS/15 of 18th September 2006, an update was provided on the completion of the Environmental Services booklet. Members' comments had been taken on board generally and would be applied to other booklets. Guidance was sought on the way forward with this project. The Chair considered that the Scrutiny Committee could look at the availability and relevance of information, together with how it was presented. As an example, he explained that he had sought information from central reception about high hedges. The receptionist had tried to help, but did not have a leaflet on this subject. The Scrutiny Committee could look at the information available, how it was categorised and formatted. It was noted that information was available via the Council's website, but was questioned how many residents used it.

Officers confirmed that the service standard information was being produced for six service areas. There was also an A-Z of Council services on the

website and following the example of another Derbyshire local authority, this could be produced in booklet form. Members might wish to look at the arrangements made by other local authorities, particularly beacon councils, to review the information they provided. Officers were surprised that staff had not been able to provide information about high hedges and referred to the ongoing access to services project for 'hard to reach' groups.

Councillor Tilley felt this issue should be included on the agenda for future meetings. The Scrutiny Committee could monitor how useful the service standard booklets were, as there was a chance to develop and improve these in the future. Whilst the booklets had now been agreed, as a second phase, consideration could be given to how best to communicate the information contained within them. Further discussion took place and the Chair proposed that Councillor Tilley and himself consider a project plan for discussion at the next Scrutiny Committee Meeting. Officers suggested that baseline information could be gathered, including samples of current leaflets produced by the Authority. An invitation could also be extended to an Officer from a beacon authority, to ask how they went about reviewing the literature provided.

It was agreed that the Chair and Councillor Tilley prepare a project plan for consideration at the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee Meeting and to review current Council literature and leaflets at that time.

#### COS/27.REDECORATION/WORKS TO THE CIVIC OFFICES

It was reported that redecoration and other works were due to start within the Civic Offices on 6th November 2006. The available budget would be used to repaint walls in communal areas and corridors, to replace worn carpets and to undertake some improvements to signage and lighting. In response to a question from Councillor Bale, it was confirmed that the redecoration works would not extend into individual offices at this time. The Chair outlined the further information he was seeking on this subject.

It was agreed to include this item on the agenda for the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee Meeting and to re-invite Officers from the Housing Division to discuss the issue further.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 6.10 p.m.