

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9th December 2002

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

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

Conservative Group

Councillor Bladen.

In Attendance

Councillors Harrington and Mrs. Rose (Labour Group).

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the Meeting were received from Councillor Mrs. Mead (Labour Group) and Councillor Douglas (Conservative Group).

COS/33. MINUTES

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 28th October 2002 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/34. MEMBERS QUESTIONS AND REPORTS

The Chair reminded Members that other special projects could be considered by the Committee and any suggested topics should be submitted to the Overview Committee for consideration.

COS/35. IEG STATEMENT

Further to Minute No. COS/31 of 28th October 2002, the Committee received an update on Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) from the E-Government and Strategy Manager. It was reported that the latest Government IEG Strategy had been received and copies would be made available. An outline was given of the Strategy's contents, the requirements for future IEG Statements and likely funding availability for 2003/04 and beyond.

The Chair asked if feedback had been received on the Council's second IEG Statement and he was advised that an announcement was expected in mid-December. The Committee discussed the likely future funding available and noted the current resource commitments for staff employed on the National Land and Property Gazetteer (NLPG). Members recognised the progress being made on the NLPG and that the Council should shortly be within the top 12% of authorities Nationally, as regards progress with this initiative. The Council had taken the lead in establishing a Derbyshire-wide NLPG Group and was receiving requests for advice from several other local authorities.

The Committee considered other information technology developments taking place at present. In particular, Members discussed the provision of high-speed network links, developments to the Council's intranet and its website and joint initiatives to improve digital mapping systems. Interaction with the Council's website was considered together with the range of on-line services available and the benefits of 'broadband' connections. With the increased volume of information on the Council's website, regular maintenance was essential, to keep the site up to date. The quality of the website was also important to create the right public perception. A presentation could be made to Members on the developments to the website and it was felt that a seminar prior to a Council Meeting would be useful.

Members discussed the proposed joint initiative with the Primary Care Trust to provide customer contact points through the 'LIFT' project. A longer term development was to provide interactive 'kiosks' which would enable the public to access Council services. Members discussed the likely timescale for this initiative and possible locations for the kiosks in a rural district such as South Derbyshire. A partnership approach would be required and ultimately the kiosks could provide information on the services of other local authorities, the emergency services and a range of other organisations. Similarly, kiosks in neighbouring authority areas could be 'enabled' to receive information on this Council's services. The Derbyshire Partnership Forum had a vision to provide a full range of services from the kiosks and the District Council's services would form only a small part of the total information available. Recognition was given to the infrastructure needed to support the kiosks, that already available and likely funding availability over the coming years for broadband connections. The Officer was thanked for the update provided.

COS/36. **BUDGET**

The Committee received an update on preparation of the Council's Budget from the Financial Services Manager. The Service and Financial Planning Working Panel would meet on Wednesday 11th December to consider the scored Service Development Bids. The base budget would be available shortly afterwards. The Government's financial settlement had been received at the end of the previous week and it was considered quite generous with an increase of 12% in grant levels as compared to the current year. This would help with the Council's three year forecast as a smaller grant increase had been assumed. There were, however, some issues to address with regard to the Housing Revenue Account.

COS/37. **CENTRAL ESTABLISHMENT CHARGES - REVIEW OF ARRANGEMENTS**

The Financial Services Manager explained that the revised methodology for treatment of Central Establishment Charges (CEC's) had been incorporated into the budget process. Information had been circulated to all Divisional Managers recently and little feedback had been received on the new arrangements. It was hoped that the revised approach would provide a clearer understanding of central costs.

COS/38. **BEST VALUE REVIEWS**(a) Human Resource Management

Further to Minute No. COS/21 of 16th September 2002, the Committee received an update from the Personnel and Development Manager. Limited progress had been made and the external “reality check” had been concluded during October 2002. It had raised a number of issues for the Review Team to consider.

It was hoped that the Improvement Plan would be provided to the next Meeting of the Committee with the final Report and Plan being submitted to the Finance and Committee in February 2003. A number of key tasks had already been implemented and more were scheduled to be implemented before the Review was concluded or inspected as part of the Corporate Performance Assessment in December 2003.

In response to a Member’s question, it was confirmed that a number of the key issues within the Review had stemmed from the Corporate Plan. They had been included within the Division’s Service Plan and therefore had been achieved or were to be undertaken during the next year.

A progress report was provided on the Investors In People accreditation. The Personnel and Development Manager spoke of the interim assessment in June and the positive feedback received. An action plan had been prepared for outstanding key areas and improved communication with employees was a particular issue which had been recognised by the Corporate Management Team. Training was planned for managers together with weekly team briefings and quarterly divisional meetings. Comment was also made on the responsibility of managers to identify staff development needs to meet the requirements of their posts. A monitoring report would be produced at the end of each year to see the effectiveness of the training provided.

(b) Asset Management

The Scrutiny Committee received an update on the Asset Management Best Value Review from the Economic Development Manager. The executive summary of the Review was submitted for the Committee’s information. The Review report comprised a short introduction, an explanation of the methodology used to undertake the Review and a detailed analysis of the subject matter. The work undertaken on the 4 ‘C’s of Challenge, Comparison, Consultation and Competition was summarised. The report also contained a short section covering proposed actions to improve the Council’s performance.

In addition to the Review report, a number of other documents had been prepared. These comprised the Improvement Plan, which had been circulated for the Committee’s information, base-line Information and the Asset Management Plan for 2002. An analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats had been undertaken and the District Audit report of Asset Management, undertaken in 2000 would be included. The final Review documents would be submitted to the Finance and Management Committee.

The Economic Development Manager referred Members to the Improvement Plan and timetable. He explained that the Group had prioritised key areas

for improvement. Key phases comprised clarifying responsibility for Asset Management and improving on the 'satisfactory' rating given by the Government Office for the Asset Management Plan.

The Economic Development Manager commented that as a result of Local Government modernisation, most Councils now had a specific Member or Committee wholly responsible for Asset Management. South Derbyshire had adopted the alternative arrangement with a modernised Committee structure and Asset Management was still the responsibility of several committees. Rationalising responsibility for Asset Management seemed a prudent way forward. Representations had been made to the Government Office for the East Midlands to explain the current arrangements at South Derbyshire and to seek to ensure that the rating of the Plan was not adversely affected by the current structural arrangements.

The Committee discussed possible mechanisms, working within the current arrangements to make a single Committee responsible for all Asset Management issues. From a strategic viewpoint, producing corporate guidelines for the holding, disposal and management of assets was a further key issue to be addressed.

Note: At 5.05 p.m. Councillor Harrington left the Meeting.

COS/39. **"HOW GREEN IS THE COUNCIL?"**

The Chair gave a verbal update on the service development bid submitted to progress this initiative. The bid had been scored along with all other service development bids and would be considered as part of the Budget process.

COS/40. **MONITORING COUNCIL PLANS AND STRATEGIES**

At its Meeting on 24th June 2002, the Committee requested a review of arrangements for monitoring and reporting progress on Action Plans resulting from various Council plans and strategies. A report was submitted to outline the information collated so far and to seek Members' views on the way forward with this Review.

Appended to the report was a list of all the Council plans and strategies identified together with the responsible Officer of the Corporate Management Team, Committee responsibility and the date that the document had been approved and was due for review. A key point to note was the number and range of plans and strategies that the Council produced. Some were required by statute whilst others were non-statutory and fell within three main categories that were set out in the report. The breadth of the Council's plans and strategies varied considerably. Some documents formed part of a larger framework of policies that cascaded from National, Regional and County guidance. Others were concerned with more local, operational issues.

In the Local Government White Paper "Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services", the Government had announced proposals to streamline and rationalise the plans it required. Details of how the Government intended to achieve the rationalisation of its plans were outlined in the publication "Freedom and Flexibilities for Local Government". Essentially, 'excellent' councils under the Corporate Performance Assessment would have to prepare just two plans – the Best Value Performance Plan and the

Community Strategy. Other councils could expect a 75% reduction in the number of plans they were required to produce and details were appended to the report.

Members views were sought on the way forward for this Review. The Chair provided further background and the Vice-Chair commented that many plans had either been subsumed or overtaken by events. The Deputy Chief Executive clarified that some plans and strategies would still be needed, even if they were not required by Government. There was a need to establish internal mechanisms to ensure that required objectives were achieved and he spoke of the monitoring role for Members, the Corporate Management Team and other managers.

Another idea suggested was to set longer review timescales for those documents not required by Central Government. For example, if the Council achieved the 'excellent' rating it might be possible to review documents such as the Corporate Plan on a two or three yearly basis.

Other issues discussed were the requirement for certain core policy documents to be approved by the Council rather than a specific committee and how initiatives like Supporting People had overtaken the need for a number of existing strategies. Members discussed the way forward for this Review and requested a further report at the next Meeting which grouped related plans and strategies. It was possible that a special working group might be required to consider this matter in more detail. Officers were thanked for the research undertaken to date.

COS/41. **CONSTITUTION – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**

It was reported that at its next Meeting, the Overview Committee would discuss possible changes to the Constitution in respect of the Overview and Scrutiny function. This was to prepare for the first Meeting of the Modernising Local Government Working Panel. The Overview Committee had conducted a Review of the Council's political management arrangements and this was assisted by a parallel study from District Audit. An outcome of the Review was an Action Plan to progress the various recommendations made by Members, the District Auditor and the Management Team. An extract of the Action Plan, in respect of the Overview and Scrutiny function was appended to the report together with other relevant extracts of the Constitution.

The Chair reminded Members of the Review undertaken by Clive Mitchell of District Audit. He asked Members to consider the documents circulated and hoped that they would contribute to the Review process. The Committee could consider this item further at its next Meeting and it was understood that the first Meeting of the Modernising Local Government Working Panel would be held early in 2003.

A Member asked whether advice was available on the operation of the 'alternative arrangements'. The Deputy Chief Executive confirmed that advice had been provided by the then Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions. Under this structure, Scrutiny was more focused on policy delivery rather than challenging policy formulation. The role of Scrutiny was to assist rather than challenge the process and Members

were reminded of the valuable contribution that Scrutiny Committees had made to overcome a number of difficult issues.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.35 p.m.