

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18th September 2006

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Mulgrew (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Jones and Tilley.

Conservative Group

Councillors Bale and Bladen.

COS/13. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 7th August 2006 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/14. **SICKNESS ABSENCE – DRAFT REPORT TO FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**

The Chair had prepared and circulated a draft report on this subject, following the discussion at the previous Committee meeting. He sought input from Members and Officers. He felt the report demonstrated that levels of sickness absence at South Derbyshire were similar to that of other local authorities, but perhaps higher than organisations in the private sector.

The report made recommendations for action by the Human Resources Division, sought to inform Members and hopefully to improve performance in this area. He referred to a specific recommendation for improvements to the working environment within the Civic Offices. Within refurbished areas like the Reception, there was a high quality of decoration and this should be provided throughout the building. The Director of Corporate Services explained the budgetary provision for this and subsequent years, to undertake redecoration works. Tenders had now been received and she gave an outline of the works proposed, to redecorate, replace carpets and improve signage. Clarification was provided on the separate funding allocated to achieve compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act.

In response to a question from Councillor Bale, there was a discussion on the link between the working environment and the psychological impact on staff, including levels of sickness absence. The Chair referred to long-term sickness, which accounted for 55% of the total absenteeism over the previous year and related to just 31 staff. The report therefore included a recommendation about the timescales for resolving long-term sickness absence issues. He spoke about the return to work interview arrangements and the systems in place to minimise arbitrary sickness. He repeated that the Council did not perform badly when compared to other local authorities.

Councillor Bladen sought an analysis of the shorter-term sickness absences, questioning how many staff were involved. Councillor Jones commented on the high temperatures in the Civic Offices through the summer months, the impact on the efficient working of staff and the need to consider investing in

air conditioning. This was felt to be more important than redecoration works. A comparison was made between revenue funded, planned maintenance works and capital programmes, such as the provision of air conditioning. There was also a discussion about providing more efficient heating systems for the Civic Offices.

The Chair considered that there was no direct correlation between sickness absence and working conditions. However, it was accepted as a general point and could be linked to staff morale. As a way forward, it was suggested that the Officer responsible for maintenance of the Civic buildings be invited to attend the next Scrutiny Committee Meeting, to discuss the proposed maintenance works. The Director of Corporate Services also offered to supply further information to the Chair with regard to air conditioning and temperature control issues for the Civic Offices.

The Chair sought further comment from the Committee on the draft report. The Deputy Chief Executive suggested an amendment to a paragraph on the application of the Sickness Absence policy, which was agreed. The Chair also commented on a subsequent paragraph regarding “trigger” points, which the Director of Corporate Services would research and respond to him on. The Chair explained that the draft report required additional sections to provide a summary and acknowledgements.

It was agreed:

- (1) That the Public Buildings Officer be invited to attend the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee Meeting, to discuss the proposed redecoration works.**
- (2) That, subject to the amendments raised, the report on sickness absence be submitted to the Finance and Management Committee.**

COS/15. SERVICE STANDARDS – CONSULTATION ON STANDARDS

The Director of Corporate Services presented a report on the process and framework for establishing the Council’s service standards. A generic Customer Service Code of Practice and Standards had been approved by the Finance and Management Committee and a copy was appended to the report. Establishing such standards was a key action in delivering the Council’s priority of “more efficient, customer focused services”. The report explained the benefits of setting such standards. In addition to the generic customer services standards, as part of the higher quality services theme of the new Corporate Plan, there was an action for 2006/07 to establish standards, in consultation with service users, across all service areas. There was an Improvement Plan action to progress to the Charter Mark for Council services and to achieve accreditation for Environmental Services during 2006/07. The aim of these initiatives was to improve access to information and Council services for local people and through this process, to improve efficiency and ultimately, customer satisfaction. This was a key element of any future CPA assessment. For consistency, it was recommended that five similar booklets be prepared for key service areas. These could be extended and changed over time, to ensure they remained up to date and covered all services, including the internal services.

The standards would be a mix of national indicators and local standards, where possible subject to benchmarking with other organisations, to ensure they were realistic and challenging. All would be monitored on a quarterly basis and reported to the various policy committees as part of their performance management reports. The booklets would have some standard content and details were provided of the information that would be included. Each booklet would be similar in design, using corporate colours and a sample was circulated of the one proposed for Environmental Services. The report gave details of the proposed distribution and the consultation undertaken to date. Meetings had taken place with the Charter Mark lead assessor, who had been complementary about the process and content of the document. Suggestions from this assessor had been taken on board. This was a major element in satisfying the Charter Mark standard in Public Service Excellence. Significant consultation had been undertaken with stakeholders and details were provided.

The Director of Corporate Services spoke of the further work undertaken to ensure that the content of the document was appropriate and she explained the options available to vary its format.

The Chair commented that the guide for Environmental Services had diverse content. There was a discussion about the photographs used for each of the booklets. It was suggested that photographs from the Corporate Plan could be used, but Members considered it might be better to use photographs relevant to each service area. The information contained within each booklet would also be available via the Council's website. The Chair questioned whether the content of the Environmental Services guide could be grouped into three categories for "like" service areas. Councillor Jones also commented on the amount of text within the booklet. The Head of Environmental Services explained that a contents section had been included for this reason. He agreed it was a diverse service area and after much discussion, the format proposed was considered the best compromise. On the Council's website, there were shortcuts to each specific service area. Councillor Tilley expressed a preference for three booklets of 'like' service areas to be placed within one folder. Another suggestion was for different coloured booklets for each service area. It was confirmed that the intention was to produce similar booklets for all service areas, but it was not yet clear whether the Charter Mark would be pursued for all services.

Note: At 5.15 p.m. the Chair left the Meeting and the Vice-Chair, Councillor Mulgrew chaired the remainder of the Meeting.

Councillor Bladen commented that whether enquiries were made via the website or through personal visit, the public just wanted information on the services they required. Councillor Bale suggested an alteration to a section of the Standard on gypsies and travellers, which was agreed. The Head of Environmental Services felt this document was a step forward and it gave a clear guide to the standards that the Council provided. Performance would be reported quarterly via the Council's website. In response to a question from Councillor Bladen, it was acknowledged that charges were levied for some services and there was a discussion about the charging policy and where charges were reported.

It was agreed that Members' comments be taken on board in finalising the Environmental Services Service Standard Document, which would

then be submitted to the Environmental and Development Services Committee, for formal approval. Officers would also take on board the general comments for other service booklets.

COS/16. USE OF RESOURCES – VALUE FOR MONEY ASSESSMENT 2006

An extract of the District Audit summary report on Value for Money was circulated. The Deputy Chief Executive reported that the self-assessment review was ongoing and still to be discussed by the Corporate Management Team. It was proposed to submit a report on this to the Overview Committee Meeting the following week. He referred to the extract from the Audit Summary Report, highlighting the improvements required to achieve the next level in performance terms. There had been an initial review of the Council's position and it was moving significantly towards the milestones which showed performance at the next level.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

COS/17. SHIFTING RESOURCES – BUSINESS PROCESS RE-ENGINEERING (PLANNING SERVICES PILOT PROJECT)

A verbal report was provided on the work undertaken by the Head of Planning Services, regarding performance on planning applications. Given the deferral of the project on building capacity by the Finance and Management Committee, it was proposed to defer this item, to see if improved information was needed and therefore a presentation should be made to a wider group of Members.

It was agreed to defer this matter.

COS/18. CORPORATE PLAN “PUTTING YOUR IDEAS INTO ACTION”

A verbal report was provided on the feedback received to this consultation exercise. Some twenty responses had been received to date and these were circulated for the Committee's information. Officers explained how this feedback would be used and in some cases, relevant items would be referred to Derbyshire County Council. It was proposed to remind parish councils of the opportunity to submit ideas and likely that the consultation deadline would be extended to accommodate these.

Officers were pleased with the feedback received, but would like even more ideas, to enable comparison by Members. There was now a need to assess the proposals submitted. The Chair commented on the need for publicity, to show how people's views had been taken on board. The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration spoke about some of the ideas submitted to date.

It was agreed that the report be noted.

COS/19. LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 (AS AMENDED BY THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT [ACCESS TO INFORMATION] ACT 1985)

RESOLVED:-

That, in accordance with Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the press and public be excluded from the

remainder of the Meeting as it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that there would be disclosed exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of the Schedule 12A of the Act indicated in brackets after each item.

MINUTES

The Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 7th August 2006 were received.

M. MULGREW

CHAIR