

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13th September 2004

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Murphy (Chair), Councillor Lane (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Jones and Stone.

Conservative Group

Councillors Atkin and Mrs. Hood.

APOLOGY

An apology for absence from the Meeting was received from Councillor Bale (Conservative Group).

COS/12. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 2nd August 2004 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/13. **BEST VALUE REVIEW PROJECT**

The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration gave an overview of the issues discussed in the pre-Committee briefing. Details of the review process had been circulated previously. The Committee had defined the terms of reference for the review. With regard to internal stakeholders, it was proposed to involve Councillors Southerd and Wilkins. It was explained that none of the Council's internally focused Best Value Reviews had been subject to external assessment. The reviews of Cleansing the Environment and Development Control had been inspected and details were provided of the assessment of each service and the perceived prospects for service improvements. It was agreed to seek contributions from the Head of Revenues, the Head of Finance and Property Services, Head of Planning Services, Waste and Cleansing Manager and a Personnel Officer. It was noted that the Deputy Chief Executive would be on holiday for the Committee's Special Meeting on 20th September 2004 and Members might wish to discuss appropriate issues with him during this Meeting.

The Committee had also discussed seeking external contributions. There was an interest in meeting representatives from Councils that had received a good or excellent rating of their services. An analysis of scoring of Best Value Review inspections had been circulated for the Committee's information. It was also planned to liaise with the Police, the Fire Service and a private company to further the review. Officers suggested meeting with the Managing Director of SLM and also seeking a contribution from Andrew Blackburn of the Audit Commission.

The Deputy Chief Executive referred to the Best Value Review of Asset Management and explained that the Review Team Leader had recently left the Council's employment. Councillor Southerd would be able to provide information with regard to this review. It was unlikely that the Economic Development Manager's replacement would be able to add value to this aspect of the review.

The Chair had given consideration to four distinct key headline areas, concerning "people" issues, "process" issues, "delivery" issues and "Member involvement" (including performance management). By considering each of these themes, the Committee could develop questions to put to the contributors. He questioned whether those involved in Best Value Reviews saw Reviews as a positive exercise or an additional task to be completed. Councillor Lane felt that the elements suggested by the Chair would cover the main aspects for this review. He questioned how Best Value Reviews had been selected previously and the Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration agreed to supply further information.

The Chair then expanded upon each of the headline areas and felt that for people issues, the Committee could consider such things as skill base, capacity and the motivation to carry out reviews and challenge current provision. For process issues there was a need to consider relevance to corporate priorities, the usability of the process, the terms of reference and resources available.

The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration responded to a question about customer satisfaction raised by Councillor Stone, by referring to the Best Value Review of the Development Control process.

With regard to delivery issues, the Chair felt contributors should be asked about change management skills, performance management, capacity (for personnel) and financial options appraisal. Councillor Jones questioned issues around future improvement and the Chair felt that this would be addressed as part of the "four C's" process of compare, consult, challenge and compete. The Chair also set out his thoughts on Member involvement. Issues to be considered were the extent that Members were involved, their roles and responsibilities and whether this was throughout the process. A comparison was made between the roles performed by policy committees and that undertaken by the scrutiny committees previously with regard to Best Value Reviews.

The Chair suggested a series of questions under each of these headings to give areas for discussion with contributors. These were noted by the Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration and would be collated for consideration at the Special Committee Meeting on 20th September 2004.

The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration explained that some review teams had been encouraged to include external representatives as part of the review process. Examples were given for the Cleansing of the Environment and Development Control Reviews. There had been varying levels of success with this approach. The involvement of the Best Value Officer Group was also discussed, together with guidance on the composition of review teams.

Councillors Stone and Jones discussed the merits of staff from the relevant department undertaking the Best Value Review. Councillor Jones felt there

was a balance between ownership of the review and the potential for resistance to change. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that the approach to reviews had developed over time. During the Sheltered Housing Review, the need for them to be undertaken by the relevant Head of Service became apparent. The Chair considered that the Best Value Officer Group should be supportive but independent of the Review Group. Officers explained the potential for conflict and an example given was the use of external reality checks to provide objective feedback. The Chair considered that effective communication was important to avoid surprises throughout the review process. He questioned whether staff believed that resources would be made available to implement improvements and whether the Corporate Management Team was considered aspirational. The Deputy Chief Executive agreed there was a need for clear guidance on how improvements would be funded. It was also noted that when Best Value Reviews were first undertaken, the District Council suffered its financial crisis, which had undoubtedly impacted on the conduct of reviews.

Consideration was given to the challenge process within a review. The composition of the Review Team was important, but it was questioned whether the team could be wholly objective. Guidance was available for review groups but there had to be a degree of trust on the conduct of the review. An example of this issue was the decision to retain the Cash Office, when alternate payment arrangements were available locally.

In response to a question from Councillor Atkin, it was confirmed that the size of review teams varied and examples were given. It was noted that future theme-based reviews were likely to be less confrontational than those undertaken previously for specific service areas.

Reference was made to the statutory guidance on review selection. The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration explained how the Council had decided upon its reviews and guidance had changed over a period of time. Initially, all Councils were required to conduct Best Value Reviews of every service area over a five-year programme. Consideration was given to future review guidance and the Audit Commission anticipated that the Council would complete a smaller number of broader, themed-based reviews. Reference was also made to the CPA Improvement Programme.

The Chair questioned how staff perceived the Best Value Review process and who set the Terms of Reference for each review. Officers responded by explaining some of the technical difficulties experienced with particular reviews and the variety of approaches adopted when undertaking a review. The Chair considered that time invested in agreeing the Terms of Reference would prove worthwhile. He quoted an extract from statutory guidance about delivery outcomes based on customer requirements. Councillor Jones raised the issue of Members aspirations of review outcomes. Councillor Lane used the Cash Office example to demonstrate the importance of consultation. Those using the Cash Office were more likely to favour its retention than residents that did not use this facility.

Further consideration was given to delivery issues. It was questioned whether review teams felt that more radical proposals were likely to be supported. The Deputy Chief Executive did not feel that any review had been undertaken on a “step change” basis. The service development process had been used to seek additional resources, but this was considered a low risk

strategy. Reference was also made to the Sheltered Housing Review and the process undertaken to resolve difficulties, without implementing a major step change. Softer issues were identified and many related to communication. An example of this was the concerns of Sheltered Housing tenants on the loss of community facilities, when resident wardens were withdrawn.

There was a discussion about the responsibility for the delivery of Best Value Reviews, by the relevant Head of Service and the Corporate Management Team. It was noted that proposed terms of reference for each review were considered by the relevant policy committee. The Committee also discussed the role of the Best Value Officer Group, to provide support whilst challenging and ensuring that the review fulfilled its terms of reference and process requirements. The Deputy Chief Executive commented on the ability of review teams to gather substantial knowledge from the baseline assessment and the potential for the review process to become flawed. He also felt there was a difference in culture between staff that delivered internal services and those delivering frontline services, with regard to the Best Value Review process.

Consideration was given to performance management issues, capacity issues and options appraisal. There was a key role for Members in determining the required outcomes to enable performance monitoring. To date, reviews had been reported to the appropriate policy committee, to provide an audit trail, but there had been no real drive from Members. The Best Value Officer Group had focused on issues where review teams deviated from the approved framework, if it was considered that the consult or challenge processes had not been conducted properly.

The Chair reminded that a Special Meeting of the Committee would be held on 20th September 2004 to give further consideration to this project. Members could finalise the areas to be discussed with contributors and give consideration to a questionnaire. As a next stage, telephone contact could be made with external contributors, to conduct the questionnaire and it might then be appropriate to invite specific respondents to attend a future meeting of the Committee.

S. MURPHY

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.50 p.m.