

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

26th June 2006

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

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

Conservative Group

Councillors Atkin, Bale and Bladen.

APOLOGY

An apology for absence from the Meeting was received from Councillor Jones (Labour Group).

COS/1. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 15th May 2006 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/2. **WORK PROGRAMME**

Information had been circulated from the informal Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on 8th June 2006, together with a template to assist Members in formulating the Scrutiny Committee's work programme. The Chair referred Members to suggested ongoing issues and special projects, which the Committee could consider over the coming year. He felt it was appropriate for the Committee to monitor progress against the Council's various action plans. Advice was sought from Officers about prioritising the suggested work areas. The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration reminded that Corporate Scrutiny's remit looked at services under the control of Finance and Management Committee. Reference was made to the District Auditor's Letter and items in the Corporate Plan and CPA Improvement Plan. There would be a further Use of Resources Assessment for September 2006 and Members were reminded of the Committee's role in the budget process.

It was considered that the Use of Resources Action Plan and Corporate Plan should be considered first. The Chair clarified that this would be a rolling programme. He suggested that the Use of Resources Action Plan be considered at the 7th August Meeting, together with an initial look at the budget consultation process. The Deputy Chief Executive felt that the Corporate Plan was inextricably linked to the budget and might also need to be considered at the next Meeting. The Chair questioned if there was a bespoke consultation strategy for the budget. Effectively the consultation was based on custom and practice, although it was developed each year. There was a wish to start the budget process earlier, so that feedback could be used to shape the Council's spending plans. The Chair suggested that the August Meeting could be used to shape this consultation process. He also spoke about reporting arrangements to policy committees and the first report

would provide information on this Committee's work programme, once this had been finalised.

Councillor Bladen questioned when the budget outturn position would be finalised. The Director of Corporate Services explained that a report would be submitted to the Finance and Management Committee on 27th July on the actual outturn from last year. She considered it would be useful information for the Corporate Scrutiny Committee and gave a broad outline of the budget process. Members clarified that they were seeking information on compliance with the approved budget for the current financial year. The Officer explained the monitoring arrangements and confirmed that there was a significant underspend last year, which the Committee might wish to consider. Monitoring reports were submitted to the Policy Committees on a quarterly basis and it was questioned when Scrutiny wished to receive this information.

In response to a question from Councillor Tilley, there was a discussion on the approach taken in submitting reports to Policy and Scrutiny Committees and the benefit of the Scrutiny Committee forum for more detailed discussion of certain issues.

The Director of Corporate Services felt it might be more useful for the Committee to consider the half-year budget position, possibly as a mid-term scrutiny review. This would tie into the Committee's role for the budget consultation. The Deputy Chief Executive felt the end of year budget report could provide useful information to the Scrutiny Committee, to give a context for such a half year review. Councillor Bladen agreed that a half-year report would give a trend on the financial position and would still give time to address any concerns. The Chair considered that the budget was likely to feature on most Scrutiny Committee agendas. For the next Meeting he felt the Committee should look at the consultation issues and for future Meetings look at expenditure against budget. He also touched on the low estimates of income, particularly for the planning service. The Deputy Chief Executive felt it could be useful to discuss with staff from the Planning Service how income was estimated, as part of the budget process.

Consideration was given to the proposed special projects for the Committee's work programme. The Chair referred Members to a Scrutiny work plan document. This could be used to show the purpose of each Scrutiny review and, for example, the need to co-opt external contributors to aid the process. He also felt the Scrutiny Committee should undertake visits to Council departments or other organisations, including voluntary sector groups. Councillor Bale welcomed the Scrutiny work plan approach, to give a clearer focus on what the Committee was trying to achieve. The Chair felt the Committee should focus on service areas and questioned whether the special projects listed would impact on service delivery, could lead to improved efficiency or highlight deficiency, so services could be improved.

Reference was made to the Shifting Resources Project and there was a need to understand how this was being undertaken. Baseline information was sought on the number of staff and managers, the grading structure and comparative cost to that of other local authorities. It might be that the Council was spending more in some service areas or underperforming elsewhere, when compared to other local authorities. Staff were the greatest cost for any local authority and the Chair felt the Committee could undertake

a monitoring role, to give an objective view on the Shifting Resources Project. The baseline data would be helpful, but it was explained that when benchmarking, each local authority operated differently. An outline was given of the factors that would need to be taken into account when undertaking such benchmarking.

Councillor Atkin felt there was a need to consider shifting resources alongside the budget process. Officers explained the reporting arrangements presently where savings occurred and confirmed that only known savings were taken into account. The Chair considered shifting resources to be another form of best value review and felt there was a need for a Member input. He requested baseline information for the next Meeting on the staffing structures and gradings. Following further discussion, the Director of Corporate Services agreed to supply this. Related issues discussed were procurement and the examination of high cost, poor performing service areas. The Director touched on options for partnering with other local authorities and the market availability for certain service areas. There was a rolling programme for strategic service reviews.

Consideration was given to the proposed Service Standards Special Project. This stemmed from the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and was considered a weakness as the Council had not consulted the public on it. The Director of Corporate Services was responsible for this project and confirmed that a start had been made. An action plan had been prepared, consultation undertaken with other departments and some service standards had been written. Clarification was sought on the role that Scrutiny wished to perform on this special project. The Chair felt that Scrutiny could review the service standards before they were finalised. There was a discussion about the arrangements already in place, but reports could also be submitted to Scrutiny. The Chair explained the merits of this approach, as it was considered Scrutiny provided a better format for discussion of the service standards and this would give Members an assurance when the reports were considered by policy committees. The timing of this review was discussed and it was suggested that some service standards be submitted to the next Committee Meeting. It was questioned whether Corporate Scrutiny's role should be more concerned with resourcing the project and the process, rather than the detail of the service standards. This point was acknowledged but Members felt that the service standards should also be considered. The Chair was mindful of the need not to overload agendas and it was suggested that the service standards be discussed at the September Meeting.

The next projects discussed were support for voluntary and community groups and a review of the Partnership Grant Scheme. The Chair had wondered whether these were sufficiently resourced and what was achieved for the Council's contribution. It was confirmed that a review group had been formed and details were given of its composition. A further meeting of the group was scheduled for July. Councillor Atkin questioned whether this was an issue for the Community Scrutiny Committee. He referred to a specific example of funding to provide hearing loops in village halls and questioned whether these were a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). An outline was provided of the functions of the grant schemes.

Councillor Bladen spoke about the respective roles of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee, to look at the use of Council resources and how the Community Scrutiny Committee looked at actual service delivery, but he accepted that

these were linked. The Chair quoted a statistic that only 58% of public buildings were currently DDA compliant. The Director of Corporate Services replied that £100,000 per year of funding was provided to undertake required works, on a prioritised basis. The Deputy Chief Executive added that there was an objective to achieve 95% compliance within the next three years.

Councillor Tilley was concerned that some of the proposed reviews might conflict with his role as a Member of the Environmental and Development Services Committee and advice was provided accordingly. Further discussion took place on the grant schemes and it was agreed that a report be submitted to the August Meeting, to give a baseline and information on how the schemes were operating.

Consideration was given to the Environmental Education Service, which the Council contributed towards. It was questioned whether the Council should fund education as this was a County Council function, or conversely whether sufficient resources were provided to this project. This review might provide the opportunity for the Committee to undertake a site visit. Such a review might be used to seek more input or funding from Derbyshire County Council. It was noted that private sector funding was also provided towards this initiative. The Chair questioned whether environmental support was provided to businesses. No direct support was provided, but the Council did have a regulatory role through its Environmental Health function. In response to a comment from Councillor Atkin, there was a discussion about the various grant initiatives that Derbyshire County Council provided. For the Environmental Education Project, there was a significant contribution from the District Council.

The Sickness Absence Management Policy was discussed and the Chair considered this might provide the opportunity for a quick review. Levels of sickness absence had increased in the last year. It was questioned whether there were work related issues involved and an update from Human Resources might highlight any such issues. It was noted that Officers were trying to tighten this process, but had to negotiate with Trade Unions. It might be helpful for management to involve Members and was considered there was a benefit in bringing a report to the next Scrutiny Meeting.

Rosliston Forestry Centre and the Sharpe's Pottery Museum were proposed as a further special project. This was linked to the earlier discussion on environmental education and it was suggested that a report be submitted later in the municipal year.

Following a question from the Director of Corporate Services, there was a discussion about the inclusion of the Asset Management Plan in the Committee's work programme. This had been raised in the Audit Letter, but it was considered that other issues needed to be considered before the Asset Management Plan. A monitoring role could be undertaken and the Scrutiny Committee might wish to revisit this issue when the next monitoring report was submitted to the Finance and Management Committee.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The meeting terminated at 5.55 p.m.