CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

8th January 2007

PRESENT:-

Labour Group
Councillor Bell (Chair) and Councillor Jones.

Conservative Group
Councillors Atkin, Bale and Bladen.

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the Meeting were received from Councillor Mulgrew (Vice-Chair) and Councillor Tilley (Labour Group).

COS/36 SERVICE INFORMATION PROJECT

The Chair explained the background to this project and the work undertaken to date. The Head of Policy and Economic Regeneration had circulated a report and samples of leaflets, which were available for Members to inspect. These had been collated from displays in the various public areas of the Council and spreadsheet provided information on the leaflets' titles, their subject and who they had been produced by, together with other information. Nearly 200 leaflets had been collected, covering a wide range of issues and services. Whilst some of these leaflets had been published by the Council, others were those of partners or public/private sector organisations. It was noted that leaflet stands contained material about different and sometimes unrelated services. Occasionally, the leaflets were duplicated on different display stands and it was noted that a large number of planning leaflets were only located in the planning reception, which had now closed.

The Head of IT and Customer Services gave an outline of the current arrangements, where leaflets were placed on display by reception staff. Members questioned the mechanisms in place to assess which literature to display and the monitoring arrangements to determine which leaflets were more popular. It was noted that the majority of literature was not from the District Council, but from external agencies.

Councillor Atkin commented that literature that did not fit in the display stands was left on tables and other surfaces, which appeared untidy. Councillor Bale questioned whether some of the literature competed with Council services, but this did not appear to be the case. Councillor Jones considered there were too many leaflets and that periodic checks were required to remove those leaflets that had become out of date.

The Chair clarified that Members were not being critical, but objective and this area did not seem to be controlled or managed. Officers considered that the spreadsheet would provide a checklist for the future. The Chair gave an outline of how this process could be managed, to ensure easy access to the District Council's leaflets. He questioned whether an IT solution could be provided and the Officer explained how this would be achieved from the computer terminals in the reception area.

Councillor Bladen spoke of the need to accommodate those who were not IT literate and he asked whether a broad outline could be given of the information leaflets available, so that the public could ask staff for a specific leaflet.

The Chair considered the key issue was about management, removing out-of-date literature and determining how new literature was placed on the displays. He suggested that an individual could be made responsible for keeping the displays up-to-date.

Councillor Jones used examples to show the range of leaflets carried and those that would be better placed at the Sharpe's Tourist Information Centre. The Chair asked how other local authorities approached this subject and it was noted that High Peak Borough Council adopted a similar approach to this Authority. The Chair then touched on the cost and environmental aspects and further information was circulated to give examples of the cost of producing three different leaflets.

A report was made on behalf of the Director of Community Services about the need for Council literature to include a "strap line" stating the purpose of each leaflet. The Chair used an example of a particular service leaflet that was unclear and differed from the approved Council format. He compared this to the range of leaflets produced by the Council for Voluntary Services, which he praised the format of.

The Committee considered that the Council should assess the need to produce literature and the practical benefits from it. Officers explained that CPA feedback stated the need to publish the leaflets on service standards. There was an ongoing process to review literature displayed in the new central reception area, it being explained that there were previously dedicated leaflets in a number of separate areas within the Council.

Comment was also made on the amount of literature displayed in the Members' areas, which at times could look untidy. Councillor Bale questioned the number of visitors to the Civic Offices and reference was made to a previous survey. Councillor Atkin referred to the Council's website and asked whether links could be provided to the other organisations that provided literature. Other Members felt this might not be appropriate in all cases and some of the information should be displayed at the local Tourist Information Centre instead.

The Chair asked whether reception staff could help members of the public by printing any required documents. This was presently undertaken if a specific leaflet was not in stock. It was felt that using technology should reduce the need for the current number of leaflet displays throughout the reception area.

Research could be undertaken of other local authorities, to determine their arrangements. Councillor Bale expressed a preference to separate Council literature from that of other organisations. There was a consensus that the current range of literature was too extensive and it should be more focused on those organisations that the Council was in partnership with or supported. Officers did explain that a proportion of the literature was from the District and County Councils, together with their partner organisations.

Councillor Jones suggested that leaflets could be placed behind the reception area so that staff could issue the appropriate leaflet to the public. Comment was also made on the terminology used within certain publications and the

average reading ability of the population. A planning leaflet was used as an example, but Officers explained that some documents, such as Supplementary Planning Guidance, had a statutory background. Officers explained the arrangements to ensure that Council publications were produced in plain English, with particular reference made to the Service Standard leaflets.

The Committee also discussed the arrangements for reviewing literature and Officers explained that this would now take place on a monthly basis. It was acknowledged that it was difficult to ensure that all information was kept up to date. There was a need to have a register of the literature displayed and a reference guide. Officers agreed that a system was needed, together with guidance on the types of literature that should be displayed.

The Chair felt that service users could be asked about their needs. Members of the Committee could look at the Council's website to see how easy it was to obtain specific literature. The potential for specific service-related displays was touched upon, together with a general information display for the Council's partners. Councillor Atkin questioned the budgets provided for each department to produce such literature, the printing and circulation costs and where the literature was sent to.

For the next Meeting, it was agreed to receive details of departmental budgets for printing, the types and volume of literature produced, together with how this was circulated. It was agreed to seek information on the arrangements made by other local authorities, to inform end users and to receive information on the previous survey of visitor numbers to the Council Offices. Members would assess the ease of access to information via the Council's website and to that of other local authorities. The Committee would then work towards guidelines for the future operation of this service.

The Chair thanked the Head of IT and Customer Services for his input and Officers within the Policy Team for the work undertaken to date.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.40 p.m.