

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3rd December 2001

**PRESENT:-**

**Labour Group**

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Harrington (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Mrs. Mead and Stone.

**Conservative Group**

Councillor Bladen.

**In Attendance**

Councillor Lemmon (Conservative Group)

**APOLOGY**

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

COS/15. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 22nd October 2001 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/16. **MEMBERS QUESTIONS AND REPORTS**

The Chair reported on a recent Advance Scrutiny Training Course at Hucknall, attended by himself and four other Members. He also explained that the Overview Committee had recently convened an additional Meeting to consider public toilet provision in South Derbyshire.

COS/17. **BEST VALUE REVIEWS**

(a) **Asset Management**

Further to Minute No. COS/6(b) of 10th September 2001, the Committee received an update on the Asset Management Best Value Review. Substantial progress had been made on collating the information required for the baseline assessment and a draft version was attached to the report. The collation of this information had not proved easy, because the Service was delivered by six different divisions. The input from other divisions for this Review had improved but ownership was still an issue.

The Review Team had challenged why the Council held its assets. Details were given of the consultation undertaken with staff, tenants and other service users on a range of asset management issues. The responses were summarised in an appendix to the report. Details were also given of membership of the Review Team, the comparisons undertaken with other local authorities, the involvement of officers from other authorities and competitive alternatives to in-house management of assets. The Review Team was to prepare options for the way forward, aiming to consult on these during January 2002 with the production of the Final Report and Implementation Plan in February 2002.

Members questioned the amount of staff time required to undertake the Review process, whether this Review would be subjected to a full inspection or “a light touch” and sought further information on the potential disposal of shops and other assets.

(b) Customer and Support Services

It was reported that no progress had been made on this Review since the last Meeting. The lead officer for the Review had been absent from work due to illness. It was intended to look at the scope and time-scale for this Review once she returned to work and the Scrutiny Committee would be kept informed of progress.

(c) Finance Services

Further to Minute COS/9 of 22nd October 2001 the Committee received an update on the Best Value Review for Finance Services. This Review covered Revenues and Benefits, Accountancy and Exchequer Services and Internal Audit. The overall strategic arrangements for managing the Council’s finances had already been addressed as part of the previous Best Value Review of Financial Management and Control.

Terms of reference had already been reported for the Revenues and Benefits part of the Review. Further terms of reference were submitted for the Accountancy and Exchequer Services and Internal Audit service. Many aspects of the constituent reviews of finance services were distinct, but there were some cross-cutting issues. Details were appended to the report and these would be considered for all finance services as defined within the Review. To date, no meetings of this Review Team had taken place. Proposals were outlined to bring together the separate aspects of the Review in order that Review Team Meetings could be commenced.

In receiving the report, Members sought information on the system for allocation of staff time to different service areas. It was questioned whether this should be included within the terms of reference for the Review. Central establishment charges were also discussed and Members were informed that this would be the subject of a separate report in due course. The Vice-Chair of this Committee had submitted a report to the Finance and Management Committee at its Meeting on 22nd November 2001 regarding central establishment charges.

(d) Human Resource Management

Further to Minute No. COS/6(c) of 10th September 2001, the Committee received an update on the Best Value Review for Human Resource Management. Significant progress had been made in collating and analysing the baseline assessment. The details of this analysis, key findings and conclusions would be reported to the Finance and Management Committee in January 2002. The assessment had addressed a number of areas which were outlined in the report.

The challenge, compare, consult and compete aspects of the Review were outlined. A range of data had been collated from existing sources to give a profile of the current service. The data had been compared in various ways

with reference being made to Best Value Performance Indicators, the use of a bench-marking service and available local performance indicators. Key comparisons were made with other district councils, against national averages and a comparative telephone survey was undertaken. To progress consultation, a questionnaire was circulated to forty employees, to divisional managers and Management Team members. A telephone survey was undertaken of Members and consultation with staff in the Personnel and Development Team also took place. To address competition, some analysis had been undertaken of the survey conducted by East Staffordshire Borough Council on the areas of work that authorities in its audit group had out-sourced. Initial discussions had taken place to explore opportunities for partnership working.

Resource difficulties over recent months were explained. Approximately 400 hours had been spent directly on this Review, with nearly one third of the time being allocated by the Personnel and Development Manager. The Review was slightly behind timescale, but the Divisional Manager was confident that the project would be on target by the end of January 2002.

Members took the opportunity to ask questions regarding the Division's industrial relations role, the resources allocated to this Review and the possible impact of other Reviews if they resulted in changes to the organisational structure with consequent personnel implications.

#### COS/18. **BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN**

It was reported that Section 6 of the Local Government Act 2000 required local authorities to prepare Best Value Performance Plans (BVPPs). These were intended to be the principle means by which an authority was held to account for the efficiency and effectiveness of its services and its plans for the future.

Details were given of those elements which must be included within a BVPP and the document had to be published by 31st March each year. There was not prescribed format for BVPPs, but authorities were expected to adopt a clear, accessible style and an attractive design. There was a requirement for a summary of the Plan to be sent to all households, local businesses and voluntary groups.

BVPPs were submitted to external audit and the Council's second plan was the subject of a report by District Audit in June. The main findings of that report were provided and Members referred to a statement that the Council's review programme had slipped to an extent. The District Auditor had produced a series of recommendations designed to tackle areas of weakness and to strengthen performance. These would provide an important input into the South Derbyshire BVPP for 2002, for which preparations were now being made. At this stage it was not proposed to make any changes to the format of either the full plan or the summary as both had been well received previously. An outline was given of the key elements proposed for the next BVPP. The BVPP would be submitted to Council for approval in March 2002.

The Chair sought guidance on how the Scrutiny Committee could have an input into the production of the BVPP. Members discussed the Best Value Review process generally, speculating on future arrangements once all service reviews had been undertaken. A Member commented that this

process should be enshrined as a management function and the related benefits and outcomes of Best Value Reviews were recognised.

COS/19. **SPECIAL PROJECTS**

The Chair reported that to date, the Committee had devoted the majority of its time to Best Value Reviews. He felt it was now appropriate for the Committee to broaden its approach and proposed a special project “How Green is the Council”. The Chair felt that initial consideration could be given to such a project at the next Meeting. If appropriate, a sub-group could be established to look at individual aspects, reporting back periodically to the full Committee. Other Members questioned the scope for this project and the Chair outlined his thoughts. Members were generally supportive of the proposal. The need for training and background information was discussed.

It was proposed that a presentation be made by appropriate officers to the next Meeting to give background to this area. In the meantime, the Policy and Best Value Manager would circulate information to Members of the Committee and she agreed to liaise with the Chair on the detailed arrangements for the next Meeting. A further special project which the Committee could consider in the future was Egovernment.

COS/20. **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered the approved Work Programme for the coming months. Details were provided of those Best Value Reviews and Policy Framework Documents to be submitted to each Meeting. It was proposed to withdraw the progress report for the Financial Services Best Value Review given the decision to commence the special project “How Green is the Council”. Training on the Community Strategy was due to be rescheduled for January 2002. The Policy and Best Value Manager gave a brief outline of the Community Strategy, stressing its importance and the likelihood of future performance indicators associated with the Strategy.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.40 p.m.