CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21st June 2004

**PRESENT:-**

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

**Conservative Group**
Councillors Atkin and Mrs. Hood.

In Attendance
Councillor Harrington (Labour Group).

**APOLOGY**

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

COS/1. **MINUTES**

The Open Minutes of the Meeting held on 10th May 2004 were taken as read, approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

COS/2. **MEMBERS' REPORTS**

The notes of a Meeting of Scrutiny Members held on 7th June 2004 were circulated. The Chair felt that this event had been useful, had enabled an exchange of views and would assist planning for the year ahead. The Policy and Best Value Manager added that a further event would be held near to Christmas. The Chair reminded Members of the topics discussed, including a change to the format of the Annual Report, to include a short and concise resume for the public.

The Policy and Best Value Manager reminded Members of the action points agreed at the Scrutiny event and the progress made to date, particularly on the Annual Report.

The Chair explained that a key purpose of the day was to discuss future arrangements for Scrutiny. He felt there was a need for a more formal approach, to agree a vision and to set criteria to enable the discussion of timely, significant and cross cutting issues. He suggested that Best Value Reviews should be considered by the appropriate Policy Committee where the review topic was clearly within that committee's remit. There might be a role for the Scrutiny Committee to look at the Best Value Review process and to provide advice and assistance to policy committees on this. The Policy and Best Value Manager confirmed that some reviews had become overwhelmed and she then responded to Councillor Jones, explaining the combination of factors responsible.

The Chair felt there was a need to agree clear terms of reference for any subject considered by the Committee. As an example, he referred to the Committee's role in reviewing the Council's budget and felt it would be better if Scrutiny approached this topic from a specific angle.

The Policy and Best Value Manager advised of the statutory guidance provided with regard to completing Best Value Reviews. There might be some benefit in speaking to the Audit Commission to obtain guidance, to enable consideration of this topic and to provide assistance to policy committees. She then responded to a question from Councillor Atkin about the required period for undertaking reviews.

Councillor Murphy spoke about the training needs for Scrutiny Members. He had been in discussion with the Council's Employee Development Officer about the types of course available and sought Members' feedback on their training needs. The Policy and Best Value Officer had undertaken research on preparing a Job Description for Scrutiny Members. A further report on this topic would be submitted to the Overview Committee the following week. Members discussed the merits of receiving a presentation from another local authority on their scrutiny arrangements. The Chair felt that this Council's scrutiny arrangements were at least equal to any other "fourth option" Council. He then spoke of his wish to involve all Members and to make the scrutiny process inclusive, setting out his thoughts on how this could be achieved.

The Chair referred Members to the Scrutiny Contributors Charter which had also been circulated. Members' feedback was sought on this draft document which would be finalised at the Overview Committee the following Monday. Councillor Lane questioned whether the Charter was in accordance with the Council's Constitution. As an example, he highlighted the provision for expenses, but noted that the Scrutiny Committee presently had no budget. This aspect would need to be discussed with Finance colleagues and the Democratic Services Section. Councillor Stone asked about the notice period that would be given to contributors. Where this related to project work, it would be possible to give considerable advance notice. However, where a policy committee decision was "called in" there were prescribed timetables within the Council's Constitution. Members felt that the Contributors Charter should provide for "reasonable" or "adequate" notice periods and the Democratic Services Officer explained the constitutional provisions.

COS/3. **UPDATE ON OUTSTANDING PROJECTS**

The Policy and Best Value Manager reminded Members of the projects considered during the previous municipal year. Of these, a report had been submitted to the Environmental and Development Services Committee about the Customer Care Project. That part of the review had effectively been completed. Councillor Atkin commented that no feedback had been received from the Policy Committee on this review. The Officer reminded of the amendments to the Constitution, which would require the Policy Committee to provide a report back to scrutiny within six months. The Chair thought this issue might be revisited by the Council and the response time period shortened.

The Chair referred to the Customer First Initiative and felt that the Committee might be able to assist by undertaking a staff satisfaction review.

Staff might be more willing to provide open feedback to Members and he sought the Committee's views on this proposal. Other Members were mindful of the physical relocation of staff, their new work role and new working environment. In addition to seeking staff views, feedback could be sought on possible improvements to assist staff performance. Councillor Atkin explained some of the issues discussed through the Customer First Working Panel. Councillor Mrs. Hood suggested approaching customers as well to determine satisfaction levels. It was noted that further work areas would be added to the contact centre in due course and a review at this stage could provide useful baseline information.

There was a discussion about information technology issues and data protection restrictions, which currently prevented the exchange of information and a "joined-up" approach. This meant that presently, the Council was not able to provide information on the services delivered by other agencies. Examples given related to information about the Fire Service and a sewage enquiry. The Chair felt that there was the potential for two projects, for the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to consider inward communication and the Community Scrutiny Committee to look at communication externally.

COS/4. **REPORTS FOR POLICY COMMITTEES**

The Chair introduced this item and spoke of the need to create a vision for scrutiny and to communicate this to other Members and the public. There was a need for a step change in the way that scrutiny was undertaken and he sought Members views on this. Councillor Lane felt that the profile of scrutiny should be raised and the process be given more credibility. The Committee should not seek to undertake too many projects. Presently, there was the perception that scrutiny was something which had to be done. Ideally, the Committee should undertake a review that would generate public interest and seek their involvement.

The Chair outlined plans for a Scrutiny Conference later in the year and the opportunities that such a Conference would present. Councillor Atkin suggested a presentation to the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Board to promote the scrutiny function. Members supported this suggestion and the Policy and Best Value Manager spoke of the role of the LSP in developing the Community Strategy. There might be the opportunity for Community Scrutiny to provide the District Council's feedback to the LSP on the strategy. Members' input was sought to finalise the wording of the Scrutiny Committee's vision for the year ahead and to provide guidelines for policy committees referring work to scrutiny panels.

COS/5. **WORK PROGRAMME**

Note: At 4.40 p.m. Councillor Harrington joined the Meeting.

The Policy and Best Value Manager explained the approach adopted by the Community Scrutiny Committee to give initial consideration to its work programme.

Initially, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee discussed Best Value Reviews and in the previous year the Committee had looked at the reviews relating to Finance, Revenues and Benefits, Asset Management and Human Resources. The Officer confirmed those reviews which had been completed and the areas

of work outstanding.  The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) would provide the opportunity for further work areas and in particular, she spoke about elements from the Human Resources Review, which could be pursued.  Members were mindful of the need to consider issues which impacted on the CPA.

The Committee then considered plans and strategies, initially focusing on the budget monitoring role.  In previous years the consultation with this Committee had been late in the process and it had not been possible to add value to it.  In future, it might be better to focus on a specific aspect.  The Chair suggested consultation with the Finance and Management Committee to ask if there was a specific area which could be examined.  If direction was not provided, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee could consider its own topic or approach and agree the Terms of Reference with the Finance and Management Committee.

Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) was discussed together with the Capital Strategy and Asset Management Plan.  These were identified as future potential work areas for the Committee.  The Chair sought Members' feedback regarding the Work Programme and expressed his own views.  A further suggestion was the provision of financial information to Members, which had been highlighted previously.  Reference was made to the Corporate Plan and the Chair commented on links to the CPA.  The Policy and Best Value Manager reminded that reports had been submitted to each policy committee to identify responsibilities for elements of the Corporate Plan. Meeting Corporate Plan targets was linked strongly to the CPA and the Officer felt that the Committee could add value to this document.  The Chair questioned whether an approach should be made to the CPA Improvement Panel to look at possible work areas.  Reference was also made to the Best Value Performance Plan and the Procurement Strategy.

The Committee was reminded of the special projects which had been considered previously.  Future projects could include Customer Care, CRM satisfaction and budgetary reviews, including a shift of resources to new service areas.  It was noted that the Community Scrutiny Committee had discussed equalities and diversity as a potential work area, but this could also be considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee.  Further reference was made to the Asset Management Plan and investment in capital projects. The Policy and Best Value Manager agreed to circulate information on the suggested projects for inclusion in the Work Programme.

The Committee then discussed Risk Management and gave further consideration to Best Value inspections.  The Policy and Best Value Manager explained the role of the Council's external auditors and the Audit Commission.  In July, a "round table" meeting would be held involving all parties.  At this meeting, the District Council would present its list of priorities and these would be compared to the priorities of the Audit Commission and other stakeholders.  Following negotiation, a programme of Best Value work would be agreed.  In future, the Council would receive a 'score' for the service area inspected and a score on the likely prospects of improvement.

Councillor Atkin spoke of the potential to work with parish councils on issues affecting rural areas.  Previously an Annual Parish Forum had been held

which enabled an exchange of views.  Councillor Jones explained the confusion for the public over responsibilities for service delivery.

A question was submitted on the way forward to determine the Committee's Work Programme.  The Chair reminded Members of those issues which the Committee had a responsibility to consider.  He pursued an earlier point about the Committee's role in reviewing the Council's budget and the agreement of Terms of Reference with the Finance and Management Committee.  He also referred to the Corporate Plan and the need to finalise the list of other items to be included in the Work Programme.  The Policy and Best Value Manager would circulate information on the topics discussed at this Meeting.  Members were asked to select three preferred work areas for inclusion in the Work Programme.  At the next Meeting, the Work Programme would be finalised and further consideration given to the issues arising from the meeting of all Scrutiny Members.


S. MURPHY


CHAIR


The Meeting terminated at 5.45 p.m.