

24 July 2008

**A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
WAS HELD ON 24 JULY 2008**

Councillors Allen (P), Beavis (P), Carr (P), Champion, Cully, Dickson (P), Edwards (P), Mrs Forder (P), Forder (Chairman) (P), Mrs Salter (P), Salter (P) and Miss West (P).

11. APOLOGIES

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Champion and Cully.

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

13. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 5 June 2008 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

14. DEVELOPMENT OF A WORK PROGRAMME

A. REQUESTS FOR SCRUTINY

(i) Cycle Parking

It was reported that a request had been received from the Policy and Organisation Board (25 June 2008) for the Committee to consider investigating the issues of cycle theft and security in the Borough.

Members of the Cycle Lanes Working Group advised that this aspect of scrutiny could be incorporated into the work they were currently undertaking.

This course of action was approved by the Committee.

The Chairman reported that he had also received correspondence from a member of the public on this issue which he would circulate to Members of the Working Group.

B. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman reported that a constituent had asked whether the Council could look at opportunities arising from the Sustainable Communities Act 2007. The Chairman had undertaken some reading on the subject and thought it would be worthy of further consideration.

Members debated whether this should be a matter for consideration at the Policy and Organisation Board but concluded that the Borough Solicitor should be requested to prepare a briefing note for the next meeting of the Committee. The Committee could then decide whether to proceed further with this issue.

The Borough Solicitor advised that government guidance was still awaited and, once received, could help with the development of this area.

C. OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR SCRUTINY

There were no other suggestions.

RESOLVED: That:

- a) the scrutiny of cycle parking in the Borough be referred to the Cycle Lanes Working Group; and
- b) the Borough Solicitor be requested to prepare a briefing note on the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee.

15. REPORTS TO BE RECEIVED

(i) CYCLE LANES WORKING GROUP

It was reported that the Cycle Lanes Working Group had met on 23 July 2008 and had drawn up a list of areas to be looked into and actions to be undertaken. The actions included:

- investigation of improvements to the website
- investigation of signage
- obtaining details of the inspection and cleansing regime

The Working Group had been particularly concerned that, although there was a prioritised plan, there was also a lack of Hampshire County Council funding for cycle lanes. The Working Group had decided to ask the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to write to Hampshire County Council to ascertain its priorities, the types of cycle lane schemes that would attract funding and the level of funding available.

Members were advised that it may be advantageous for a representative from Hampshire County Council to meet with the Working Group to provide some background information. Although there was no funding at present, this may not be the case in the future. The Local Transport Plan was a five year plan, the current one ending in 2011. It would therefore be advisable to begin preparing bids very soon.

An alternative view was expressed that there were problems with cycle lanes being underused. Cyclists had been shown to ride on pavements, with dog walkers using the cycle lanes.

In conclusion Members were informed that a date was usually set for a Working Group to report its findings to the Committee. It was suggested that this Working Group report to the Committee in January 2009.

(ii) NOISE MONITORING WORKING GROUP

The first meeting of the Working Group was scheduled for 11 August 2008. It was suggested that this Working Group should also endeavour to report its findings to the Committee in January 2009.

(iii) NEW MEMBER INDUCTION AND TRAINING

Consideration was given to a briefing note on the above topic prepared by the Chairman.

Members were in agreement with the points raised and the recommendations in the report. A number of other issues were also raised:

- training on the Council's Constitution and Standing Orders should be provided
- such training should be provided in "digestible chunks"
- training on the Constitution could include examples of its use
- a tour of the Council Chamber should be given prior to the first Full Council meeting in the Municipal Year
- notes should be prepared for new Members in a similar way to those provided for new Mayors
- a Members' Information Pack in a glossy cover should be provided
- a programme should be devised for Councillors to receive training in setting up individual websites

It was agreed that the Chairman incorporate the suggestions into his briefing note and have it circulated to the Members of the Committee. Officers suggested that a report could then be presented to the Standards and Governance Committee with a view to adopting the recommendations.

RESOLVED: That:

- a) the Chairman incorporate the suggestions into his briefing note;

- b) the revised briefing note circulated to the Members of the Committee; and
- c) a report be presented to the Standards and Governance Committee with a view to adopting the recommendations of the briefing note.

(iv) SCRUTINY TRAINING FOR MEMBERS

The Chairman reported that he had recently attended a scrutiny seminar at Birmingham University and he had looked at other publications on the subject. He suggested that training should be arranged and offered to all Members of the Council, falling into two broad categories:

- the purpose of overview and scrutiny and how to choose topics leading to successful scrutiny
- questioning techniques

The Chairman suggested that the first part of the training take place at 6.00 p.m. on 15 (***subsequently amended to 16***) September 2008. Training on questioning techniques should be provided by an outside trainer at a later date.

The Chairman explained that a meeting designed to plan the first session would take place on 3 September 2008 and would be attended by Chief Executive, the Borough Solicitor and himself. Councillor Allen was asked whether he would be prepared to attend the meeting and he stated that he would consider this issue.

Members felt that some guidance should be provided for Members of Working Groups who may well be in the process of questioning officers or external representatives before the questioning techniques training took place. The Borough Solicitor undertook to provide assistance should this arise.

(v) PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Consideration was given to a briefing note by the Development Services Manager which provided Members with information related to Performance Indicators for the year 2007/08.

Members were advised that local authority performance was now subject to considerable scrutiny and the Council had been required to produce an annual Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) giving details of its performance last year and its plan for the next year. The objective was for Councils to improve through monitoring.

The Best Value Performance Indicators had now been replaced by a series of national indicators which were similar but were less target orientated. They were more to do with the Borough itself than the Council; 2007/08 would be the last year of the Best Value Performance Indicators.

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The officers' Performance Sub-Group reviewed internal performance four times a year, each Service Unit Manager being requested to present his or her unit's Performance Information and Service Improvement Plan.

A report on performance indicators was brought twice a year (including once at the end of the financial year) to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Scrutiny by the Committee forms part of the evidence provided to the Audit Commission regarding our Performance Management processes.

Members were advised that generally the Council's performance was improving but there were variations in certain areas.

Members drew attention to the outturn and target of Level One for the Equality Standard for Local Government to which the authority conformed. Officers advised that Level Five was the highest achievable. A new standard for racial equality is currently out for consultation.

A Member view was expressed that some of the criteria were very subjective and gave the impression that, for example, early retirement of officers was not desirable whereas, in reality, some instances may be beneficial to the Council such as when the postholder was not replaced and savings could be made.

The cost of early retirements was high and due to underfunding of the retirement scheme, practice had changed over the last 15 years and now required Councils to contribute more directly to the pension fund in these instances. In addition ill-health retirements were not discretionary, since they are only undertaken when unavoidable because of an individual's inability to carry out their duties and responsibilities as certificated by a duly qualified medical practitioner.

Officers were asked which indicators they were most concerned with, and drew attention to the performance information related to front line services. These were a measure of the Council's interaction with the public and, where a reduction in performance was identified, action could be taken to address the situation.

Attention was drawn to the Best Value Performance Indicator BV109 which related to the processing of planning applications. For many years Gosport Borough Council had been in the national top twenty providers of this service. At that time, the section was fully staffed with experienced, long serving officers. In the last two years the supply of good quality planners appeared to have dried up and, as a result, the Development Control Section had not been fully staffed and was currently carrying two vacancies.

The section had, since March 2008, concentrated on the statutory areas of work and, as a result, performance had improved. However, officers felt that a better service would be provided to the public if the section was able to again be fully staffed and reintroduce services which were over and above those it was obliged to provide.

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It was pointed out that the target for Council tenants of not more than seven weeks in rent arrears had not been met. Officers advised that the target had been somewhat ambitious and that the Council's rent collection statistics were amongst the best in the country.

Members raised the issue of the Decent Homes Standard for Council dwellings and were advised that this was a standard set by the government to be achieved by local authorities by 2010. A stock condition survey had been carried out and a programme of works is currently in progress to ensure the target is met. Dwellings were classified as currently decent, non-decent or potentially non-decent but no yearly inspection or survey was required.

RESOLVED: That the briefing note of the Development Services Manager be noted.

16 CLOSING REMARKS

The Chairman thanked Members and officers for their contributions.

17 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business to discuss.

The meeting ended at 7.20 p.m.

CHAIRMAN