

23 July 2009

A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WAS HELD ON 23 JULY 2009

Councillors Beavis (P), Bradley (P), Carr (P), Champion, Dickson (P), Mrs Forder (P), Forder (Chairman) (P), Foster-Reed (P), Geddes, Mrs Searle, Smith and Miss West (P).

11. APOLOGIES

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

12. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

13. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 11 June 2009 be approved and signed by the Chairman as a true and correct record.

14. DEVELOPMENT OF A WORK PROGRAMME

A) REQUESTS FOR SCRUTINY

No requests had been received.

B) WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman advised that the Borough Solicitor would be reporting on new and impending legislation at the next meeting of the Committee.

With regard to Post 16 Vocational Education, the Chairman reported that he had written to Ann-Marie Mountfield of the Learning Skills Council on 20 July 2009 but, as yet, had received no reply. The purpose of meeting with members of the Learning and Skills Council was to discover whether there would be a way forward in this area for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

C) OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR SCRUTINY

The following suggestions were put forward:

- A. Maintenance of rear accessways
- B. Maintenance at Ann's Hill Cemetery
- C. Management of weeds on kerbs and roads
- D. Gosport Borough Council as a Fourth Option Authority
- E. Recruitment and Succession Planning

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With regard to the maintenance of rear accessways, the problem appeared to be one of responsibility for management. Councillors Carr and Dickson undertook to liaise on this problem.

With regard to the maintenance of Ann's Hill Cemetery, it was agreed that the Leisure and Cultural Services Manager be requested to produce a paper containing the relevant issues to be brought to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

With regard to management of weeds, concerns were raised that, although they were strimmed, the roots were not killed. Members were assured that the appropriate weedkiller was applied by Hampshire County Council and any debris cleared away by Gosport Borough Council.

With regard to Gosport Borough Council as a Fourth Option Authority, Members were advised that it was the only Council in Hampshire which had not adopted the Cabinet system. It was felt that it may be an appropriate time to look at the issue and learn from the experiences of other Councils.

It was agreed that, as this issue cut across the work of both the Overview and Scrutiny and the Standards and Governance Committee, Group Leaders would be advised of this scrutiny and a report be made to a future meeting of the Committee.

With regard to recruitment and succession planning, it was agreed that a working group be set up to consider this issue. Councillors Bradley and Miss West were nominated to sit on the working group and an invitation would also be made to Councillor Mrs Searle to be the Labour Group representative.

RESOLVED: That:

- a) Councillors Carr and Dickson liaise on the maintenance of rear accessways;
- b) the Leisure and Cultural Services Manager be requested to produce a paper containing the relevant issues on the maintenance of Ann's Hill Cemetery to be brought to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- c) no action be taken regarding the management of weeds on kerbs and roads;
- d) Group Leaders be advised of the scrutiny of Gosport Borough Council as a fourth option authority and a report be made to the meeting of the Committee on 26 November 2009; and

- e) (i) a Working Group be established to consider recruitment and succession planning issues
- (ii) Councillors Bradley and Miss West be nominated to sit on the Working Group and Councillor Mrs Searle be invited to sit as the Labour Group representative.

15. REPORTS RECEIVED

(i) PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Consideration was given to a report of the Chief Executive which considered information relating to Performance Indicators (PIs) for the year 2008/2009.

Members were advised that a number of indicators were covered by a statutory survey which all Councils were obliged to conduct. The survey contained predefined questions and answer categories. The Government looked for a 95% confidence level.

The Chief Executive reported that the Council had received a grant of £20,000 towards the improvement of community cohesion.

It was felt that the Council's performance on National Indicator 20 (Assault with injury crime rate) was encouraging.

With regard to National Indicator 184 (Food Establishments in the area which are broadly compliant with food hygiene law), Members were advised that a risk assessment was always drawn up. Scoring below a certain level would indicate that the premises were not compliant. The score in Gosport was regarded as satisfactory and consistent with the rest of Hampshire.

With regard street and environmental cleanliness (NI195) and the question of detritus, Members were advised that Officers surveyed 900 transects per year. Figures in this area were good compared to the rest of the County.

Attention was drawn to National Indicator 179 (*Value for Money-total net value of ongoing cash-releasing value for money gains that have impacted since the start of the 2008-09 financial year*) and the fact that value for money gains of £419,000 had been made. Members were advised that this figure came from the analysis of efficiency savings. A number of areas were covered including staffing which was the largest single element.

Members enquired regarding staffing measures in place should there be a severe outbreak of Swine Flu and were assured that crucial services such as benefits and the cemetery would continue. Government recommendations were to work on a basis of 50% of staff being absent through Swine Flu at any one time. Section Heads had been asked to establish how services would be covered in the worst case scenario. It was felt that the Council would be able to cope with a 50% absentee rate.

Members raised the issue of sickness amongst staff (BV12) and were advised that measures were in place to deal with this, and others would be introduced shortly. Currently any instance of four periods of casual sickness within a twelve month period was flagged up and an interview with the Unit Manager would subsequently take place. In the case of six periods of casual sickness in any twelve months, unless there were specific medical issues, a medical referral would be made. In addition the personal review process would include sickness issues. Staff were encouraged to engage in healthy practices and lifestyles. In the last two years 40% of total sickness had been of a long term nature.

Members were advised that the cost of waste collection in the Borough (BV86) was significantly below that in the rest of Hampshire and amongst the lowest in the country.

With regard to BV9 it was noted that the recession had had a detrimental affect on Council Tax collection rates.

(ii) CONFERENCE ON OLDER PEOPLE AND ISSUES OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

The Chairman advised that a letter of invitation had been sent out to all potentially interested parties. This had been carried out as a staged process and indications were that the conference would be well attended. All Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be welcome to attend on 8 October 2009.

(iii) REVIEW OF OUTTURN/BUDGET 2008/09

Consideration was given to report and presentation (a copy of which is attached in the Minute Book as Appendix A) of the Borough Treasurer which looked at the financial outturn for 2008/09 compared to budget along with related financial issues and suggested potential areas for further review.

The question was raised as to what action would be taken once it was realised that an overspend would occur. The Borough Treasurer advised that there was a continuous process of monitoring, including quarterly reports to the members of the Policy and Organisation Board for information. Reports could be placed, if necessary, on the agenda of the Policy and Organisation Board and Members could request that this happen should they wish.

Generally the Board would be asked for approvals for remedial action if the problem could be quantified. Otherwise the matter would simply be flagged up. Any approval would need to generate savings to balance the books. A more accurate figure would normally be available when revised budgets were reported after Christmas each year.

Members asked about situations where major projects were dependent upon capital receipts but such receipts turned out to be lower than expected. The Borough Treasurer advised that a large number of combinations of levels and variations were analysed and, provided there was the necessary commitment, the Council could borrow until the receipts were available. Total cost would always be the main variable. If this did not work out there could be a subsequent cut in services or a rise in the level of Council Tax, if permitted. Decisions could be challenged and voided if found to be unreasonable.

The Council was required to provide certain statutory services such as those relating to homelessness, concessionary travel and housing benefits which were difficult areas for the Council to exercise financial control. The first quarterly budget monitor would highlight where additional money was required.

The Borough Treasurer advised that the main difficulties occurred where the Council had to provide high risk statutory services where it had little control. Members suggested the possibility of requesting the Government to review statutory areas of work such as concessionary travel, as many Councils were not satisfied with the situation.

It was felt that Member involvement with the budget process was not as full as it might be and this was an area where the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could become active.

Officers were asked about the large differences in cumulative write-offs. The Borough Treasurer advised that this figure fluctuated from year to year and tended to be affected by the cycle of the economy. Write-offs were not made unless they were necessary. Some related to business rates which would be written off promptly as the Council was reimbursed by Central Government.

A sizeable proportion of write-offs were due to debts relating to homelessness. The Council did make provision in its budgets to absorb this level of write-off, and as a consequence did not overspend. Overspends were governed by standing orders and financial regulations and would have to be reported to the appropriate board.

The Borough Treasurer advised that currently only large variations within the budget were drawn to the attention of Members. Generally there was little feedback on monitoring reports from members of the Policy and Organisation Board. External Audit were currently satisfied with the Council's budget reporting. The involvement of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee over the next twelve months was likely to be well received and also prove useful for Officers.

It was felt that this should not be a scrutiny for the whole Committee and it would be beneficial to set up a panel which would be able to identify issues for the whole Committee over the next year. This would also be welcomed by External Audit.

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It was agreed that a Working Group comprising four Members be established. Councillors Beavis, Mrs Forder and Dickson were nominated to sit on the working group together with an invitation to Councillor Mrs Searle to sit as the Labour Group representative.

It was suggested that the budget monitor sent to the members of the Policy and Organisation Board could also be sent to members of the Working Group.

RESOLVED: That:

- a) a Working Group be established to identify budget issues for whole Committee scrutiny; and
- b) Councillors Beavis, Mrs Forder and Dickson be nominated to sit on the Working Group and Councillor Mrs Searle be invited to sit as the Labour Group representative.

16. OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business to discuss.

The meeting ended at 7.49 p.m.

CHAIRMAN