

Meeting: COUNCIL

Portfolio Area: All

Date: 4th April 2007

ANNUAL REPORT – SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE & SCRUTINY TOPIC GROUPS

(Constitutional Services)

NON-KEY DECISION

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1 PURPOSE

To report on the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Scrutiny Topic Groups during the 2006/07 Municipal Year.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

That the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Scrutiny Topic Groups during 2006/07 be noted.

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 Overview and Scrutiny's role is to operate as an independent function of the Councils decision making process, by holding the Executive to account, having the power to "call in " decisions for reconsideration, conducting policy development, undertaking internal and external scrutiny reviews and carry out pre-decision scrutiny into decisions.

3.2 At Annual Council on 23rd May 2006 a structure of 7 Scrutiny and Value for Money Panels, which mirrored more closely the revised Executive Portfolios was agreed.

3.3 There had been a number of successful reviews conducted by the Scrutiny Panels. However, Scrutiny Members had been saying for some time that they felt that the arrangements were not flexible enough and there had been a problem with inertia with a number of the reviews. To this end an outside facilitator, Derek Lamb of Exeter House Training, was brought in to run a facilitated workshop to gauge Members' views about how scrutiny was conducted at the Council and looking at ways it could be improved. The main outcome was that there should be One Scrutiny Committee and that there should be time limited, less formal Topic Groups established to do the detailed scrutiny work.

3.4 Scrutiny Members had also identified a further inhibitor to Members conducting meaningful scrutiny was the lack of dedicated scrutiny support. This was also

highlighted by the Peer Review in 2003 as a weakness in the Council's Scrutiny arrangements and was included in the Council's Corporate Improvement Plan. Accordingly the Post of Scrutiny Officer was established and the post filled in early October 2006.

- 3.5 At Scrutiny Overview Committee 16th October 2006 Members approved that scrutiny review work would be conducted for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2006/07 in informal Topic Groups, as described in the attached protocol at Appendix A.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Officer, working in consultation with Members, established a number of internal management tools – see Appendix B.

- 4.2 A number of Scrutiny Topic Groups have met, conducted thorough studies and have made conclusions and recommendations to Scrutiny Overview Committee. This process has been fully reported to the Scrutiny Overview Committee and recorded in its agenda papers, therefore the following is a summary of the work carried out since October 2006.

4.3 Green Space Strategy

The Topic Group looked at and agreed the wording for a set of vision statements for an emerging Green Space Strategy, and this was an important step in establishing a strategy. Scrutiny Members have challenged the lack of an existing strategy and have championed some officer work to draw up a strategy in the later half of 2007. Scrutiny Members will continue to help implement this piece of important policy development work.

4.4 Housing Revenue Account Repairs & Maintenance Budget Overspend

Having established the scope of their review this Topic Group met twice and interviewed the Council's Monitoring Officer and the Chief Executive, Finance Director and Head of Technical Service of Stevenage Homes Ltd, about an important study into a £1.3 million overspend of the Council's Housing Revenue Account Repairs and Maintenance Budget. The findings of this study were reported to the Scrutiny Overview Committee 19th February 2007, and the Committee along with the Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) will be monitoring Stevenage Homes Limited's progress towards bringing down this figure for next year and pinpointing exactly what the position is likely to be for the 2008/09 HRA Budget.

4.5 Stevenage Football Club

Following the decision of the Executive 15th November 2006 to make funding available for improvements to the stadium East Stand Toilets and the Floodlighting, Scrutiny Overview Committee raised concerns over the Council providing Capital funding to the Football Club. These concerns were pursued with the Council's Principal Leisure Manager and the Scrutiny Overview Committee were content with the response they received. The capital funding provided to the club was conditional on the Football Club complying with certain provisos regarding the Football Foundation Stadia Improvement Fund providing 40% of the costs towards the toilets and 20% towards the floodlighting, with planned preventative maintenance programmes in place to keep the facility in good order, and the Council were not

aware of any further future projects where capital assistance would be sought from the Council.

4.6 General Fund Budget Topic Group

Scrutiny Members met twice in Topic Groups to scrutinise the General Fund Budget at the Forward Plan stage on 21st December 2006 and following the final budget being agreed by the Executive 24 01 07 on 1st February 2007. Members looked strategically at the budget and started the process of asking a number of fundamental questions about the Council's budget such as:

- Does it match what the Council is trying to achieve, i.e. its corporate priorities?
- What level of Council Tax is acceptable?
- Is the spending what's right for Stevenage?
- Are we doing anything that we no longer need to do?
- Is there sufficient money in "balances" kept aside for unforeseen needs?
- Are services providing value for money (VFM)?
- How is VFM measured and how does it relate to service quality?

Following this process Members raised a number of specific issues that may appear to be under resourced /over resourced but that were important to the Council meeting its corporate priorities. SOC will need to decide which of the following issues could be scrutinised in more detail in the next municipal year 2007/08 when considering the general fund budget for 2008/09:

- Arboricultural Services
- Balance between statutory and non-statutory services
- Grants
- Leisure
- Play & Youth
- Museum
- Car Parking
- Support Services
- Agency Work & Consultants

4.7 Value for Money (VFM) Topic Group - Fairlands Valley Farmhouse

Following the Executive's decision not to agree a request for a supplementary estimate of £70,000 at its 13th December 2006 meeting, the Executive requested that Scrutiny Overview Committee be invited to set up a VFM Topic Group on its behalf to look at the proposed works and associated costs of this scheme.

The Topic Group met on 19th January 2007, and it was established that the figure of £70,000 was over stated and significant savings could be found and these works could be deferred until a full options study be carried out. The Executive noted the initial findings of the VFM Topic Group and agreed that the VFM Topic Group undertakes further work to explore the options to the long-term use of the building.

4.8 Ongoing Scrutiny Topic Groups

Scrutiny Members are currently conducting a number of Topic Group studies into the following areas:

4.9 **SLL Swimming Centre**

Members have begun work on this Topic Group Study and have raised the following issues with SLL around routine maintenance, reporting of faults/repairs, cleaning programme, details of complaints handling, staff training, customer care and the level of use of different users. This Topic Group will meet again to formally interview SLL Management and users of the Swimming Centre and will report its findings and make recommendations to SOC in due course.

4.10 **Local Strategic Partnership**

The Scrutiny Members involved in this Topic Group have focused on a number of issues that they feel are worthy of scrutiny regarding the Stevenage Partnership. Questions posed and issues raised by Scrutiny Members include: Is it making a difference?; governance and accountability; public awareness; lines of communication; Members input to the LSP; what does it achieve?; is it meeting its aims & objectives?; have these objectives been met, in full or in part?; are they the correct objectives?; what is the way forward?, and who is doing the work on the Partnership?

4.11 **Other Scrutiny issues for future consideration by Topic Groups**

As well as allowing time for consideration of one or two specific issues for the 2008/09 general fund budget, as identified through this year's budget scrutiny process, there are a number of other issues already identified for possible scrutiny in Topic Groups when there is capacity to progress these items, such as:

- VFM Options Study into Fairlands Valley Farmhouse
- VFM Study into Grant Aid
- Parking Strategy Action Plan
- Community Associations Management Agreement
- Bedwell SRB Sustainability
- Disabled Facilities Grant Scheme
- Member Complaints System
- Recycling – Wheelie Bins
- Budget Scrutiny for 2008/09 General Fund
- Equalities issue around HR Recruitment Procedures

4.12 **Member Evaluation of Scrutiny**

It is envisaged that as good practice, Scrutiny Members should be invited to an evaluation session on scrutiny at SBC, where Members can provide feedback into how successful or otherwise they feel this function is conducted. It is proposed that this session be conducted in October 2007, which would be one year after the Topic Groups were set up.

4.13 What works

The rationale for conducting Scrutiny in Topic Groups was to allow Scrutiny to “do a little well” and it would appear that the work that Scrutiny Members have been carrying out in the Topic Groups has been well received. Since scrutiny has been conducted in Topic Groups from October 2006 there has been 4 completed reviews, with a further 2 reviews currently active and will be complete shortly. Six reviews in 6 months is a fair return given that the new procedures, together with the new officer support, were bedding-in during this time.

4.14 Areas for improvement

There has been some inertia in the system where Members initially met in Topic Groups to complete the internal scrutiny management tools such as the Scrutiny Template and the Scrutiny Scoping Proforma. This work is now being conducted by the Scrutiny Officer, Chair of SOC and the individual Chairs of the Topic Groups and cuts out the need for extra meetings. Generally Members have responded in a timely manner but on occasion this can delay progress. Also officers have mostly made themselves available and provided information when requested in a timely manner, but again on occasion there have been exceptions which can cause delays to the Topic Groups carrying out their studies.

4.15 What’s emerging?

4.16 Scrutiny Newsletter

The Scrutiny Officer in consultation with the Chair of SOC and assisted by the Council Corporate Communications section are drawing together a Scrutiny Newsletter which will be piloted soon. The purpose of the Newsletter is to provide both Members and Heads of Service Officers with brief quarterly update on what work is being undertaken by Scrutiny Members and this will be emailed around as well as being published on the Council’s web site and intranet.

4.17 Emerging Legislation

There are two pieces of emerging legislation, which will have an impact on the Scrutiny Overview function. The Police & Justice Act 2006 has been on the Statute Book for some months but has not yet come into force and is likely to be aligned with the “Community Call for Action” provisions of the White Paper – “Strong and Prosperous Communities” and it is thought that this will come into force no earlier than the first half of 2008. The implications of Part 3 of the Police & Justice Act, which introduces the Crime & Disorder Committees, is that every local authority will be required to have an independent Crime & Disorder Scrutiny Committee to deal with new governance arrangements whereby a member of the public can seek to have a matter considered by this Committee. Members will be briefed when guidance is published from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There is a budget of £5,000 to support study activities, site visits and specialist advice where necessary.

5.2 Legal Implications

Members need to be aware of the emerging legislation as referred to at 4.17. As directed in this report Members will be briefed when guidance is published from the Department for Communities and Local Government regarding the Police & Justice Act 2006 and the White Paper "Strong & Prosperous Communities".

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- Scrutiny Overview Committee – 19th February 2007

APPENDICES

- Appendix A – Protocol for Topic Groups
- Appendix B – Scrutiny Development Issues