

**Meeting: COUNCIL**

Agenda Item:

**Date: 25 June 2008**

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**COMPLETED SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE AND SCRUTINY TOPIC GROUP STUDIES DURING THE 2007/08 MUNICIPAL YEAR**

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**1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To report on the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Scrutiny Topic Groups during the 2007/08 Municipal Year.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Scrutiny Topic Groups during 2007/08 be noted.
- 2.2 That Council compare the way scrutiny is conducted at SBC with the "14 Steps to Scrutiny Success" as advocated by a leading scrutiny academic Dr Stephanie Snape and appended to this report, and give a view as to the success or otherwise of the local arrangements.

**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.
- 3.2 The Municipal Year 2007/08 was the first full year that Scrutiny was conducted under the new arrangement of one Scrutiny Overview Committee fulfilling the Scrutiny function with specific review work being conducted by ad hoc Topic Groups and supported by a dedicated Scrutiny Officer.

**4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTIONS AND OTHER**

## **OPTIONS**

4.1 Throughout the last municipal year the Scrutiny Topic Groups have carried out a number of studies which have in each case drawn conclusions and made recommendations to the 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 brief summary of the work carried out during 2007/08:

### **4.2 The Local Strategic Partnership**

4.2.1 A series of interviews with the Local Strategic Partnership Board Members and Executive support officers were conducted by the Topic Group and following this process a number of conclusions and recommendations were made, including issues around the following:

- Ways the LSP can make a difference?
- Improvements to the governance and accountability arrangements
- Raising public awareness
- Better lines of communication
- Clear lines of input to the LSP for all Members
- Ways to help the Strategic Partnership meet its aims & objectives
- Were these the correct local objectives?
- Developing a clear vision of the way forward.
- Maintaining a fair distribution of who does the work on the Partnership.

4.2.2 One of the key findings of the review was the need for smaller thematic sub groups to focus on a few key actions against specific LAA 'blocks' such as (1) economic development & enterprise (2) children & young people (3) safer & stronger communities and (4) healthier communities and older people. These groups could report back throughout the year on progress of their individual action plans to the Executive. The role of these groups would not be to do the work of each partner but to work in a 'joined up' way.

4.2.3 The LSP Executive considered the issues raised and provided a response to the Scrutiny Overview Committee and an associated action plan. The Scrutiny Overview Committee is due to receive an update on these actions over the summer. Most of the recommendations for improvement matched issues that The Partnership had already identified for change.

### **4.3 Stevenage Leisure Limited Swimming Centre**

4.3.1 Following a Topic Group review of the Stevenage Swimming Centre where various Centre user groups were interviewed it was identified that there were a number of issues that the management of the Swimming Centre could adopt to improve the running of the Centre, including:

- the underlying problems with the boiler and the pool water temperature and shower water temperature be identified and steps to remedy be instigated
- following school visits a thorough clean of the changing areas takes place
- showers be regularly descaled to help improve the water flow
- broken cubicles latches on the doors and lockers be fixed
- the bottom of the pool be cleaned periodically as the Sub-Aqua Club reported that

the deep end was especially littered with hair, plasters and other debris

- a user forum be set up including those who assisted in this review
- extra mirrors be installed at a lower height adjacent to the hair dryers to accommodate women, and faulty hair dryers be fixed or replaced
- the issue of the correct frames being purchased and installed for the diving boards be implemented.

4.3.2 The Topic Group also noted that there were issues regarding the design of the building and issues regarding the condition of the boiler, which would be difficult to resolve without significant changes to the building and capital investment and suggested that discussions between SLL and SBC be held to establish what capital investment would be required.

4.3.3 Following the Topic Group review the Regional Contract Manager for Stevenage Leisure Limited provided the Scrutiny Overview Committee with an improvement action plan which would be revisited by the Scrutiny Overview Committee over the summer to see what progress there has been with the plan.

#### **4.4 Grant Aid Programme**

4.4.1 A group of Scrutiny Members conducted a Topic Group review of the Council's Grant Aid Programme, focusing on two key issues (i) whether there was evidence of any duplication in the scheme and (ii) whether the programme offered value for money?

4.4.2 The Topic Group interviewed a number of (i) groups who receive a large grant, (ii) groups whose client base was other voluntary sector groups and finally (iii) groups where it would appear that they could be a duplication of service.

4.4.3 Following the interview process, a number of conclusions and recommendations were made including the following issues:

- in terms of who to receive grant aid, weight be given to how well the groups utilise volunteers
- groups that predominantly use a high proportion of volunteers to deliver their service should be given a priority over groups who work predominantly with paid staff.
- in some cases the Council is funding a shortfall of what other areas of the public sector should be funding? It is recommend that in the future this issue should be taken into account when considering the grant aid allocation.
- groups that receive larger grants and can also demonstrate strong links with the Local Area Agreement and who can show which strands of the Community Strategy they are delivering against, should be given a priority over groups that don't.
- consideration should be given to weaning groups off total dependency to the Council's grant aid provision, and those that make efforts to fund raise beyond the Council grant aid should be encouraged to do so by being given priority over those who don't.
- some groups appeared to be well prepared for any future reduction in Council grant aid, others were less well prepared and could potentially disband without the current grant aid support from the Council. Consideration should be given to the Council offering support and models of best practise towards funding capacity building in this area.
- consider offering some of the larger groups a 2 – 3 year settlement with an agreed

## SLA

4.4.4 The Scrutiny Overview Committee have received a written response from the Portfolio Holder for Community & Culture, which in response the Scrutiny Overview Committee has requested an open discussion at a future Scrutiny Overview Committee meeting.

### **4.5 Value for Money Options Study into the future use of Fairlands Valley Farmhouse**

4.5.1 At the request of the Executive a Value for Money (VFM) Topic Group was set up to investigate a supplementary estimate for essential maintenance works to Fairlands Valley Farmhouse. The Topic Group reported its findings at the Executive on 14th February 2007. Following this study the Executive asked that a further VFM Topic Group be conducted to explore the options for the long term use of the building.

4.5.2 Following an analysis of four potential options for the future use of the Farmhouse including (i) Digswell Arts Trust remaining in the building with an 'Investing in Communities' fund bid of £800,000; (ii) a Groundwork Hertfordshire environmental education /conference/visitor centre; (iii) use for residential development and (iv) a pub/restaurant use.

4.5.3 On closer inspection options (i), (ii) and (iii) were all unsuitable for different reasons detailed in the report which left option (iv) the use of the building as a pub/restaurant. This was recommended to the Scrutiny Overview Committee, and a report was submitted to the Executive recommending this option be pursued. Officers are currently working with DAT about finding an alternative site for their operations and marketing the site for a pub/restaurant.

### **4.6 Outturn Analysis of 2004/05, 05/06 and 06/07 Budget under spends and over spends variations**

4.6.1 A Topic Group scrutinised budget variations of the 2006/07 draft outturns and this year was compared with the two previous years outturns for 2004/05, 2005/06. The Topic Group looked at the three years, looking for patterns of over and under spends in specific SDU/Portfolio areas. Where there appeared to be repeat patterns of under / over spends over the three years or one off anomalies the Topic Group asked the relevant officers to provide a written explanation and these were analysed by the topic group who found that there did not appear to be any one clear pattern of events leading to the variances in each area year-on-year. However, the process did reveal some inconsistencies, and on more than one occasion an inability of Service Delivery Units to account for specific under or over spend.

4.6.2 Members were also of the view that consideration should be given to the current client contractor model and Members questioned whether the model that was adopted under the CCT regime was now a viable model in terms of its relevance, accuracy and robustness for SDU budget setting?

### **4.7 Equalities Scrutiny – Study into data collection in the Customer Services Centre and Human Resources**

4.7.1 The Equalities Topic Group focused on 2 of the 21 Service Delivery Units that had

undergone an Equalities Impact Assessment. It was decided that one service would be inward facing and one outward facing and the purpose of the review was to test what data was being collected against the six strands of the 2006 Equalities Act. The review was to establish the quality of that data, what is being done with it and whether these services were having a positive impact on the embedding the six strands of Equalities and Diversity.

- 4.7.2 Following the scrutiny exercise there was evidence that the Council had come a long way over the past three years regarding its commitment to equalities and diversity, but the Topic Group were aware that there was a very long way to go before it could be demonstrated that this was truly a mainstream activity and part of the normal day to day activity and culture of the Council. The fact that the Council slipped from a (self assessed) level 2 local government standard to zero, with a minor change in the criteria from the government, concerned the Topic Group members, but they welcomed the introduction of the generic equalities scheme, which would provide the Council with a 'golden thread' to monitor the progress of Equalities Impact Assessments, Action Plans, individual Service Delivery Unit's Service Plans and right down to individual officers actions in their personal development meetings. This was seen as a very positive move forward in the 'direction of travel' of equalities at the Council.
- 4.7.3 Regarding the two Service Delivery Units under review the Topic Group found that with regard to the Human Resources SDU the quality of the data collected on its IT software had been limited, as it had not been possible to collect the data. However, this was soon to be rectified with information on all six strands of the 2006 Equalities Act being able to be collected for new and existing employees.
- 4.7.4 The Topic Group also found that the Customer Service Centre did not currently have the capacity to record the six strands of the 2006 Equalities Act. However, there is an opportunity for a step change in the data the CSC collects if the Council signs up to the Customer Data Hub.
- 4.7.5 It would appear that there were instances of a silo approach to data sharing with the CSC from some SDUs which could have an impact on the success of embedding Equalities and Diversity. There were other challenges which were addressed in detail in the report. Scrutiny Overview Committee were awaiting a corporate response from the Executive.

#### **4.8 Implementation of the Council's Parking Strategy**

- 4.8.1 The Topic Group initially looked into the reasons for the perceived delays in the delivery of the Parking Strategy Action Plan. Following investigation a letter was written to all Members highlighting what progress had been achieved, where there were delays and actions that required forward plan bids to be achieved.
- 4.8.2 The Topic Group picked up progressing one of the significant priority one actions and decided to focus on moving forward restricting commercial vehicles parking overnight in residential areas. However, the 2008/09 general fund bid for a trial on limiting the weight restriction on commercial vehicles parking overnight in residential areas was unsuccessful and the work undertaken to progress this issue is now on hold until such time that funding is available.

4.8.3 Engineering Officers focus has now shifted to progressing the Old Town Parking Study and the Scrutiny Overview Committee would consider whether it wished to pursue this or other parking issues, when it considers its Work Programme for 2008/09.

#### **4.9 Pre-scrutiny of the Corporate Business Strategy**

4.9.1 The Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee met with the Portfolio Holder for Performance and Improvement and established a simple way for Scrutiny Members to look at a strategy document as it was being formulated and to comment on and help shape the policy as a piece of pre-scrutiny policy development work. This work was carried out informally and it was suggested that this could be a way of working in the future in agreement with the relevant Portfolio Holder on a case-by-case basis and involving a small group of Scrutiny Members in a Topic Group format.

#### **4.10 Scrutiny issues for future consideration by Topic Groups**

4.10.1 The Scrutiny Overview Committee were considering the work programme for 2008/09 for consideration by Topic Groups. The following issues remain from the work programme for 2007/08:

- Renewal of the Neighbourhood Centres
- Member Complaints System
- Disabled Facilities Grant Scheme
- Recycling
- Equalities – continuation of the work carried out in 2007/08 engaging with the Voluntary Sector representative groups.

#### **4.11 Future Developments**

4.11.1 It is anticipated that during the autumn an All Member Seminar will be held considering the future developments of the scrutiny function and the challenges that lay ahead for Members involved in scrutiny. To help facilitate this event a nationally recognised expert will be engaged to speak to Members about the specific challenges for scrutiny at Stevenage Borough Council.

### **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**

There are a number of pieces of emerging legislation which will have to a greater or lesser extent some impact on the operation of the Scrutiny function. However, as yet it is not clear what specific impact the legislation in the Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, Police & Justice Act 2006 and the White Paper "Strong & Prosperous Communities" will have on the scrutiny function and until formal guidance from the Department for Communities and Local Government is issued it would be unwise to make any changes to the Council's Constitution until the impact is clear. For instance the impact of "Councillor's Call For Action" is still unclear as

the relevant paragraphs are being changed and the dates for implications are as yet unknown.

### **5.3 Policy Implications**

As referred to above for legal implications at 5.2 the policy impact of the new legislation is unclear.

### **5.4 Staffing and Accommodation Implications**

Whatever impact the emerging legislation could have would need to be resourced through the existing structures.

### **5.5 Service Delivery Implications**

The Scrutiny Officer would continue to support all aspects of the scrutiny function at SBC, including desk top research, report writing, note taking at meetings, setting up Topic Group meetings, initiating and completing scoping documents, liaising with Executive Portfolio holders, Strategic Management Board and SDU service users (including members of the public) as appropriate.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- Local Government Act 2000

## **APPENDICES**

- "14 Steps to Scrutiny Success" Dr Stephanie Snape, 2002