

## SUMMARY OF SCRUTINY TOPIC GROUPS THAT WERE UNDERTAKEN DURING THE 2010-11 MUNICIPAL YEAR

### 1 SHL Finance Scrutiny Topic Group

#### 1.1 Scope

- Establish what are SBC's accountancy requirements to set & manage the HRA?
- Explore SHL's accountancy provision to meet SBC requirements
- Resulting from 1 and 2 tease out any problems with timing issues around the setting of the HRA annually
- Explore issues (if any) around European directive on accounting procedures for both SBC and SHL
- Review management of large spend projects by SHL – issues around Value for Money, delivery, doing more for less etc. Investigate the risk management structure at SHL to alleviate penalties of not meeting the contractual requirements e.g. of decent homes, does this satisfy SBC requirements?

#### 1.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Cllrs Monika Cherney-Craw (Chair), Phil Bibby, David Cullen, David Kissane, Margaret Notley, Graham Snell and Marilyn Yarnold-Forrester.

#### 1.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Scott Crudgington, SBC Strategic Director (Resources)  
Clare Fletcher, SBC Head of Finance  
Roger Gochin, SHL Board Member  
Desmond Gray, SHL Interim Director, Finance and Compliance  
Lorraine O'Brien, SHL Chief Executive  
Brent O'Halloran, Director of Property Services  
Cllr Carol Latif, SHL Board Member  
Richard Protheroe, Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications  
Debbie Rabot, SHL Director of Housing Management (Deputy CE SHL)  
Cllr Ann Webb, SBC Housing Portfolio Holder

#### 1.4 The following themes emerged

- Closer aligning of SHL & SBC Budget Process
- Delivery of the July 2009 Audit Commission Recommendations
- Revised Management Agreement
- HRA experience within SHL finance officers
- Continuity and retention problems with senior SHL staff
- Future direction of funding for Social Housing in Stevenage

#### 1.5 Recommendations

The Topic Group made five recommendations in line with the themes outlined above.

#### 1.6 Action/Response

A formal response was received from SHL Chief Executive and from the SBC Strategic Director (Resources)

## 2 **Support for the Third Sector (Community Grants) Scrutiny Topic Group**

### 2.1 Scope

Look at the possible options open to the Council to offer financial support to the Third Sector, beyond the traditional Community Grant or (Grant Aid).

### 2.2 The following Members conducted the review

Cllrs Graham Clark (Chair), David Cullen, Monika Cherney-Craw, Matthew Hurst, John Mead, Simon Speller and Marilyn Yarnold-Forrester. Councillor David Cullen took over Chairing the Topic Group when the Chair, Councillor Graham Clark was unwell

### 2.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Portfolio Holder for Community, Health and Older People, Cllr Sherma Batson Scott Crudgington, Strategic Director (Resources) and Richard Protheroe, Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications.

### 2.4 The following themes emerged:

- A combination of commissioning and small grants being awarded by an independent Third Sector body would be the best option to recommend as it would give the Council flexibility in terms of its approach to support the Third Sector. By directing the largest proportion of funding via Commissioning it would give the Council more control over where and how resources would be directed. Via monitoring the contract it will be possible to make interventions during a year that the current combination of SLA and grant making does not adequately provide.
- By offering modest fund to support small grants the Council would still offer valuable support to local niche service providers. For an agreed fee, the grant giving Third Sector group could remove a bureaucratic and time consuming process from the Council and at the same time help distance the authority from the appearance of partiality to particular groups as the grant giving would be based on a sound criteria agreed between the Council and the administrative group.

### 2.5 Recommendations

The Topic Group recommended that that officers prepare the 2011/12 Community Grant funds on the basis of a combination of Commissioning and inviting an independent Third Sector group to administer the awarding of smaller grants.

### 2.6 Action/Response

The work of the Topic Group was fed into the process for administering the Community Grants for 2011/12 and for future years. There has been no formal feedback on the success or otherwise of adopting this methodology.

### 3 **Support for the Third Sector (Developing a Strategy) Scrutiny Topic Group**

#### 3.1 Scope

The purpose of the Topic Group is to help assist in establishing some high level core priorities for a strategy. The Topic Group will seek to establish what does the Council currently know about the sector and its needs to develop a strategy? How can the Council best support the Third Sector with diminishing resources? How can the Council support the smaller Third Sector groups as well as the larger groups?

#### 3.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Councillors, David Cullen (Chair), Monika Cherney-Craw, Matthew Hurst, Lin Martin-Haugh, Carol Latif, John Mead, Simon Speller and Marilyn Yarnold-Forrester.

#### 3.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Portfolio Holder for Community, Health and Older People, Cllr Sherma Batson  
Richard Protheroe, Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications  
Nicola Kilvington, Communications and Partnerships Manager  
Pam Shaw, St Nicholas Community Centre Manager  
Rose Griffin, The Oval Community Centre Manager  
Ann Jansz, Stevenage CVS  
Pauline Hickey, Neighbourhood Team Manager  
Mandy Williams, Community Development Officer  
Marian Hurle, Director Stevenage CAB  
George Ruddock, Third Thursday  
Eileen Hutchinson, Third Thursday  
Jonathan Prince, Social Impact Group

#### 3.4 The following themes emerged:

#### 3.5 There were too many themes to list fully but they covered the following areas:

- Make the Strategy a working document
- Helping the Council become an enabler to the Sector – “Co-operative Council”
- Carry out a mapping exercise and facilitating peer health checks for the sector
- Supporting sustainability in the sector and income generation
- Provide training opportunities and facilitate networking opportunities
- Encourage collaborative working and shared back offices
- Develop business links with the sector and SME
- Continue to be strategic in the support that the Council provides

#### 3.6 Recommendations

The Topic Group provided the Portfolio Holder for Community Health and Older People and the Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications with 23 separate emergent recommendations. Which were formally commended by the Community Health and Older Peoples Development and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 30 June 2011.

#### 3.7 Action/Response

The recommendations and work of the Topic Group were fed into the current work that is being undertaken by the Portfolio Holder, Strategic Director and Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications who are drawing together a strategy to support the sector. There has been no formal feedback to the emergent recommendations but these will be fed into the consultation which is being undertaken during the summer and a response will be provided to the Community, Health and Older People Development and Scrutiny Committee.

#### 4 **Strategic Topic Group of SOC – Pre-Scrutiny of Green Space Strategy**

##### 4.1 Scope

To undertake some pre-scrutiny of the draft Green Space Strategy, ahead of it being formerly considered by the Executive 28 July 2010 and formally scrutinised at SOC 29 July 2010.

##### 4.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Councillors David Cullen (Chair) Graham Clark, Matthew Hurst, David Kissane, Graham Snell and Simon Speller.

##### 4.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Marcel Coiffait, Head of Environmental Services.

##### 4.4 The following themes emerged:

- Learning lessons from past mistakes e.g. a natural meadow in the Valley was cited as an example, this was to be cut twice a year to encourage the growth of wild flowers but the grass cutting didn't happen and the area was allowed to turn to scrub and became known as the Millennium Wood
- Utilising volunteers - Community Engagement, putting resources into encouraging more "friends of" groups for parks and open spaces
- Sports – engagement and closer links with Sports Clubs
- More specific work in the Action Plan to develop non housing land for more allotments to meet the demand
- Vision for Green Corridors
- Use of Section 106 Monies – development of a priority of needs with regard to Environmental projects
- Focus on Site Management Plans for all key green spaces by 2012
- Develop agreements for residents to have licences to cultivate land on the property boundaries
- Undertake a full and comprehensive assessment to determine the effectiveness of existing and new CCTV installations to green spaces
- Wildlife Conservation – issuing of fixed penalty notices for fly tipping

##### 4.5 Recommendations

The comments and recommendations of the Strategic Topic Group fed directly into the strategy before it was reported to the Executive.

##### 4.6 Action/Response

As the Topic Groups work was pre-scrutiny the comments and recommendations were actioned by the Head of Environmental Services

## 5 **One-Off Housing Options Scrutiny Topic Group**

### 5.1 Scope

To undertake some pre-scrutiny of the report to the Executive on the Future Delivery of the Council's Housing Services, ahead of it being formerly considered by the Executive 19 January 2011 and formally scrutinised at SOC 24 January 2011.

### 5.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Cllrs Dave Cullen (Chair), Liz Harrington, David Kissane, Matthew Hurst and Marilyn Yarnold-Forrester.

### 5.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Marcel Coiffait, Strategic Director (Community) and Richard Protheroe, Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications

### 5.4 The following themes emerged:

- The Topic Group were content that all viable alternatives had been equally looked at as options to present to the Executive to be further developed in a feasibility study
- The Topic Group concluded that it was not in their remit to come to a view on any one option over another but rather that the interests of the tenants and leaseholders be met by the Council further exploring all options as recommended in the report

### 5.5 Recommendations

The comments of the Strategic Topic Group were acted upon by the Strategic Director (Community) and the Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications.

### 5.6 Action/Response

As the Topic Groups work was pre-scrutiny the comments were acted upon by the Strategic Director (Community) and the Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications.

## 6 Crime and Disorder Committee - SoSafe CCTV Scrutiny Topic Group

### 6.1 Scope

To establish what type of information SoSafe, the Stevenage Community Safety Partnership (Responsible Authority Group), are receiving from the Council's CCTV Partnership? Is this information useful, can this data be interpreted by SoSafe? Is it resulting in a reduction in crime, antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime? If so, can this be demonstrated? It is the intention that the scrutiny review would help identify ways to improve the way CCTV is implemented as a tool to tackle crime, antisocial behaviour and the fear of crime in Stevenage.

### 6.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Cllrs Liz Harrington (Chair), David Cullen, Dilys Clark, David Kissane, John Lloyd and John Mead.

### 6.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Jenny Andrews, Housing, Partnerships and Communications, Community Safety Officer

Robby Holgate, Stevenage CCTV Manager

Nicola Kilvington, Housing, Partnerships and Communications, Communications and Partnerships Manager

Keith Moore, Parking and CCTV Services Manager

Nick Parry, Chair of the Responsible Authority Group & SBC CE (Stevenage Community Safety Partnership Member)

Richard Liversidge, Herts Constabulary, Community Safety Chief Inspector, (Stevenage Community Safety Partnership Member)

Ian Parkhouse, Herts Fire & Rescue Service, Group Commander, Stevenage & North Herts District (Stevenage Community Safety Partnership Member)  
Neighbourhood Watch

Stevenage Town Centre Manager

Cllr Richard Henry, Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities

### 6.4 The following themes emerged:

- Hertfordshire CCTV Partnership is an efficient and well run service. The cost of the cameras to SBC are low compared to other areas
- The Police and Community Safety Partners value CCTV as a community safety tool
- CCTV's use is partly as a crime deterrent
- The national picture is that local authority CCTV only accounts for a small percentage of identifications of offenders (4% in London)
- Overall there is a lack of data to make a definitive judgement on the impact of CCTV as a tool to reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. There is evidence for the number of incidents and arrests but not convictions. Also the data that is collected is based on incidents that the Police respond to, the overall level of crime and antisocial behaviour is likely to be higher. Anecdotally the Police and its community safety partners value CCTV as it has acted as a deterrent and reduces the number of incidents of crime when mobile CCTV cameras are moved into an area. Levels of crime in areas before CCTV was used in that area are unknown. This also makes evaluation of the effectiveness of CCTV difficult to measure
- It is also hard to evaluate the value for money of CCTV, the cost of cameras is known as well as the costs of staff but it is not possible to

evaluate to what level CCTV reduces crime and the fear of crime as no statistics are available to show levels of crime and antisocial behaviour in an area before and after CCTV is deployed in an area

- If the authority wishes to further protect its CCTV service in the future it should look to adopt a total place approach to funding with its partners

## 6.5 Recommendations

The SoSafe CCTV Scrutiny Topic Group made 7 recommendations covering the following areas:

- Data on numbers
- Type and location of Convictions
- Benchmarking
- Risk Analysis of the building housing the CCTV operation room
- Reporting on CCTV
- SoSafe to carry out further local and desk top analysis on the effectiveness of CCTV
- Future funding
- Community Consultation

## 6.6 Action/Response

SoSafe and the Portfolio Holder for Safer Stronger Communities responded in writing to SOC to all of the Topic Groups recommendations.



## 7 Fuel Poverty Scrutiny Topic Group

### 7.1 Scope

The Scrutiny Overview Committee determined that having received an outline of the extensive activity that the Council and SHL have undertaken to tackle fuel poverty, the focus of the review should be on evaluating how successful these interventions have been on reducing fuel poverty.

- How successful has the work been that the Council has undertaken?
- Statistically what impact have our interventions, such as Affordable Warmth Strategy and HEEP, had on fuel poverty levels?
- What are the known levels of fuel poverty in Stevenage and in the towns most deprived wards of Bedwell and Shephall?
- What has the uptake been on grants?
- How are owner occupiers affected, compared to Council tenants?
- With the removal of the Government funding for HEEP in March 2011 is this likely to see an increase in Fuel Poverty?

### 7.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Councillors, Monika Cherney-Craw, (Chair), Phil Bibby, Liz Harrington, Lin Martin-Haugh and Graham Snell.

### 7.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Cllr Ann Webb, Portfolio Holder for Housing  
Jim Archibald, SBC Environmental Health Manager (Residential)  
Lydia Wisby, Energy & Sustainability Co-ordinator  
Andrew Garside, Asset Management and Major Works Manager  
Stevenage CAB

### 7.4 The following themes emerged:

The data from witnesses both oral and written are still being evaluated but will cover the following areas:

- Numbers of households in Stevenage suffering from fuel poverty?
- Local data
- National data
- Pre-payment meters
- Under occupancy
- Energy Efficiency Insulation Grants via HEEP
- Heat seekers vehicle
- Case Studies
- Action against landlords for mildew and condensation
- Carbon Emissions Reductions Target (CERT)
- Energy Company Obligations

- The Government's proposed Green Deal
- Use of the Government's Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rating
- Energy Saving Trust
- Benchmarking

#### 7.5 Recommendations

The emerging recommendations from the Topic Group are being considered by the Housing Development and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on Monday 25 July.

#### 7.6 Action/Response

Not yet applicable.

## 8 Communications Scrutiny Topic Group

### 8.1 Scope

For a long period of time Members have raised concern over the way communications have been handled with regard to incidents, policy changes and Service Delivery changes that affect the public. More recently, there had been two incidents that again gave rise to Members concerns over the effectiveness of the Council's current Communications strategy. These incidents include maintenance to hedges and changes to the Environmental Health's Recycling schemes. Changes/work has commenced in both these areas with, it would appear, less than adequate communication with residents (or Members). Members feel there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Communications Strategy is far from robust and should be scrutinised in a one-off Scrutiny Topic Group.

Topic Group to compare the existing Communications Strategy with the soon to be amended Strategy, which is currently out for consultation, to determine whether in the Topic Groups view the new Strategy will address the sort of lapses in Communications that have occurred as described above?

Members are concerned that whenever there are significant local issues or policy changes being proposed it is Members who repeatedly raise the issue of an associated Communications package to accompany these changes. The Topic Group will explore why this issue is not being picked up corporately as a standard procedure.

If there are gaps between the overarching Strategy and day to day operational issues how can these be identified, and where possible eradicated, to avoid future incidents that give rise to communications and press releases after the event?

### 8.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Councillors, David Cullen (Chair), Monika Cherney-Craw, Liz Harrington, Matthew Hurst, Carol Latif, John Mead and Vickie Warwick.

### 8.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Communications Team Leader  
Head of Housing, Partnerships and Communications  
The Leader of the Council as Executive Member with responsibility for Media and Communications

### 8.4 The following themes emerged:

- A high quality Communications Team
- The importance of seeing communications as a two way process
- The ad hoc nature of incidents of poor communications
- Corporate responsibility for communications
- The problem of non-standard Service Plans
- Adoption of the Communications Plan Template
- Recommendations for a Communications Implications heading in reports
- Communications on post Executive decisions
- Decisions made by officers under delegated powers

- Local Performance Indicators for communications
- Future focus of Communications
- Supporting Heads of Service with Communications
- Letting people know what we have done
- The importance of being flexible with fewer resources
- Quick turnaround of communications
- Responding to a 24-7 information age public

#### 8.5 Recommendations

10 specific recommendations from the Topic Group based on the above themes were considered by the Resources Development and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on Monday 20 June.

#### 8.6 Action/Response

Not yet applicable. The recommendations have been sent to the Leader and relevant Officers and SMB for a response to the Resources Development and Scrutiny Committee

## 9 Strategic Topic Group of SOC Budget Scrutiny Topic Group

### 9.1 Scope

- Focus On Environmental Services – Grounds Maintenance (Including Arboriculture) Budgets
- Overview of the key themes within the Council's General Fund Budget and Capital Programme For 2011/12
- Draft proposals for 2011/2012 Council Tax Setting and General Fund Budget
- Draft proposals 2011/2012 Capital Forward Plan and 5 Year Capital Strategy

### 9.2 The following Members conducted the review:

Topic Group Chair and Chair of Scrutiny Overview Committee, Cllr Dave Cullen, Councillors, Monika Cherney-Craw, Margaret Notley, Marilyn Yarnold-Forrester and Vickie Warwick.

### 9.3 The following people provided verbal and written evidence to the review:

Scott Crudginton, Deputy Chief Executive  
Strategic Director (Finance)  
Clare Fletcher, Head of Finance  
Lee Myers, Head of Environmental Services  
Paul Seaby, Environmental Services Manager,  
Grounds Maintenance

### 9.4 The following themes emerged:

#### Environmental Services

- Why had there been no adjustment of an overspend in cemeteries of circa £2,200 between 2007/08 and 2009/09? Officers stated that there had been extra sweeping at the cemeteries.
- There appeared to be incorrect figures quoted for projected variances for 2008/09, the actual variance overspend should be £8,755 not the £101,360 as described in the figures provided.
- Town Centre also showed a variance overspend of £2,663 in 2007/08 and in 2008/09 £3,127 for weed control. Members queried why this had not been picked up by a budget bid between the two years? Officers stated that there had been problems with the existing contractor which had to be retendered part way through a year which required the budget to be reset
- Members commented that they would have expected some variances for 2006/07 but perhaps this was because no working budget was available from the records systems
- Members commented that they understood that the officer had recently taken responsibility for this area and that there had been accounting changes as well as the removal of the client contractor split so this would explain why the officers did not have the information readily at their disposal
- Members discussed whether it should be questioning whether the service was providing value for money for the £2.4M budget, but it was agreed that this was a wider question than the remit the Topic had set its self, and perhaps this could be an area that the Challenge Board could pick up?

## General Fund

- The Government settlement had been more severe than the Council were originally anticipating, having prepared for a 25% reduction over 4 years, when in actuality was 28% and front loaded in the first two years
- Members were confident that the Working Together Programme would bring increased efficiencies to the authority's finances, with minimal impact on front line services, there were still pressures on the budget from areas that historically are hard to accurately forecast. The most telling being the true cost of HR redundancies from this year's General Fund Budget and perhaps more concerning the implementation of Single Status, which on average resulted in an increase on the overall salaries budget of up to 5%, which could be hard to fund in the current climate.

## Capital

- The Topic Group were of the view that the Capital Strategy would have major challenges over the 5 year period, and ultimately could be unsustainable. Given that there were so little capital available to the Council it would not be able to benefit from match funding schemes that it had in the past, such as the Town Centre Gardens scheme. This was of major concern to Members, but there were few options open to the authority other than borrowing to undertake schemes to meet the Council's statutory duties.

### 9.5 Recommendations

The Topic Groups comments and recommendations were fed into the budget process by the Head of Finance.

### 9.6 Action/Response

There were no formal responses to the Topic Groups recommendations.