

CORPORATE RESOURCES
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY, 16 JANUARY 2003 AT 2.20 PM

PRESENT: Councillor Guest (Chairman), Councillors Bain, Mrs Bowman, Mrs Bradley, Jefferson, Joscelyne, J Mallinson and Mrs Styth.

CROS.17/03 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

CROS.18/03 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest affecting any item on the Agenda.

CROS.19/03 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meetings held on 24 October, 12 (Special) and 28 November 2002 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record of the meetings.

CROS.20/03 CALL-IN OF DECISIONS

There were no matters which had been the subject of call-ins.

CROS.21/03 WORK PROGRAMME

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager presented the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2002/03, which took into account matters scheduled to be dealt with by this Committee.

He updated Members on the current position as regards the various items contained therein –

1. The Head of Member Support and Employee Services would not commence employment with the City Council until mid-February and therefore the performance indicator reports on Sickness Absence/Ill Health Retirement and Disabled/Ethnic Minority Employees had been held over for the time being.
2. The Benefit User Satisfaction report may be available in time for the next meeting of this Committee, but would take the form of an issues report, rather than a report on performance.
3. The reports on the items concerning Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rate Collection, and the Sundry Debtors and Periodic Income Performance Review Study had been deferred and would be submitted to the meeting scheduled to take place on 20 February 2003.

A Member commented that Area Working was to be considered later on the Agenda and asked whether the Policy and Performance Manager would join the meeting.

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager advised that the Officer's attendance was required at another meeting and he had therefore tendered his apologies. He added that he would be meeting with the Policy and Performance Manager later in the week to discuss the matter.

RESOLVED - That the Work Programme be noted.

CROS.22/03 FORWARD PLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager presented report LDS.1/03 highlighting issues within the ambit of the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee included within the Forward Plan of Executive Decisions for the period 1 January 2003 – 30 April 2003.

In considering the matter, Members expressed a particular interest in the following issues:

- a) Compulsory Competitive Tendering
- b) Local Public Service Agreements
- c) Information Systems Strategy

and asked whether they would have sight of the relevant reports prior to their submission to the Executive. Members were strongly of the belief that there was little point in receiving such reports once the decisions had been taken.

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager commented that there was a balance to be struck between on the one hand scrutinising all Executive decisions and on the other the careful scrutiny of the Council's objectives and priorities. Selective scrutiny would allow Overview and Scrutiny more time to examine and test the outcomes, thereby making a significant difference. It was intended that the issue would be the subject of debate at the forthcoming Overview and Scrutiny Workshop.

Members stressed their wish to be involved in the scrutiny function prior to decision making by the Executive and questioned how that could be achieved. A Member felt that the timetabling of meetings was an important factor which should be examined further. All reports could come to Overview and Scrutiny who would then undertake a 'sifting' procedure.

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager agreed that in appropriate cases policy changes should be planned to come to Overview and Scrutiny. If that were not the case then an alternative approach may be required e.g. inviting the appropriate Officer to come and address the Committee on the issue prior to compiling his report. He added that the issue of timetabling was difficult and would be dependant upon the availability of reports.

A Member repeated a previous request, submitted via the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee, that major items of business should be timetabled within the Forward Plan to ensure that they came to Overview and Scrutiny prior to the Executive. She queried how Members could be selective in their scrutiny if they did not have sight of the reports. She added that once issues arrived at Council there was no opportunity for the majority of Members to test the same. There was also a danger that the Council perceived Overview and Scrutiny to be a "necessary evil".

The Overview and Scrutiny Manager emphasised that he was merely drawing upon ODPM guidance which sought to identify emerging best practice and it was up to Members how business was planned. The matters raised above were those which required full debate at next week's Workshop. The outcomes of the Workshop could then be included in the draft Annual Report to all Committees as had been the case last year.

A Member commented that it was a dilemma faced by Members of all parties which had been particularly highlighted as regards the issue of Area Working. He added that Overview and Scrutiny may need to demonstrate to the Executive that, whilst their role was to scrutinise, supportive criticism could ensue.

Members added that they would like to see this Committee included as Consultee for the items mentioned at a), b) and c) above.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY - (1) That this Committee requests that it be included as a Consultee within the Forward Plan as regards the items concerning Compulsory Competitive Tendering, Local Public Service Agreements and Information Systems Strategy.

(2) That the issues contained within the Forward Plan for 1 January 2003 to 30 April 2003 and which fell within the ambit of this Committee be noted.

CROS.23/03 MUNICIPAL MAINTENANCE BEST VALUE REVIEW – ACTION PLAN MONITORING

The Head of Commercial and Technical Services presented report CTS.01/03 providing an update on progress in implementing the Action Plan as regards the Best Value Review of Municipal Maintenance completed in 2002.

Several factors had subsequently influenced the defined actions and required to be taken into account. The organisational review and the need to respond to and inform that process had had a major influence. In addition, major initiatives such as LSVT and the Leisuretime externalisation had significantly impacted upon municipal maintenance activities. Similarly a separate Best Value Review had been completed for Property and, whilst there was linkage between the two, with hindsight there should have been one thematic review. The actions/improvements from the Property Best Value Review had therefore been embraced where relevant.

The key actions which had emerged from the Review for the first two years were:

Year 1

- integration of client/contractor roles
- improved customer care
- review of cleaning operations

Year 2

- asset investment to improve efficiency

- review specifications
- explore partnership opportunities
- develop effective performance indicators
- investigate quality systems

The Head of Commercial and Technical Services then outlined progress in each of those areas and invited Members to consider the actions achieved to date in implementing the Improvement Plan.

In considering the matter, Members raised the following issues, to which the Head of Commercial and Technical Services responded:

Review of Cleaning Operations

Operational Changes were being introduced on an ongoing basis to meet all reasonable needs of the building operators – what was the scale of the changes?

The changes were, in the main, minor e.g. if Tullie House altered how it presented Exhibitions then we would have to adjust the manner by which the Gallery was cleaned.

To improve performance there had been investment in new equipment - what was included within that investment?

That related in the main to new cleaning machine. A list of items could, however, be supplied to Members should they so wish.

Integration of Client/Contractor Roles

The previous internal contractual relationships would cease and be replaced by a Service Level Agreement with Property Services who would undertake the strategic property role. Would this Committee have sight of that SLA and have an input?

I would be happy with that course of action.

Improved Customer Care

Once the new team was in place roles would be clarified, but it was the intention to allocate one Manager to be the contact person for all relevant activities in a specific building – would that involve a change in job descriptions?

That had been reflected in the new job descriptions prepared as a result of the Organisational Review.

Quality Systems

Will this Committee receive a report on the proposals?

The Local Authority as a whole may wish to look at that on a corporate basis. There was also an issue as to whether the Council went for accreditation.

Asset Investment

In 2002/03 the Council allocated £185,000 for a package of measures to ensure compliance to the Disability Discrimination Act on some of its buildings. The Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee had undertaken performance indicator work on it – was that work reflected?

A bid of £200,000 had been put forward for 2003/04. A detailed evaluation of works would be done and budget allocated. You may wish to take stock of what had been achieved by mid-summer.

£100,000 had been allocated to introduce an asset database to ensure the more efficient management of all assets – what was the timescale?

Members would require to raise that issue with the Head of Property Services.

RESOLVED – That the Head of Commercial and Technical Services be requested to respond to the issues identified above as soon as possible and submit a report to a future meeting of this Committee.

CROS.24/03 AREA WORKING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW

Pursuant to Minute CROS.150/02, the Chairman reported the outcome of his discussions with the relevant Portfolio Holder and Officers on the issues involved in area working.

There were a number of concerns as regards area working and disagreement on how to progress the matter further. The Executive did not favour the County Council Neighbourhood Forum model and the Portfolio Holder had agreed to consult with his colleagues and give feedback.

A Member questioned whether the objections related to the County Council's Neighbourhood Forum model or to participating in that system.

The Chairman advised that that had not been made clear. The Overview and Scrutiny Manager commented that at the time when this Committee's views had been reported to the Executive there appeared to be strategic objections.

A Member expressed his deep concern that this Council, or indeed any Council, was prepared to sit back because there may at some time in the future be a move towards Regional Government. A Member also noted that the existing County Council Neighbourhood Forums and the areas they presently covered may not match exactly the City Council's Wards which may prove to be an issue.

A Member added that the original proposal put forward by this Committee had been unanimous and was a good idea which was seen to be working. It involved a successful operation which the City Council could either adopt or participate in by way of a partnership. The Executive's decision to wait and see was not acceptable.

A Member stated that the matter clearly affected the community and should therefore be referred to the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their view.

The Chairman instructed that representatives of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee be invited

to attend a future meeting of this Committee when the matter was discussed further.

There then followed detailed discussion of the way forward, at the conclusion of which it was agreed that this Committee did not feel that sufficient explanation had been given as to the Executive's reasons for rejecting Area Working. It was the unanimous wish of this Committee that the Executive reconsider that issue.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY - (1) That the Executive be advised that this Committee did not feel that sufficient explanation had been given as to the Executive's reasons for rejecting Area Working, and it was the wish of this Committee that the Executive reconsider that issue and, if they were not willing to support the proposal, then they should put forward a workable plan in line with the Leader's statement in the 2002/03 budget debate for the introduction of Area Working.

(2) That representatives of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee be invited to attend a future meeting of this Committee when the issue of Area Working was considered further.

CROS.25/03 EXTERNAL GRANT FUNDING PERFORMANCE REVIEW - UPDATE

Pursuant to Minute CROS.154/02, the Head of Economic and Community Development Services presented report ECD.01/03 concerning the External Grant Funding Performance Review.

The report provided an initial response to some of the procedural issues raised by Members and suggested areas for further discussion to achieve a more corporate approach to external funding.

She reminded Members that the Study had identified nine key areas for further consideration which had now been divided into two groups "Operational/Procedural" and "Developmental/Strategic" actions. She then outlined the initial proposals to develop the issues into action, which had been prepared in consultation with Financial Services and the External Funding Officer.

External funding had become increasingly important across all service areas for the delivery of a range of functions and, clearly, securing, spending and monitoring the impact of that funding was a shared corporate responsibility. The Study highlighted the need for development and improvement of both the success rate in funding bids and the subsequent management processes in respect of those bids which were successful. Business Unit Heads and the internal processes within Units had a vital role in identifying and responding to funding opportunities where these clearly contributed to achieving the objectives in the Corporate Plan relevant to each service. It was therefore important to improve the processes within Business Units backed up by Financial Services and the External Funding Officer.

It had not been possible to prepare a fully fledged Action Plan in the period since November, since clearly that would require further study of best practice elsewhere, more extensive consultation with Business Units and with key Funding Agencies, discussions amongst Project Officers and with externally funded partnerships and programmes and clarification of priorities. It would also require to be tied in with the process identified in the Chief Executive's report to the Executive on Integrating Strategic Planning with Three Year Budgeting.

However, at this early stage some key initial actions could be recommended:

- a) The updating of the draft procedure – Responsibilities in Respect of Grant Claims and External Funding (a copy of which was appended to the report) and endorsement by CMT and Business Units.
- b) Improvements to coding arrangements for funds from external sources by Financial Services in discussion with Business Unit Heads.

- c) Corporate discussions to commence on the development of a database to enable the effective management of external funding with detailed development and implementation, subject to the availability of staff and financial resources.
- d) Consider whether to purchase the Grantfinder system or an appropriate alternative.
- e) Further study of best practice in other Authorities and partnerships.
- f) Discussions amongst Project Officers and with externally funded Partnerships and programmes and consultation on proposed new procedures.

The Head of Economic and Community Development Services invited Members' comments for transmission to the Executive. Progress should be reviewed in six months time and, if the changes were not proving to be effective, alternative recommendations for more stringent improvements should be made at that time.

In considering the matter, Members raised the following issues to which the Head of Economic and Community Development Services responded:

A co-ordinated approach was required, together with sufficient supervision to ensure that all was put in place. What was the chain of command?

The External Funding Officer operated within the Economic and Community Development Services Unit. He had a feel for all available grant opportunities and was liaising with and helping Officers to go through the process. The Council did not have a team of people to police the exercise and that was beyond the role of the External Funding Officer.

We still have a system whereby Heads of Units are entering into the specialised field of submitting bids as a result of which problems could arise, and no system was in place to address that.

If basic triggers were in place that would go a long way to ensure that bids were not submitted without the appropriate authority.

Would the Grantfinder system make it more efficient?

The Grantfinder system itself would be relatively straightforward to operate in identifying the sources of external funding.

RESOLVED – (1) That the Executive be advised that this Committee endorses the approach detailed within report ECD.01/03.

(2) That the Head of Economic and Community Development Services be requested to submit a further report in due course, including an Action Plan related to the previous report on the External Grant Funding Performance Review Study (Financial Memo No. 87 refers).

[The meeting ended at 4.05 pm]