
EXCERPT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 30 SEPTEMBER 2004

OSM.45/04 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 August 2004 were signed by the Chairman as a correct record of the meeting.

The Acting Town Clerk and Chief Executive referred to minute OSM.38/04(b) and updated Members on progress with two of the matters which had been raised at that meeting.

Ms Mooney referred to Resolution 3, "That the Executive Director (M Mooney) raise with the Head of Commercial and Technical Services the Council's strategic role in relation to the particular monitoring of environmental maintenance in relation to green areas, back lanes and roads". She advised that the Executive would be considering a report on Back Lanes at their meeting on 11 October 2004. The report had also been considered by the Infrastructure Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was clear that environmental issues and grass cutting in particular were areas which needed to be examined and action taken to improve the current situation which had given rise to a number of complaints. Ms Mooney advised Members of the Council's strategic role in relation to environmental issues. She commented that the strategic role for environmental issues was being strengthened and that this would involve the transfer of two officers from Environmental Protection Services to Commercial and Technical Services. This was in line with the Audit Commission's recommendations when they had expressed concern about the client/contractor split. The strategic role and responsibility could therefore be developed within Commercial and Technical Services.

Ms Mooney then referred to Resolution 4, "That the Executive Director investigate and report back to the next meeting of the Management Committee on ways of regularly consulting Members to identify any common problem areas or areas of complaint which could be tackled corporately". She advised that she would provide a full written report on this to the next meeting of the Management Committee. She was currently examining the potential for a central referral system which would enable the consolidation of complaints which are made to individual Members. Referral systems in other authorities were being looked at to identify and learn from best practice. The development of an improved referral system would enable Officers and Members to identify common areas of complaint across the whole City Council area.

In addition, the Head of Commercial and Technical Services was looking at introducing a new system of monitoring his Unit's services within local communities.

A number of Members commented on the complaints they had received on a regular basis about the maintenance of environmental areas on housing estates and in particular grass cutting and trimming of shrubs.

A Member commented that Britain in Bloom did not seem to be happening on the Council estates. The member suggested that this would have been one of the benefits of area working, as there would have been more control over what happens in specific areas. Members commented that there had been a steady decline in standards in relation to grass cutting over the past few years and, although they recognised there were some practical issues which had contributed to this, they stressed that the matter needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency and radical improvements made between now and Spring 2005.

In response to a Member's question, Ms Mooney advised that the grass cutting service was not sub-contracted by the City Council and all the work was carried out by City Council staff.

Members spoke of the frustration they experience when trying to resolve specific problems within their ward areas. They were often passed from one agency to another when following up on complaints and trying to establish responsibility for specific areas.

A Member commented that the basic problem related to the Grounds Maintenance Contract and suggested that the contract needed to be looked at closely and performance of the contract monitored and action taken where necessary.

In response to a Member's question, Ms Mooney advised that the Environment Officer who would be transferring to Commercial and Technical Services would have more of a strategic role and he would not necessarily be the first point of contact for Members with problems, but she advised that this point of contact would be established in the near future.

Members then raised the following concerns about performance in relation to grass cutting:

- verges on one side of the road are often cut and the others left uncut;
- grass is cut with the mower, but there is no strimming of areas against the walls at the same time;
- concerns over a lack of monitoring and supervision of employees doing the grass cutting.

RESOLVED – (1) That the minutes of 19 August 2004 be noted.

(2) That the Acting Town Clerk and Chief Executive discuss with the Head of Commercial and Technical Services the Committee's concerns about the performance in relation to grass cutting and environmental maintenance with a view to improved performance.

(3) That the Acting Town Clerk and Chief Executive report back to the next meeting of the Management Committee on progress with the development of a central referral system to consolidate referrals and complaints made to individual Council members.