

Overview and Scrutiny Training Session: 2nd July 2014

Subjects for Scrutiny

During the course of the Overview and Scrutiny training session on 2nd July Members participated in two exercises. The first exercise was designed to enable Member to highlight the five key issues brought to their attention in the previous six months (or whilst canvassing in the case of new Members). Each of these issues was linked to one of the Council's six strategic purposes. During the second exercise Members were divided into two groups. In these groups they discussed each of the issues in turn to determine whether the subject would be suitable for further scrutiny. The findings from these group discussions are detailed below in line with the strategic purpose to which each subject was linked.

Keep my place safe and looking good

Subject 1: The state of grass verges and parking restrictions

- A number of Councillors reported that residents had approached them about the state of grass verges, generally arising from the use of these verges for parking in the absence of adequate parking facilities.
- Some residents were also likely to raise questions about the frequency of grass cutting.
- Members expressed the view that the Police and Traffic Wardens had limited capacity to address problems with parking on grass verges. Their focus inevitably needed to be criminal activities.
- Whilst some grass verges were the responsibility of Redditch Borough Council other grass verges were the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council. The exact division of responsibilities between the two authorities would take time to clarify.

Conclusions:

- a) An Officer could be invited to speak to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee about the extent of the problem with cars parking on grass verges. However, Members felt that the subject would not really be suitable for further scrutiny as there were limited options available to address the problem.
- b) Grass cutting formed part of the focus of the Landscaping Task Group review in 2013/14. Interested Councillors could revisit this report and / or arrange to meet with representatives of the Landscaping and Place teams.

Subject 2: We don't want more powerful mobile phone masts

- Some Councillors had received enquiries from concerned residents about the installation and location of phone masts in the Borough.
- Some residents' concerns focused on the appearance of the phone masts. The Council had already explored different designs.

- However, the number of complaints about phone masts had decreased over the past 10 years alongside a growth in use of mobile phones.
- A review of this subject could only focus on planning policy and not on specific planning applications.

Conclusion: Members were not convinced that this subject would be suitable for further scrutiny.

Subject 3: Rats in adjoining properties

- Complaints had been received by some Councillors about rats as pests in particular neighbourhoods.
- The problem was often exacerbated for residents by the condition of adjacent properties. This could be difficult for the Council to address, particularly in instances involving private properties.
- A pest control service is available to eligible residents free of charge (further details provided on the Council's website).

Conclusions:

- a) This subject would not be suitable for further scrutiny.
- b) Councillors interested in finding out more about the pest control service could contact Officers from Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) directly for further information and / or signpost residents accordingly.

Subject 4: Dog Fouling

- Residents have persistently complained about dog fouling in the local community.
- There has been the high profile Mucky Pup campaign in recent years designed to encourage residents to clean up after their pets.
- Members were particularly interested to learn more about the enforcement action that is being taken to address dog fouling and the level of fines that have been issued to owners.
- There is the potential to combine consideration of dog fouling with discussion of street cleansing arrangements.

Conclusions:

- a) This subject would be suitable for discussion at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- b) A Short, Sharp Review would only be suitable if the initial presentation to the Committee identifies areas of concern that Members feel should be subject to further scrutiny.

Provide good things for me to do, see and visit

Subject 5: More things for the youth to do in youth clubs

- Some Councillors have been approached about young people gathering in parts of the Borough.
- Concerns have been raised that there are limited activities available to young people and those activities that are available are not necessarily promoted effectively to the young people who might be most interested in participating.
- Worcestershire County Council commissions “positive activities” from two consortiums of voluntary, community and public sector organisations in the Borough.
- An update on the outcomes of the positive activities programme in Redditch is due to be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2nd September. Members suggested that the following questions could be raised during the delivery of this update:
 - At what times of the day/evening are youth activities delivered to young people in Redditch?
 - How are these activities advertised to young people?
 - Is there a particular target audience for these youth activities? If so how do groups monitor whether they are attracting these groups?
 - What activities are offered to young people who do not want to attend a youth club and how are these activities advertised?

Conclusions:

- a) Consideration should be given to inviting all Members to attend the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2nd September so that interested Councillors can also receive the update on the positive activities programme.
- b) The Youth Service Provision Task Group’s final report (published in 2012) should be sent to any new Members who request a copy for information.

Help me to be financially independent (including education and skills)

Subject 6: Is Transformation working?

- Service transformation has been underway at the Council for a number of years.
- Given the significance of service transformation to the Council it is important, particularly for new Members, to learn what transformation means and the difference it is making in terms of:
 - financial savings; and
 - Improvements to services.

Conclusions: The Chief Executive should be invited to attend a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide further information on this subject.

Subject 7: Provide sources of support to those who struggle to manage their money.

- Prior to launching a review Members would need to clarify the level of demand for this advice.
- There are other indicators to take into account, including the demand for food banks in the area.
- There is a need to clarify where earlier intervention might prevent demand from arising at a later stage.
- Schools have a role to play in educating people about how to manage their finances.
- Consideration should be given to the ways in which the Council becomes aware of problems (e.g. through housing services, rent collection etc.)
- Exploration is needed regarding the support that is already available and how this is promoted to residents.
- The purpose of investigating this subject would be:
 - Establish the level of the problem and need for advice at the local level.
 - To identify existing sources of support and advice.
 - To increase awareness of existing sources of support and advice.
- Any review of this subject should consider need across the whole Borough, not just in one ward.

Conclusions: This subject would be suitable for further scrutiny, either for discussion at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or as part of a Short, Sharp Review exercise. It may also be appropriate to visit the locality work where team members are dealing with this issue.

Subject 8: Free Swimming – is it worth it? / Concessionary Bus Passes - are they worth it?

- There is a need to ensure that the Council is achieving best value for money in its use of resources.
- Members need to consider whether the use of resources is benefitting the maximum number of people.
- A review could focus on the following:
 - Obtaining information from relevant Officers about usage and costs.
 - Consulting with representatives of the bus company to find out how they account for the charges and the demand for use of services before 9.30am.

Conclusion:

- a) Relevant Officers and the relevant Portfolio Holder should be invited to attend a meeting of the Committee to discuss free swimming further.
- b) Relevant Officer, the relevant Portfolio Holder and (possibly) representatives of the bus company should be invited to attend a meeting of the Committee to discuss Concessionary Bus Passes further.

Help me run a successful business

Subject 9: Make more advice available locally for small business people (e.g. at the One Stop Shop)

- This subject matter raises a number of questions:
 - What support is already provided to small businesses?
 - How is this communicated to elected Members?
 - How can elected Members report issues on behalf of businesses located in their wards?
- Members did not feel that this subject was suitable for further scrutiny.

Conclusion: Interested Members should approach the North Worcestershire Economic Development Unit to discuss this matter further. Alternatively, if a number of Councillors consider that they would like to find out more information, the Member Support Steering Group could be asked to arrange a briefing session for Councillors

Help me to find somewhere to live in my locality

Subject 10: Void Properties

- This subject has implications for both Housing Services and Legal Services.
- To assess the scale of the problem locally it might be useful to benchmark local void levels against levels for housing associations.
- The number of void properties and how voids are managed would need to be considered.
- Questions were raised as to whether there had been any changes in terms of the time taken to turn around void properties when compared to previous years.
- There would be a number of potential benefits to be gained from reviewing this subject including:
 - Identifying potential actions that could be taken to reduce the number of void properties.
 - Reducing the length for which these properties remain vacant.
 - Maintaining rental income.
 - Reducing costs (to the Council).

Conclusion: Officers should attend a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to deliver a presentation/report on this subject.

Subject 11: More good standard social housing

- The group that discussed this suggestion were uncertain about the intentions of the Councillor who had raised the issue.
- Social housing could refer to housing provided by the Council or by other housing providers.

- Questions were raised as to whether there was poor quality housing in some parts of the Borough.

Conclusions: A Member Briefing should be delivered to all Councillors focusing on the quality of social housing available and addressing any current problems with poor quality social housing.

Subject 12: Housing in parts of Batchley

- Concerns were raised about the condition of residential properties located in parts of Batchley, particularly Salters Lane and Hewell Road.
- Members felt that there was a need to explore further the support available to people living in these areas to help improve the condition of housing in the area.
- There is the potential to consider the outcomes of the recent estate enhancements work and lessons that could be applied in Batchley.
- The outcomes of the External Refurbishment of Housing Stock Short, Sharp Review (completed in 2010) and the implications for other parts of the Borough could be considered by Members.
- The potential for capital investment to be made in the Council's housing stock at a time of financial austerity would need to be considered carefully.
- A cost / benefit analysis could be included as part of any review of this subject.

Conclusions:

- a) The lessons from the previous Short, Sharp Review and Estate Enhancement programme could be discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- b) Members may want to consider the content of the *Delivering New Affordable Housing Report*, which was presented for the Executive Committee's consideration in October 2013.
- c) Planned action to provide better quality housing to residents over forthcoming years could be provided in the form of a Member Briefing.
- d) This could also be a suitable subject for a Short, Sharp Review. However any findings would need to be related to other parts of the Borough.

Help me to live my life independently (including health and activity)

Subject 13: Tackling Obesity

- Obesity levels in Redditch have been identified as a significant form of health inequality impacting on the town.
- Some action has already been taken to tackle obesity levels (e.g. led by the Redditch Partnership). This should be taken into account as part of any review of the subject.
- Consideration should be given to action taken by the following to address obesity levels:
 - Redditch Borough Council (e.g. at the Arrow Valley Park).

- Worcestershire County Council – Choose How You Move.
- Health organisations, including Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).
- Voluntary and Community Sector groups.
- Local schools.
- It would be important to determine what action can be taken to inspire people to change their lifestyles.
- Consideration should be given to what other local authorities have done to tackle the subject.
- There would be some key outcomes to a review of this subject:
 - Reduce obesity levels amongst local residents.
 - Reduce obesity related health conditions (such as diabetes).

Conclusion: This would be a suitable subject for a Task Group review.

Subject 14: Improving awareness of contraception

- If this subject was to be scrutinised there would be a need to establish public awareness of the various contraceptive methods available for people to use.
- Members also felt it would be useful to identify the extent to which unplanned pregnancies are arising due to limited awareness of the different forms of contraceptive that are available.
- The support and advice available to some of the most vulnerable members of society experiencing unplanned pregnancies should be considered, including support for people with addictions and drug dependency issues.
- Concerns have been raised about the need to keep children in a loving family environment wherever possible and that the focus should be on the needs of the child.
- However, in some cases Members recognise that children do need to go into care because they are living in chaotic environments. This can have an impact on the child as well as on local authority resources.
- This is a sensitive subject and any discussions through scrutiny would need to be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Conclusion: This topic would be suitable for further scrutiny as a Task Group exercise.