

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 7 November
2007

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Colin MacMillan (Chair), Councillor Andrew Fry (Vice-Chair)
and Councillors K Banks, J Brunner and D Taylor

Also Present:

Councillor M Braley

Officers:

S Hanley, T Kristunas and J Smith

Committee Services Officers:

J Bayley and H Saunders

68. APOLOGIES AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors
Cookson, Passingham and Thomas.

69. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND OF PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or of any party whip.

70. MINUTES

RESOLVED that

**the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 17th
of October 2007 be confirmed as a correct record and signed
by the Chair.**

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Chair

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71. CALL-IN AND PRE-SCRUTINY

Members received the Decision Notice from the meeting of the Executive Committee held on Wednesday, the 19th of September 2007, with a view to considering the need for any Call-ins.

RESOLVED that

no action be taken to initiate call-in procedures on any of the Key Decisions contained in the Executive Committee Decision Notice.

72. TASK & FINISH REVIEWS - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENTS

There were no draft scoping reports for consideration.

73. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS - PROGRESS REPORTS

The Committee considered update reports in relation to current and pending reviews.

The following oral reports were given:

- a) Communications Task and Finish Group (Stage One)
– Chair Councillor J. Brunner.

Members were informed that the Group was scheduled to visit Stevenage Borough Council the following day to discuss best practice for corporate communications in a similar local authority.

The Chair explained that the Group was due to interview their final expert witness the following week and that the majority of information gathered during the interviewing process had been collated.

- b) District Centres Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor A. Fry

The Chair of the District Centres Task and Finish Group explained that the Group was due to meet on Thursday the 22nd November to receive updates from Officers. The Chair of the Committee requested that the Chair of the Group consider a potential end date for this exercise.

- c) Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor C. MacMillan

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The Chair of the Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group reported that the Group had reviewed two service areas: Planning and Land Charges. The Group had found that there was very little scope for adjustment. The Chair explained that the Head of Financial, Revenues and Benefit Services had been invited to the next meeting to discuss how the Council allocated overheads.

The Chair also informed the Group that the issue of local authority powers to trade had arisen at the previous meeting. Further information about this had been requested by Officers for consideration at a future meeting of the Group.

d) Housing Priority Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor B. Passingham

Members were informed of the continuing postponement of this Task and Finish Group due to Member illness. The Committee discussed the possibility of electing a Vice-Chair to help progress the work of this Group. Officers reminded Members of the recent visioning event that had taken place which could impact on the work of this Task and Finish Group. Members were advised that depending on the outcome, the visioning exercise could initiate changes to the content of the Directorate Service Plans that was due to be analysed by this Task and Finish Group.

e) Gypsies and Travellers Task and Finish Group
– Chair Councillor P. Hill

Officers explained that due to personal circumstances, the Chair of this Task and Finish Group had asked to postpone the first meeting of this group until further notice.

f) Joint Scrutiny on Flooding

Officers reported to Members that the first meeting for this Review was due to take place on Monday the 26th of November at 6pm at County Hall.

RESOLVED that

the Committee note the reports and agree the proposed action; all as detailed in the preamble above.

74. FORMAT OF TASK AND FINISH GROUP PRESENTATIONS, REPORTS AND INTERIM REPORTING

The Chair explained that he had initiated this item out of concern that Task and Finish Groups had yet to produce any output for the consideration of the Executive Committee, other Members and Officers.

The Chair suggested that Task and Finish Groups could begin to produce recommendations in a simple one page format on a phased basis, rather than on completion of the Task and Finish Group's work. Members discussed this proposal and agreed that it was not important that a glossy report be produced on completion of Task and Finish work. However, Members recognised that whilst reporting recommendations as they became available might be appropriate for some Group exercises the submission of a final report would remain suitable for other Task and Finish Groups.

RESOLVED that

**75. the proposed course of action be supported.
PORTFOLIO HOLDER ANNUAL REPORTS – COUNCILLOR
BRALEY PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CORPORATE
MANAGEMENT**

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Management, Councillor Braley, attended the meeting to provide the second Annual Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair explained that as this was only the second time a Portfolio Holder had attended the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to provide their annual report, the most effective method of producing these reports was yet to be established. The Chair apologised for the changes in format to the process.

a) Roles and Responsibilities

Councillor Braley began his presentation by explaining to Members his role and responsibilities as a Portfolio Holder. He explained that his Portfolio area did not relate to political policy but rather to supporting a well managed organisation. Members were informed that integral to working towards a well managed organisation was the theme of good governance.

The Portfolio Holder informed Members that he had relatively few decision making powers. He explained that the decisions he was

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able to influence included; when to fly the flag on the Town Hall; when to grant concessionary use of the Civic Suite; and (in consultation with the Mayor and Group Leaders) when to suspend Standing Orders on contracts.

Councillor Braley explained to Members that his role was to ensure that decisions were made and implemented following the correct Council procedures. Members were informed that Councillor Braley was not opposed to many of the decisions made by the Council but that in the past he had been concerned about how decisions had been reached.

Councillor Braley stated that he agreed with the list of roles and responsibilities set out in the Portfolio Holder's Terms of Reference. However, he informed Members that he encountered difficulties due to his binary role as a Member of the Opposition and spokesperson for the Council, particularly when the Council's decisions were subject to criticism.

Councillor Braley further explained that his priority as a Portfolio Holder was to work towards a better managed organisation. He informed Members that some of the key actions that had been achieved included: budget savings as a result of improved procurement processes; improved Member Development; use of performance management systems and improved monitoring of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs).

Members referred to the Portfolio Holder's Terms of Reference and queried the difference between "may" and "can" in relation to the duties of a Portfolio Holder. The Chair requested that Officers provide a brief explanation of what these categories meant for future Portfolio Holder presentations.

b) Key Issues for the Portfolio Holder

Members questioned why issues relating to IT at the Council were rarely discussed and were seemingly not at the top of the Council's agenda. In response to this, Officers explained that IT was given due consideration internally and at senior management level. One of the elements identified recently by the Corporate Management Team was that the Council needed to identify leaders in this area and to learn from good practice. Officers stated that the Council was committed to bringing in expertise in this area to help address some of the issues that had arisen in the past.

Members queried the lack of IT support when utilising their own personal computers for Council business. Councillor Braley

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explained that Members had formed negative perceptions about the Council's IT based on their own personal IT experiences. Councillor Braley noted that there was a lack of IT skills amongst Councillors. Members agreed that a Member training event in relation to the use of IT systems would be useful.

Members commented on overspends and discussed the need to identify ways of minimising the risks associated with IT projects. Members agreed that examining good practice elsewhere and instigating systems through joint ventures would help to tackle these issues.

Councillor Braley commented on risk management procedures at the Council and explained that assessing risk was a difficult science. Councillor Braley explained that both Members and Officers required more training on managing risks and suggested that Officers needed to be reminded to address risks more thoroughly in reports and other forms of communication to Members. Councillor Braley informed Members that he felt Council reports should be robust and should demonstrate consideration of alternative forms of action.

Members discussed the recent restructuring of the organisation and the consequences for the Council. Councillor Braley noted that the capacity for Officers to complete reports for the Executive Committee within stipulated timeframes was of concern to him. Councillor Braley acknowledged that Officers had suggested that a more realistic timeframe would be six-eight weeks. Councillor Braley pointed out to Members that in his opinion setting realistic timeframes for the production of quality reports was imperative to good decision making.

Councillor Braley explained that staffing issues such as recruitment of Officers and sickness absences were also of concern to him. Members requested that Officers provide further information relating to sickness absence figures, including a break down of figures relating to short term and long term sickness; figures according to service area; and information detailing reasons for sickness absence.

Councillor Braley briefly discussed Member training. He explained to the Committee that he felt that Members needed more regular training sessions; to be trained in specific skills, and that there should be independent assessments to monitor the progress of individuals. Members approved this suggestion.

c) Improvements to the Portfolio Holder Role

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In conclusion to his presentation, Councillor Braley summarised some key improvements he felt could be made to the role of Portfolio Holder and to his Portfolio. Councillor Braley explained that he felt that Portfolio Holders should meet on a regular basis to discuss issues affecting them in their role as Portfolio Holders. Councillor Braley also suggested that the Portfolio Annual Reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should take place every six months instead of once a year.

Members queried whether Portfolio Holders should deliver more presentations to ensure that all non-executive Members might be fully briefed on decisions made by the Executive Committee. Councillor Braley agreed that additional feedback mechanisms should be put in place to enable Executive Councillors to report back to Members but further consideration was needed on how to achieve this. Members noted that all Members could attend the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to observe the Portfolio Holders' Annual Reports.

In terms of improving his Portfolio, Councillor Braley expressed his opinion that the remit of his Portfolio was too large. Councillor Braley suggested that there might be scope to revise it, with the possibility of removing the IT function from his jurisdiction.

Councillor Braley was thanked for attending the meeting and was asked to provide a copy of his written slides for reference purposes (Appendix A). Members requested that the content of Councillor Braley's presentation should be considered at the following Executive Committee meeting.

RECOMMENDED that

the Executive Committee be asked to consider and comment on the content of Councillor Braley's presentation.

76. QUARTERLY BUDGET REPORT – JULY-SEPTEMBER 2007

The Committee received the quarterly budget report for July to September 2007 for consideration.

The Chair noted that the report mentioned "savings due to vacant post" on a number of occasions. Officers explained that some posts had been frozen during restructuring and so had been vacant for longer than usual. Members requested further information regarding vacant posts including; details of the number of days lost; the financial savings made; and the capacity implications for the

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Council.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **Officers be requested to provide further information at a future meeting about vacant posts as detailed in the preamble above; and**
- 2) **the report be noted and approved.**

77. REFERRALS

There were no referrals.

78. WORK PROGRAMME

The programme of future work was received and accepted.

Officers informed Members that the current co-opted membership had changed and that two new Borough Tenants' Panel representatives and two new reserve representatives would be registered at the Committee's next meeting.

RESOLVED that

- 1) **the Committee Work Programme be noted; and**
- 2) **the Chair write on behalf of the Committee thanking the Borough Tenants' Panel Representative for all her work on the Committee.**

The Meeting commenced at 7.00 pm
and closed at 9.00 pm