

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL
Thursday, 18th November, 2004

Present:- Councillor Atkin (in the Chair); The Mayor (Councillor F. Wright); Councillors Burke, Clarke, Hall, Jackson, McNeely and Rushforth, together with Mr. D. Alderson (Housing Tenant Panel), Mr. D. Willoughby (Housing Tenant Panel) and Mr. J. Carr (National Society for Clean Air).

Councillor Ellis was in attendance at the invitation of the Chairman.

Councillors Pickering and Whelbourn were in attendance for Minute No. 73.

Apologies were received from Councillors Hodgkiss, J. Lewis and Sgt. B. Bell.

71. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS.

There were no members of the press and public present.

72. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

Councillor Vines declared a personal item in Minute No. 76 (rents a Council garage).

73. NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report setting out the local and national context in which the Council's proposals for neighbourhood development was set.

It provided a summary of the steps to be taken to put in place, the right conditions to develop neighbourhood management in Rotherham and the partnership with communities and key organisations such as the Police. The report also set out some of the local and national issues that required the Council to put in place neighbourhood management arrangements particularly in terms of the Council's overall standing.

It had been recognised that the Council required a proper infrastructure to deliver the changes needed to tackle deprivation in neighbourhoods. A clear role was also needed for Area Assemblies, which was also linked to the role of Ward Membership role and Community Leadership, and strengthen the community planning processes .

An action plan had been produced (Appendix 1) , the first 6 months of which would enable a proper insight to be gained of where the Council was and an understanding of how far its partners were prepared to go in joining force with the Authority to tackle certain issues. A Corporate Task Group had been established to ensure that the actions were taken forward.

Discussion ensued on the report with the following points clarified:-

- It was the intention to align the neighbourhood management areas with Area Assembly boundaries. The Police were on board and the Primary Care Trust, although not sharing area boundaries, were hoping to share a collection of Ward boundaries.
- Pathfinder boundaries, set by Central Government, did not follow Ward boundaries because of the definition of deprivation and could not be changed.
- It was for the Council and its partners to ensure that arrangements were in place to maintain the confidence of the community and recognised as a body that could tackle and resolve problems. The Council was the community leader and the organisation that took on board the concerns of the whole community and, therefore, needed to ensure that it knew there was someone in charge of ensuring problems were solved.
- Members had expressed the need to see some real changes taking place in the way service was delivered and the way resources were targeted particularly in those communities where people were subject to deprivation and exclusion from main stream activities. Strengthening the Community Planning Framework would ensure that issues stated in the Plan changed the way Council services were delivered and the way partner organisations operated. The process needed to be properly integrated with business planning.
- Numerous discussions had taken place with regard to Area Assemblies and the need for absolute clarity as to their role. Political decisions would need to be made to clarify their role and determine their decision making powers.
- Neighbourhood management was designed to help deliver a change in services that community members felt excluded from. These would include housing, employment, training etc. and crossed all Programme Areas. Currently there was insufficient information to ascertain an accurate profile of a neighbourhood i.e. what community facilities there were, who were the key players for that community, what difference the activity/resources/spend had had. That baseline information would be utilised to conduct a Best Value Review of Neighbourhood Management.
- The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit was a national Unit set up to provide advice to partnerships who were serious about tackling deprivation. A bid had been made to the Unit for an Advisor to enable the Authority to learn nationally what had been successful. The Advisor was funded by Central Government but it was only for a 10 day period.

- There were issues of the Best Value Review that would link into the Community Leadership of the Local Council Review undertaken by the Democratic Resources Scrutiny Panel. The scope of the Neighbourhood Management Review needed to be established by February, 2005, in order to produce an improvement plan to inform phase 2 of the review 2005/06.
- There was no deliberate intent to exclude Parish Councils or ignore the forthcoming Quality Parish Councils. The report was a "catch all" and many organisations/services were not mentioned. Under the new arrangements Parish Councils also had rights.
- Once a Parish Council had achieved "Quality Service" they had the opportunity to take over services such as Streetpride. There were no plans at present as to how this would be dealt with. Discussions were needed to develop the Council's Framework and the neighbourhood development approach. A series of opportunities for developing decentralised services was being produced which all needed to be debated as part of the bigger framework.
- The issue of Parish Council boundaries was not set by the Programme Area. There was to be a review of the Parliamentary boundaries in 2005 followed by Parish Councils in 2007.
- Many of the Parish Councils had Parish Plans and there was a question of how they would fit into Community Planning for the new neighbourhoods. It had to be ensured that the Community Development Framework had a strong Community Planning process as it changed the way actions were delivered and the way spending was targeted so that it made a real difference on the ground. One of the many issues was the multitude of plans and how to streamline them. The Programme Area was currently looking at the way services were delivered, what their impact was and what results they had had and how smarter plans could be produced.

Resolved:- (1) That the report and outline project plan be noted.

(2) That the matter be referred to the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee recommending that a joint review be carried out by the Democratic and Resources and Environment Scrutiny Panels.

74. ALMO INSPECTION

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods gave a brief verbal report on the indicative findings of the recent ALMO inspection.

Resolved:- That the report be noted.

75. WASTE MANAGEMENT INSPECTION

The Head of Neighbourhood Services presented a report on the results of the Waste Service's Best Value Inspection.

The Service was judged to be good (2 star) with promising prospects of improvements. The Inspection Team had felt that the Service was efficient and effective in keeping public spaces and town centres clean and tidy, the refuse collection was reliable and local people had many facilities to recycle their household waste. The inspection had covered the Council's Waste Management Service, including refuse collection, recycling, waste disposal, environmental education, enforcement and street cleansing. The cost of the services was £11.5M.

Since the report had been produced the Authority was in the top quartile of Metropolitan Authorities for recycling.

One of the issues the Inspectors noted as requiring attention was the measurement and monitoring of participation rates in kerbside collections of recyclables. The second phase of Blue Boxes had been chipped to allow quite accurate measurement of who participated and how frequently. This would allow the Service to target its education programme and improve participation. It was known that there were certain areas of the Borough with poor participation rates but the focus leading up to the inspection had been to get the boxes out and collection in place to allow those who wished to recycle to do so. The issue of cost to the Council of non-participation was a real issue which may need to be addressed in the future.

A draft Improvement Plan had been prepared and was to be consulted on with Economic and Development Services shortly.

There had been approximately 15,000 responses to the Waste Strategy so far all of whom would be invited to a consultation event.

With regard to collections at Christmas, all households would have a sticker placed on their wheelie bin informing them they would receive a leaflet specific to their area. The leaflet would state when their waste and Blue Box would be collected and advice on how to manage waste over the Christmas period, real Christmas tree composting and opening times/days/locations of the household waste recycling centres. There would also be a 2005 calendar for Blue Box collections.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Service Improvement Plan be submitted to this Scrutiny Panel for consideration in January, 2005.

76. GARAGE MANAGEMENT REVIEW

The Housing Manager presented a progress report on the garage management review.

The 2003/04 review had resulted in the identification of an 11 point service improvement plan. The major issue was the poor condition of many garage sites, mainly as a result of a lack of investment. It had been agreed that an annual budget would be established for planned maintenance, improvements and demolitions based on garage income. The figure agreed was £291,612 for 2004/05 with an additional £112,914 available for responsive repairs on garages. Any underspend on the responsive budget would be switched to the planned maintenance and improvements to ensure that the whole budget was spent on garage issues.

In June, 2004, a Technical Officer had been allocated to work exclusively on garage site management issues and to carry out 3 main tasks:-

- Carry out a stock condition survey of all garage sites
Appendix 1 identified the garage sites presently appropriate for disposal, demolition or alternative use.
- Draw up a 7 year planned maintenance scheme
Appendix 2 included all the sites where there was no present intention to dispose of the land or use it for another purpose. A small number of the plot sites were in a good enough condition to justify continued investment. A definitive list of those sites was being prepared.
- Implement a planned maintenance, improvement and demolition programme for 2004/05.
Appendix 3 included improvements/demolitions and identified the type of work and cost. So far work to the value of £216,053 had been ordered and it was likely that the remaining budget (£75,559) would be spent replacing the tarmac surface of sites in the Kimberworth Park area.

Of the 11 identified targets, 10 had been met. The 1 that had not been achieved was the computerised garage waiting list which had been put on hold pending the introduction of the OHMS estate management module. This had been identified as a function suitable for transfer to RBT.

Discussion ensued on the report with the following issues raised/clarified:-

- Inspection of garage sites took place on a monthly basis but did not include an inspection of the interior. If a garage was not being used to house a car or being let to someone else, it was a breach of the Tenancy Agreement and action would be taken. A manual inspection record was kept at present but it would become part of the IT Management Module.

- Before the disposal of any garage site took place, Ward Members would be consulted.
- Appendix 1 would be updated on an annual basis.

Resolved:- That the progress made with the management and maintenance/improvement of garage sites across the Borough be noted.

77. HOUSING DISREPAIR CLAIMS - SECTION 11/82

The Head of Housing Services presented a report setting out the impact of the current management strategy for dealing with disrepair claims (Section 11.82).

In the first 6 months of 2003/04, the number of cases had risen to such an extent that it was having a serious negative effect on the Repairs budget. Additional legal assistance had been recruited to support a more assertive approach. Publicity material was also issued stating that spurious cases would be contested with the utmost vigour.

As at 28th September, 2004, the number of cases had fallen during the 12 months period from 267 live claims to 161 despite having received 67 new claims during that period. 173 claims had been settled comprising:-

51 cases where payment was required (average £4,555.00 per claim)
90 cases where no payment was received (potential saving of £409,950.00)
32 cases where the Council would receive costs.

Of the 51 cases where payment was required, the amount paid as at 28th September was £197,266.45 (£114,928.45 during 2003/04 financial year and £92,338.00 during 2004/05). However, costs remain to be paid on 7 of the cases and are likely to be paid during 2004/05 (£35,000).

Of the 32 cases where the Council would receive costs, the total sum of £121,101.73 was due of which £101,578.28 had already been recovered during 2004/05 financial year.

The Scrutiny Panel commended the officers involved for their hard work and success.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Scrutiny Panel's comments be conveyed to the staff concerned.

78. LICENSING ACT 2003

The Panel received an update report on the progress of the Statement of Licensing Policy.

There was concern that the proposed licensing fees, set by the Government, would be insufficient to cover the costs involved. A letter had been sent to the 3 Local Members of Parliament lobbying on this issue.

It was noted that an All Members Seminar was to be held on 21st December, 2004.

Resolved:- That the report be noted.

79. MEMBERS HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL TOURS

The Scrutiny Advisor submitted a report on the recent tours undertaken by new Members to give them a practical perspective of current housing and environmental objectives.

The Housing tour, held on 7th October, 2004, had visited the White Bear Regeneration Scheme, Brinsworth, Woodland Drive Estate at North Anston, East Street at Dinnington and the Eastwood Village Housing scheme.

The second tour, held on 28th October, 2004, had concentrated on Environmental projects including the Howard Building, Carr Hill household waste recycling centre, Rawmarsh Leisure Centre, East Herringthorpe Cemetery and Crematorium and details of Creation Recycling.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That further visits be arranged for the Panel during the 2004/05 Municipal Year.

(3) That the Panel's thanks be conveyed to the officers involved in arranging the itinerary for the tours.

80. MINUTES OF MEETINGS OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES HELD ON 25TH OCTOBER, 2004 (ATTACHED).

The Panel noted the decisions made under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Environmental Services held on 25th October, 2004.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Environmental Services gave an update on Minute No. 92 (Procurement of Cemeteries Ground Maintenance and Grave Digging Services).

81. MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 21ST OCTOBER, 2004 (ATTACHED).

The minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 21st October, 2004, were noted.

Arising from Minute No. 62(4) (Fly Tipping Review), it was noted that the review had been endorsed by the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee and would be submitted to the Cabinet for action. The approach would then be made to the Magistrates with regard to a meeting.

Arising from Minute No. 70 (Demonstrating Competitiveness in Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Services of Housing Services DSO) it was noted that a report would be submitted to the Panel's February meeting.

82. MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE PERFORMANCE AND SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE HELD ON 8TH AND 22ND OCTOBER, 2004 (ATTACHED).

The Panel noted the minutes of a meeting of the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee held on 8th and 22nd October.

Resolved:- That the Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submit the Risk Register to a future meeting of this Scrutiny Panel