

DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL SCRUTINY PANEL
Thursday, 15th July, 2010

Present:- Councillor Austen (in the Chair); Councillors Currie, J. Hamilton, Hughes, Littleboy, Parker, Pickering and Tweed.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cutts, Dodson, Johnston, Mannion and Sims.

12. COMMUNICATIONS.

Co-optees

The Chair welcomed Joanna Jones back to the Panel and Councillor Dryden to his first meeting.

She reported that Ray Noble, who had also been appointed as a Co-optee had advised that he would be unable to take up the position due to personal circumstances.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no Declarations of Interest to report.

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

There were no questions from members of the public or the press.

15. REPRESENTATIVES ON WORKING GROUPS AND PANELS 2010

Consideration was given to the memberships of the various Council sub-groups for the Municipal Year 2010/ 11.

Resolved:- That the following memberships be confirmed:-

Health, Welfare and Safety Panel:- Councillor Dodson and Councillor Currie as substitute.

Members' Sustainable Development Group:- Councillor Austen.

RBT Governance Group:- Councillor Austen and Councillor Hamilton

16. IMAGE OF ROTHERHAM SCRUTINY REVIEW - UPDATE

The Chair gave an update to the Panel in respect of the Image of Rotherham Scrutiny Review which had been undertaken jointly with members of the Regeneration Scrutiny Panel.

The Review had commenced in February 2010 and had been chaired by Councillor Boyes, with support from Councillors Austen, Swift, Havenhand and Hamilton and a number of co-optees. Councillor Austen had now taken over the role of Chair following the retirement of Councillor Boyes.

She reported that the review set out to look at five key areas:

- The Town Centre
- Industrial History of Rotherham
- Community Cohesion
- Perception of Crime
- Perception of the Council

As part of the consultation the following took place:

- Key members of the Council were interviewed
- Looked at good practice in other authorities
- Strategic Plans and Policies were considered
- People who live and work in the Borough were consulted

She detailed the following as issues which had been highlighted as being the way forward:

- To create an image which includes the towns and the rural parts of Rotherham
- Maximise the use of the words “green generating and growth
- Minimise stereotyping
- Industrial History – celebrate what is good about the town
- Reducing the barriers and changing perception to anti-social behaviour
- Community Cohesion

She confirmed that the first draft of the review would be presented to the Regeneration Scrutiny Panel in September/ October, which members of this panel would be invited to attend. It would then be presented to PSOC in October and Cabinet in November. Responses from Cabinet would then be reported back in early January 2011.

The Cabinet Member for Community Development and Engagement then gave a presentation in respect of “One Town One Community”.

He drew specific attention to:

- Why the One Town One Community started

- The need for the image of Rotherham to be one image
- How to spread the message
- Internal and external message
- Work undertaken with the Chamber of Commerce
- Other groups to work with to help promotion
 - Voluntary Community Sector
 - Women's Groups
 - Police – Community Safety
 - Fire and Rescue Service
 - Health Service
 - Arts and Culture
 - Sports Clubs
 - Rotherham United
 - Rotherham Rugby Club
 - Rotherham Cricket Club
 - Formula One – Dinnington
 - Schools
 - Street Scene
 - Boston Castle
 - Clifton Park – Rotherham Show
- Changing people's discussions and debates
- Celebrating Diversity

A discussion ensued and the following issues were discussed:

- Reference was made to the work being done in the town centre with young people by Oracle Training and it was suggested that more providers should get involved such as RCAT. This may be a way to engage young people and get their perception on the town which could then be fed into the review.
- A comment was made that there was no engagement by the Council with the rural communities. It was felt that this was a contributing factor to why they did not associate themselves with Rotherham. It was suggested that the Area Assemblies be given the responsibility for collating community events to ensure that there were representatives from the council in attendance. It was agreed that this be included on the agenda for the next Area Assembly Chairs meeting.

Resolved:- (1) That the content of the review be noted.

(2) That an item be included on the next Area Assembly Chairs meeting regarding future responsibility for Area Assemblies in respect of Community events.

17. SAFER ROTHERHAM PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

Steve Parry, Safer Rotherham Partnership Manager gave a powerpoint presentation in respect of the Safer Rotherham Partnership.

The presentation drew specific attention to:-

- Performance: April – May 2009 -v- April – May 2010
- The Challenges
- Community Safety Partnerships
- Priorities for 2010/ 11
- Funding for 2010/ 11

He also circulated the Safer Rotherham Partnership Performance Summary for May 2010.

Reference was made to the PACT meetings which were held around the Borough and the general consensus was that they were having a big impact on making people feel safe.

A discussion ensued around the violent crime statistics and in particular in respect of domestic violence. A request was made that future statistics include a break down in respect of gender. Also reference was made to the proposed refresh of the Domestic Violence Strategy which had been discussed at a previous meeting. Members had been advised that this would be undertaken through the Performance Clinic and a query was raised as to whether this had happened yet. It was confirmed that the Domestic Violence Strategy Refresh had been completed and was in the process of going out to 90 day consultation.

Members thanks Steve for his informative presentation.

18. CONTRIBUTING TO REDUCING AND MANAGING OFFENDER BEHAVIOUR

Maryke Turvey, Head of Probation in Rotherham reported on the work of South Yorkshire Probation Trust in Rotherham in reducing re-offending and contributing to make communities safer by punishing and rehabilitating offenders through delivering the sentences of the Court.

The Trust was hoping to move from its existing premises to a business park close to the Town Centre but may be affected by current reviews of all Government expenditure. As part of the move, it was the intention to co-locate at least 6 Police personnel (the local Offender Management Unit currently based in Maltby) as well as

Local Accommodation and Drugs Services using a regime called Integrated Offender Management.

The Rotherham Probation Unit:-

- Consisted of Head of Unit, 4 (FTE) Team Managers, 22 Probation Officers, 15 Probation Service Officers and 15 Administrative Support staff
- 1,300 offenders were worked with in a typical year
- Over 1,000 reports prepared for local Magistrates and Crown Courts, 257 Community Orders supervised and 215 people on Licence post-Custody
- Approximately 50,000 hours of Community Payback supervised
- In 2009 37 Drug Rehabilitation requirements (in partnership with Clearways) completed, 58 Alcohol requirements (in partnership with Lifelines), 11 Sex Offender Programmes, 19 Domestic Abuse Programmes and 77 other Offending Behaviour Programmes
- Reduced re-offending by those on the caseloads by an average of 11% against their expected levels
- Only area to have achieved a statistically significant reduction for all 6 quarters

Along with most of the public sector, South Yorkshire Probation Trust faced an uncertain financial future. The budget had reduced by approximately 5% in each of the past 2 years, including a cut of approximately 3% last month (£600,000 across SYPT) and clearly there would also be effects from the recently announced 25% cut over the next 4-5 years.

SYPT had a target to ensure 35% of offenders were in employment by the end of their Order. In light of the local economy, this was an area where difficulties were anticipated.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised and clarified:-

- Reference was made to the sharing of information in respect of perpetrators of crime and whether all partners were involved. It was confirmed that on the whole most agencies were effective, but there were problems engaging certain agencies.
- A comment was made about offender mentoring and a query was raised as to whether Rotherham had such a system in place. It was confirmed that a group called Remedy had recently made some mentors available to the Probation Service and also Voluntary Action Rotherham undertook some

work in this area.

It was noted that a meeting had been arranged between the Probation Service, Steve Parry and Simon Perry to discuss what support could be given to offenders, during the community service and beyond. It was anticipated that the Council would be invited to assist with this support in the future.

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

(2) That the Council be invited to become involved in the development of Integrated Offender Management services being developed in Rotherham.

19. **RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DEBT RECOVERY FINAL REPORT**

Further to Minute No. 146 of 2nd December, 2009 Cabinet meeting, the Director of Internal Audit and Governance submitted four reports on debt recovery.

Report No 1 – Creation of a Single Debt Recovery Service

Of the 112,000 Council Tax payers in Rotherham and 20,000 housing tenants, less than 500 residents had significant debt on both their rent and Council Tax accounts. In 2009/ 10 there were approximately 30 formal complaints received by the various Services relating to debt collection of which only 7 were upheld. In proportion to the number of payers, the number with significant multiple debts was small and the number of complaints even smaller.

The report set out how the current arrangements between the respective Services for co-ordinating their work relating to residents with significant multiple debts could be developed to achieve the objectives of the Scrutiny recommendation without requiring full consolidation of existing Services which could have significant financial and operational implications.

Attempts had been made to identify any authority that had combined the collection of Council Tax, sundry debts and rents. Scrutiny Services had also been unable to find any authority using a single collection point. The Programme Director for Finance at the LGA had stated that it was not uncommon to have Council tax, sundry debts and business rate collection under 1 roof, however, he could not name any authorities that had included rents in the arrangement.

Of particular significance was the fact that Rotherham's performance

in collecting debt was exemplary under the existing arrangements and any reduction in current performance would create a detrimental impact on the Council's overall budget.

Resolved:- (1) That the findings and conclusions of the Review be noted.

(2) That Debt Collection Services improve the communication and co-ordination of debt recovery action relating to significant multiple debts, as opposed to the consolidation of existing services, be supported.

Report 2 – Bailiff Services

The comparison of existing charges to both the Council and customers with estimated costs of an in-house service, suggested that the Council would have to subsidise any internal service by approximately £88,404 per year or charge customers more than was currently the case for the recovery of debt. The creation of an in-house service would also involve set up costs of approximately £76,765.

In considering any alternatives it was noted that the Council's current arrangements, which involve the use of external bailiffs, worked very effectively. The Council's Council Tax and NNDR collection rates were amongst the best in the country. The creation of an in-house service could adversely affect the Council's income collection rates, at least in the short term. If this happened, there would be a reduction in Council Tax collected to pay for Council services.

The Scrutiny review recommendation has had a positive impact. Whilst the number of formal complaints received by the Council about bailiffs was low, as a result of the review quarterly forums had been established between the Council, bailiffs and advice services to enable any concerns to be addressed in an open and constructive way. This should improve the customer relations element of existing arrangements.

It was therefore recommended that the Council should continue to work with bailiffs to make the services provided to customers' as sympathetic as possible in the circumstances. It was also recommended that the Council continue to work as proactively as possible with debtors, to prevent cases from being referred to bailiffs.

Resolved:- (1) That the findings and conclusions from the review of the business case for creating an in-house bailiff service be noted.

(2) That the recommendation to continue to work closely with bailiffs and advice services, rather than to establish an in-house bailiff service be supported.

Report 3 – Additional effort to contact debtors prior to referral of cases to bailiffs

A pilot had been carried out on 97 council tax cases about to be passed to bailiffs. This resulted in a small amount of additional council tax being collected and agreement of payment arrangements with half of the sample group. However it was noted that two thirds of the residents making payment arrangements later defaulted on the agreement within one month of making it. In these cases, referral to bailiffs was delayed, and with it, the chances of the prompt recovery of debt.

The pilot demonstrated benefits including identification of vulnerable residents or residents potentially entitled to benefits or discounts and identification of vacant properties.

In order to attempt to contact approximately 900 relevant cases per year prior to referring these to the bailiffs, RBT would have to engage one extra collection officer at a cost of £29,000. There was currently no budget available to meet these costs and this requirement would have to compete with other Council priorities.

Resolved:- (1) That the findings and conclusions from this pilot involving taking additional steps to contact residents owing Council Tax prior to the Council referring debts to bailiffs for recovery be noted.

(2) That the recommendation to not invest in additional proactive activity at this time be supported.

Report 4 – Scrutiny Review of Debt Recovery

A large number of positive outcomes had been achieved from the review, including:

- The production of a customer focused corporate debt policy
- Better information on where to get help with debt and procedures for helping vulnerable residents
- Better co-ordination of debt collection
- Closer working with and monitoring bailiffs

These outcomes would both improve the services managed by the

Council and result in a fairer and more sympathetic approach to the collection of debt.

Resolved:- That the positive outcomes achieved from the scrutiny review of debt recovery arrangements be noted.

20. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 3RD JUNE, 2010

Resolved:- That the minutes of the meeting of the Democratic Renewal Scrutiny Panel held on 3rd June, 2010 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

21. MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE MEMBERS' TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL HELD ON 24TH JUNE, 2010

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meetings of the Members' Training and Development Panel held on 24th June, 2010.

Resolved:- That the contents of the minutes be noted.