

Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday, 4 January 2006

Present: Councillor M Perks (Chair) and Councillors T Bedford, Brownlee, F Culshaw, Mrs M Gray, G Morgan and Mrs I Smith

06.COM.01 APOLOGIES OF ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Birchall.

06.COM.02 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal or prejudicial interest by any of the Members in any of the agenda items.

06.COM.03 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 8 November 2005 were confirmed as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

06.COM.04 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNCIL'S DECISION MAKING PROCESS - SCRUTINY INQUIRY

(a) Area Forums/Committees Sub-Group

The Panel, at its meeting on 8 November 2005, had agreed arrangements for the Sub-Group members' attendance at a number of Area Committee meetings in surrounding Lancashire Districts as part of the Panel's collation of evidence for the inquiry.

- Pendle Borough Council's West Craven Area Committee held on 29 November 2005

The meeting had been attended by the Chair (Councillor Perks) who had submitted to the Panel a written note on his visit.

The membership of the Area Committee included the nine Councillors representing the three Borough Wards covered by the Committee, together with co-opted representatives from Parish/Town Councils, Customer Panels, Town Centre Forum and CED Partnership operating in the area, but only the Borough Councillors had voting rights. The Lancashire County Council was not represented on the Area Committee.

The Committee was empowered to determine certain planning applications and traffic regulation orders, and the District Council had allocated a £300,000 capital budget and a £100,000 revenue budget to the District's five Area Committees for allocation on a pro rata basis based on the areas' respective electorates.

Councillor Perks indicated that the meeting had been dominated by consideration of planning issues. While the agenda items were instigated by the Borough Council, the meeting opened with an open Question Time session.

- South Ribble Borough Council's Western Parishes Area Committee held on 5 December 2005

The meeting had been attended by Councillor Bedford and Councillor Brownlee, who circulated at the Panel meeting a note of their attendance.

The Area Committee comprised 13 Borough Councillors and a number of co-opted members, with voting rights.

The Committee had delegated authority to determine planning applications within Council policy guidelines and each meeting commenced with an open 15 minutes Question Time.

The Councillors attending had noticed, in particular, the length of time devoted to planning issues. The Members had also noted the limited space in the meeting room allowed for members of the public, highlighting the importance of the selection of suitable venues for public meetings.

(b) Public Speaking/Questions Sub-Group

At the last Panel meeting, the Sub-Group members had expressed a wish to attend a meeting of West Lancashire District Council's Planning Committee.

As none of the Members had been able to attend the 15 December 2005 meeting, the Panel had been invited to observe the Planning Committee meeting to be held at Ormskirk on 19 January 2006. In response, the Chair (Councillor Perks) and Councillors Culshaw and Mrs I Smith intimated that they may be able to attend.

(c) Future Visits

Since the last meeting, the Chairman had suggested that the Panel might benefit from observing the full Council meetings of a few neighbouring Authorities which allowed members of the public to participate in the debates and/or ask questions. Consequently, a note was circulated at the meeting listing those Lancashire Authorities which allowed members of the public to speak at their Council meetings and the Panel members were requested to select the meetings they wished to attend.

The Panel was also reminded of the invitation from West Lancashire District Council for members to attend and observe the Authority's Annual Council Meeting as an Assembly to be held at the Civic Offices, Ormskirk on 25 January 2006. Attendance at the meeting could prove beneficial, as the Annual Assembly concept represented an alternative form of public participation to the Area Forum/Committee model.

It was **AGREED**:

(1) That arrangements be made for the attendance of Councillor Perks (Chairman) and Councillors Bedford, Brownlee, Mrs M Gray, Morgan and Mrs I Smith at West Lancashire District Council's meeting as an Assembly on 25 January 2006.

(2) That arrangements be made for the attendance of the Councillors indicated at the following Council meetings of two neighbouring Authorities:

- Meeting of Rossendale Borough Council on Wednesday, 1 February 2006 - Councillors Brownlee, Mrs M Gray and Mrs I Smith.
- Meeting of South Ribble Borough Council on Wednesday, 15 February 2006 - Councillor Perks (Chairman) and Councillors Brownlee, Mrs M Gray, Morgan and Mrs I Smith.

(d) Area Forum Pilot Schemes

The Chairman reminded the Panel of the following arrangements agreed for the organisation of the three Area Forum pilot schemes:

- Clayton-le-Woods North Ward Area Forum to be held in the Youth and Community Centre, Manor Road, Clayton-le-Woods on Thursday, 16 March 2006;
- Coppull Parish Area Forum to be held in the Royal British Legion Club, Springfield Road, Coppull on Tuesday, 28 February 2006;
- Lostock Ward Area Forum to be held in Croston Old School, Church Street, Croston on Thursday, 23 March 2006.

The Chairman hoped that the Panel members would be able to attend one, or more, of the Area Forum pilot meetings.

(e) Relevant Issues raised

The subsequent debate amongst the Panel members raised a number of issues and factors which had been highlighted at the Members' visits to neighbouring Authorities' Area Councils/Committees, Cabinet and Planning Committee meetings. These issues, (primarily related to proposals for Area Forums, and summarised below) would need to be considered and assessed by the Panel when deliberating on its final report and recommendations.

- The Panel accepted that it was important for any Area Forum model that may be introduced not to duplicate or supersede the role and functions of other existing bodies (eg Parish Councils and community organisations such as PAiCE or SWITCH). The Panel would need to identify the specific roles and responsibilities of those bodies to ensure that their terms of reference were not replicated.
- It was the Panel's general consensus of opinion that the remit of proposed Area Forums should not include delegated power to determine planning applications, as Members considered that this element of its functions would dominate meetings' agendas and restrict their overall purpose.
- An argument was, however, put forward that the Area Forums might be granted limited capital budget spending powers.
- Only suitable, convenient and easily accessible venues, with sufficient capacity to accommodate large groups, should be chosen for public meetings.
- The Panel agreed that a restriction should be imposed on the duration of Area Forum meetings (eg 7.00pm to 9.00pm) and that limits should also be imposed on public speakers.
- Area Forum meetings should be structured so as to allow Parish Councils or any local resident or business to request agenda items related to issues falling within the Borough Council's jurisdiction. In addition, there should be provision within each meeting for an open question/debate session.
- The skills and expertise of the Chair of the Area Forum would also be paramount to the successful operation of the Forums.

The Chairman reminded the Panel of the two elements of the inquiry into the best means of encouraging public participation in the Council's decision making process through the introduction of Area Forums and/or the allowance of public speaking at the meetings of the Council and/or its Committees. The Chairman envisaged that the Panel might be in a position to formulate its recommendations on the public speaking element after the Sub-Group's impending visits. Following an assessment of the initial rounds of the Area Forum pilots, the Panel would need to determine its recommendations on the concept of Area Forums, formulating views on whether or not to support the

continuance and expansion of Area Forums across the Borough and, if so, recommendations on the geographical area, composition, remit and operational arrangements to be applied to the Area Forums.

It was **AGREED**:

(1) That the dates of forthcoming meetings of PAiCE and SWITCH be presented to the next Panel meeting, with a view to Members' attendance as observers.

(2) That a progress report be also submitted to the next Panel meeting highlighting the actions of the Panel so far, and the interim views expressed, in relation to the key issues identified in the inquiry's scoping documents.

06.COM.05 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2005/06

The Panel received, for information, the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2005/06, which had been agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its last meeting.

The programme included the envisaged timescales for the on-going scrutiny inquiries and the planned dates for the periodic monitoring of past inquiries.

Chair