

Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday, 8 February 2006

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

Also in attendance: Councillor S Smith

06.COM.06 APOLOGIES OF ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Birchall, Brownlee and Whittaker.

06.COM.07 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.08 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of the Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 4 January 2006 were confirmed as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

06.COM.09 DRAFT GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET FOR 2006/07 - REVIEW OF PLANNING SERVICES BUDGET

The Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel had been requested to undertake a review of the Authority's spending on Planning Services, as part of Members' overall scrutiny of the draft budget proposals for the next financial year. The purpose of the review was to explore the reasons for the service area appearing as upper quartile costs in the results of a recent Audit Commission on Value for Money Assessment, and to establish if the Council's policy objectives were being achieved.

The Panel received a report of the Director of Finance which summarised and commented on the key issues arising from the Audit Commission's report. The assessment had entailed a basic benchmarking of the costs of providing Planning Services by comparing the absolute costs of each Authority included in the Audit Commission's 'family group' of Councils that exhibit the same attributes in terms of demography, population etc. The survey had analysed the costs of each Authority's planning service as a whole, utilising the 2004/05 cost base and the 2003/04 performance data. The statistical data revealed that Chorley's spending in 2004/05 had exceeded the average spending by £209,000, with the number of applications processed being 9% lower than the family group.

The Chairman welcomed the Executive Member for Development and Planning, who had been invited to attend the meeting to assist the Panel's review. The Executive Member was accompanied by the Deputy Chief Executive/Group Director and the Head of Development and Regeneration. The review was conducted through a series of searching questions asked of the Executive Member by the Chairman and members of the Panel.

At the conclusion of the discussions with the Executive Member, the Panel accepted that the delivery and efficiency of the development control service had improved over recent years, particularly since the investment provided by the Planning Delivery Grant and the creation of the new Development and Regeneration Unit. The national

and local targets for the determination of planning applications had been met, but it was accepted that other efficiencies and improvements could be pursued.

The Planning Service was not restricted to Development Control, the Unit being also responsible for Building Control, Planning Policy, Economic Development and Regeneration services. In order to evaluate whether the service was providing value for money, the Council needed to determine the total cost base for each element, together with comparative costs from similar authorities. The Panel, therefore, urged the pursuance of a more probing benchmarking exercise into issues surrounding the cost and quality elements of the planning service. In addition, the introduction of additional key performance indicators in relation to qualitative and enforcement work was essential.

At the end of the debate, it was **AGREED** that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be recommended to submit the following comments to the Executive Cabinet.

- (1) That the Executive Cabinet be recommended to pursue the provision of more detailed comparative data from the Audit Commission's 'family tree' authorities, particularly in relation to the output, cost and quality of service, in order to enable a more reasonable value for money assessment of the whole of the Council's planning service.
- (2) That action be taken to introduce effective performance indicators for planning enforcement work.

06.COM.10 BUSINESS PLANS, 2005/06 - THIRD QUARTER UPDATES

The Panel received and considered the Business Plan monitoring statements for the third quarter period ending on 31 December 2005 in respect of the services and functions falling within the remit of the Panel.

(a) Development and Regeneration Unit

The Head of Development and Regeneration submitted the Business Plan monitoring statement for the newly merged Development and Regeneration Unit for the quarter period up to 31 December 2005.

The Panel noted that the forecast outturn for 2005/06 was within budget provision. The Members were assured by the Chief Officers that plans had been put in place to ensure that the Unit remained focused on its Business Plan's key tasks and that measures had been introduced to improve the Development Control Section's performance on the determination of minor applications.

The report also highlighted the major projects at Astley Park and at the Strategic Regional Site in which the Unit were involved, together with the production of the Local Development Framework, Economic Regeneration Strategy and a Town Centre Retail Strategy.

(b) Leisure and Cultural Services Unit

The Head of Leisure and Cultural Services presented his Unit's Business Plan monitoring statement for the quarter period up to 31 December 2005.

The Chief Officer informed the Panel that, in relation to the Unit's performance against its key performance indicators, the target for the encouragement of young people in activities would be met by the year end and the percentage of young people from priority areas participating had already exceeded its goal. It

was anticipated that, by April 2006, 1.3m visits to the town's leisure and cultural facilities would have been recorded.

The report also highlighted the Unit's involvement in the negotiation of the new Indoor Leisure Contract, and the development of the young people's programme. Negotiations were in an advanced stage with Glendale Golf on the projected transfer to the company of the management and operation of Duxbury Park Golf Course. In addition, the development of a wider community management programme was being progressed.

The report also revealed that the Unit's forecast cash outturn for the financial year was likely to be contained within its adjusted allocated budget.

06.COM.11 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNCIL'S DECISION MAKING PROCESS - SCRUTINY INQUIRY

(a) Progress Report

The Panel received, for information, a note prepared by the Head of Customer, Democratic and Office Support Services which summarised the progress to date of the Panel's inquiry into the means of encouraging greater public participation in the Council's decision making processes.

The note referred to the preliminary survey of Lancashire Districts to ascertain current practices and listed the witnesses interviewed and meetings of other Authorities' Area Forums, Planning Committees, etc visited by the Panel members as part of the collation of evidence exercise.

The reports of the various visits and perceptions of the Members attending would need to be summarised and taken into account by the Panel in its deliberations and formulation of conclusions. While the Panel may soon be in a position to form initial views on the public speaking at Council/Committees element of the inquiry following the recent visits, the Panel's final conclusions, report and recommendations would need to await the completion of the Panel's review of the Area Forums aspect of the inquiry.

(b) Community Groups' meetings

The Panel, at its last meeting, had suggested Members' attendance, as observers, at the next meetings of the two community groups Positive Action in East Chorley (PAiCE) and South West Chorley Community Safety Group (SWITCH).

The Members noted that the next Annual General Meeting of SWITCH was to be held on the evening of 7 March 2006 (the date of the next Borough Council meeting).

The next meeting of PAiCE was to take place at the Tatton Community Centre on 8 March 2006 at 1.00pm and the Chair hoped that as many members of the Panel as possible would be able to attend.

Subsequently, representatives of the two groups would be invited to discuss the Area Forum proposals with the Panel to dispel any perceptions of duplication of roles.

(c) Survey Results

The Panel received, for information, a schedule showing the results of a recent survey of 13 Lancashire District Councils on the arrangements operated in the

respective Districts to allow public speaking and/or questions at their Council/Committee meetings.

The information would provide useful comparative data to inform and assist the Panel's final conclusions on the current inquiry.

(d) Matters Deferred

It was **AGREED** that consideration of the following agenda items in relation to the public speaking element of the public participation inquiry be deferred to the next Panel meeting on 14 March 2006:

- Feedback on recent visits;
- Key issues for consideration.

06.COM.12 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME, 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.

06.COM.13 PROPOSED CLOSURE OF EAVES LANE LIBRARY

The Chairman raised as a matter of urgency an item not included on the meeting's agenda in order to ensure an early response to an important community issue.

The Chairman drew the Panel's attention to the recent announcement of the Lancashire County Council's proposal to close the Eaves Green Library in Chorley between April and June 2006.

The Panel **AGREED** to request the Executive Cabinet to consider the proposal as a matter of urgency at its meeting on 9 February 2006 and agree arrangements for a suitable early response to the plans.

Chair