

# Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel

**Tuesday, 14 March 2006**

**Present:** Councillor M Perks (Chair) and Councillors T Bedford, Brownlee, F Culshaw and G Morgan.

## **06.COM.14 APOLOGIES OF ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor A Birchall, P Buckley, Mrs M Gray, Mrs I Smith and A Whittaker.

## **06.COM.15 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.16 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Community, Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 8 February 2006 were confirmed as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

## **06.COM.17 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE COUNCIL'S DECISION MAKING PROCESS - SCRUTINY INQUIRY**

### (a) Public Speaking Element - Feedback on Visits

The Chairman invited the members who had attended the following meetings to comment on their visits and perceived effectiveness of the adopted arrangements for public speaking at the meetings:

- (i) The Chairman and Councillor Culshaw reported on their attendance at West Lancashire District Council's Planning Committee meeting on 19 January 2006. The Members had been impressed with the standard of modern facilities offered (eg overhead projection; microphone for each Councillor), and the efficiently organised procedures, with each party being allowed to speak for three minutes on the planning applications.
- (ii) The Chairman and Councillor Bedford reported on their attendance, with a number of other Panel members, at the meeting of West Lancashire District Council as an Assembly on 25 January 2006.

The public meeting was held annually and provided a platform for the Council Leader to present his annual report and for other Officers and Partners to make short presentations.

The public debate had been facilitated by Dave Guest (a BBC celebrity) with speakers being allowed to speak for 5 minutes. The Panel members noted, however, that relatively few questions had been asked by the public, which might be attributed to the formality of the occasion.

- (iii) Councillors Mrs M Gray and Mrs I Smith had each attended the meeting of the Rossendale Borough Council and the South Ribble Borough Council on 1 and 15 February respectively.

Notes prepared by Councillor Mrs Smith, commenting on the procedures practised by each Authority to allow public participation in the Council meetings, had been provided to the Panel members.

(b) Public Speaking - Key Issues for consideration

The Panel were invited to consider whether it wished to support a recommendation that the Authority should introduce a regulated and clearly defined system to allow the public to speak and ask questions at Council and/or Committee meetings in the light of the recent survey evidence and Members' visits to neighbouring Councils.

After taking into account past evidence, it was the Members' unanimous view that the Panel should support and advocate the allowance of some form of public speaking at meetings of the full Council, Executive Cabinet, Development Control Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny bodies. The Panel also had due regard to the key issues and factors that had been identified in the inquiry's scoping document, and the note presented by Councillor Brownlee expressing her views on public speaking at meetings, when formulating their recommendations.

It was **AGREED:**

(1) That the Panel supports the introduction of appropriate procedures to allow the public's participation in the following Member bodies on the lines indicated:

Council Meetings:

- A 30 minutes open question time be held at the beginning of each ordinary Council meeting to allow members of the public to ask a question on any topic.
- Notification of questions required at least 48 hours prior to the Council meeting.
- Questions to be answered at the Council meetings by the Member(s) most able to give an appropriate response.
- Questioners be allowed to ask one supplementary question at the meeting.

Executive Cabinet:

- Members of the public be allowed to speak and ask questions on agenda items at Executive Cabinet meetings held in public.
- A time limit of 5 minutes over the whole length of the meeting be imposed for the public's participation in Executive Cabinet meetings.

Development Control Committee:

- One person be allowed to address the Committee in favour of the Officer's recommendations on respective Planning Applications and one person be allowed to speak against the Officer's recommendation.
- In the event of several people wishing to speak either in favour or against the recommendation, the respective group(s) be allowed to elect one spokesperson to address the Committee.
- If a person wishes to speak either in favour or against an application without anyone wishing to present an opposing argument, that person be allowed to address the Committee.

- Each person addressing the Committee be allowed a maximum of 3 minutes to speak.
- Councillors' debate and consideration of each planning application commence after the public addresses.

Overview and Scrutiny Bodies:

- A 30 minutes open session be held at the commencement of each meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its appropriate Panels as an opportunity for members of the public to raise and ask questions on any issue falling within the remit of the Committee or Panel.
- Members of the public be allowed to speak for a maximum length of 3 minutes on each particular issue.

(2) That the Officers be requested to produce separate draft Procedure Rules to regulate the public's participation in meetings of the Council, Executive Cabinet, Development Control Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny bodies within the recommended parameters for submission to the next Panel meeting.

(3) That the Development Control Committee be advised of the Panel's support of procedures to allow members of the public to address the Committee, in order to allow the Committee the opportunity to comment on the proposals before final recommendations are put before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

(4) That the Executive Cabinet be requested, within the recommendations of the inquiry's final report, to set up a Working Group to examine and review the current restrictions on Councillors' debates at Council meetings as defined in the Council's Constitution.

(5) That the Executive Cabinet be further recommended to authorise a comprehensive review of current accommodation for public meetings, including a review of the feasibility of the Lancastrian Room being used on appropriate occasions and the use of public address systems.

(c) Area Forums/Committee element

The Chief Executive had been invited to attend the meeting to make a short presentation on the following three issues which would inform and influence the Panel's deliberations on the scrutiny inquiry.

(i) Existing Forms of Community Engagement

The Chief Executive outlined the numerous means and avenues through which the Council currently engaged with members of the community.

A number of consultative, partnership and community bodies and groups in which the Authority participated existed and it was planned to make more effective use of the Local Strategic Partnership to deliver the Community Strategy objectives and galvanise available funding sources. In addition, the extended use of the Citizens' Panel, the Area Forum Pilots and the Council's scrutiny function itself each presented an ideal opportunity to widen the Council's engagement with its customers.

(ii) Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

The Chief Executive advised the Panel of the ways in which her former authority, Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, practised community engagement.

The Borough comprised 18 'natural' neighbourhoods and five neighbourhood co-ordinators were responsible for the administration of Community meetings (as opposed to formal Area Forums) in their respective areas. The Council and its respective Partners were represented at the Community meetings, at which locally agreed action plans linked to wider initiatives were considered.

Blackburn had a well established Community Network and an effective Local Strategic Partnership.

(iii) 'Neighbourhood' Agenda

The Chief Executive highlighted a new Government initiative announced by David Miliband MP (Minister for Communities and Local Government) to empower local communities to shape public services. This would be achieved by Central Government devolving power to local authorities, which, in turn, would devolve power to local communities through a new national Neighbourhood Agreement.

The Chief Executive outlined the principal elements and advantages that would accrue from the national neighbourhood framework expected in the Spring and which could be strengthened by the Local Government White Paper to be published in June, 2006.

The Panel accepted that effective and structured neighbourhood engagement would be an increasingly important role of local authorities, which would be expected to initiate the lead and co-ordinate partnership ventures. In this context, the Community Strategy, which set out the vision and aspirations of the local communities and priority actions, would be critical. The Chief Executive also referred to the Lancashire Local Area Agreement to become operative on 1 April 2006, under which additional Government funding would be available for each of the identified 'stretch' targets achieved.

(d) Community Groups

The Chairman reported that he had attended the last meeting of the community group, Positive Action in East Chorley (PAiCE) held at Tatton Community Centre on 8 March 2006. A written note of the Chairman's observations would be presented to the next Panel meeting.

The Panel Members were also invited to attend as observers, the next meeting of the South West Chorley Community Safety Group scheduled to take place at the Eaves Green Community Centre on 6 June 2006 at 7.00pm.

Representatives from the Community Groups were also to be invited to attend a future Panel meeting in order to allow the Panel members to explain the primary purposes of the Area Forum proposals.

## **06.COM.18 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 ongoing scrutiny inquiries and the planned dates for the periodic monitoring of past inquiries.

Chair