

Minutes

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

11th March 2009



Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
M. Dunn	Apologies	R. Ramage	Yes
Dr. R. L. Evans	Apologies	Mrs. C. Sandbrook	Yes
Ms. L. B. Flint	Yes	A. F. Shelton	Apologies
M. Gage (Chairman)	Yes	C. Siddall	Apologies
J. E. B. Gyford	Yes	Mrs. J. Smith	Yes
A. M. Meyer	Apologies	F. Swallow	Yes

Cllrs. Mrs. W. Schmitt, Portfolio Holder for Communities and Housing and Cllr. Mrs. L. Edey, Deputy Cabinet Manager for Communities and Housing were also in attendance.

75. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

INFORMATION: There were no interests declared.

76. MINUTES

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 28th January 2009 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman subject to Minute 69 being amended by the substitution of the word “Mechanical” for “Micro” on pages 71 and 72.

77. QUESTION TIME

INFORMATION: There were no questions asked or statements made.

78. PROGRAMME FOR MEMBERS OF THE CABINET TO ATTEND MEETINGS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – CLLR. MRS. W. SCHMITT, PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR COMMUNITIES AND HOUSING

The Chairman welcomed Cllrs. Mrs. Schmitt and Mrs. Edey to the meeting, and reminded Members that the purpose of the session was to enable the Committee to understand the Portfolio Holder’s priorities and challenges for the coming year, and how they fit into the budgets that have been allocated for 2009/10. He also asked the Portfolio Holder to indicate any particular problem areas where she thought the Committee may be able to assist through its scrutiny role.

Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt advised the Committee that this was a new Portfolio that she had taken on in May of last year.

The communities element was all about partnerships involving children and young

people, the police, Primary Care Trust, the voluntary sector, Crime and Disorder Reduction Panel, the Local Strategic Partnership, and the EEC. Everything that we do on the communities aspects involves a partnership approach.

In relation to children and young people, we were the first authority in the country to hold a joint conference with the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership, and this was followed by another one in November on 'Young People Who Care'. There will be a further conference held this year, but the subject matter has not yet been determined.

The Council was continuing to work with Youth Councils, and with the 'For Children Centre' at Silver End. This is likely to be another centre set up in the District in the near future.

The Council has been working with the Primary Care Trust and the Essex County Council regarding parenting programmes.

The Community Wardens have an extremely good relationship with the army at Colchester. Courses for youngsters are run by the army at Colchester involving youngsters in undertaking physical challenges, team building and learning to respect other people's viewpoint. Any agencies that come into contact with young people can nominate persons (ages range from 14 to 20 years) who they feel would benefit from these courses.

On the health side, work on St. Michael's hospital is finally underway, and the Community Hospital extension at Halstead should be started in April. There was a meeting 10 days ago about the lack of health facilities in Witham although the meeting was not well attended. However, there were a number of GPs present who made a very useful contribution. The GPs saw add-on clinics to their surgeries as a way forward.

Cllr. Schmitt indicated that she and Mrs. C. Dean the Head of Community Services are shortly to meet with a senior representative of the Primary Care Trust to discuss a number of health issues and how matters will be progressed.

A junior member of staff of the Primary Care Trust is now based within the Community Services Department with a view to improving liaison and partnership working between the Council and the Trust. A more senior member of the Trust staff is also likely to be based in Community Services in the near future.

On the equalities and diversity side, funding has been secured to keep the Council's Migrant Worker Officer for a further year. The Council maintains good relationships with organisations representing minorities including the Polish community.

In respect of the voluntary sector, the importance of this sector is now recognised at government level and the voluntary sector has a place on the Local Strategic Partnership. The statistics and information provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau is invaluable.

The Essex Compact was launched last week. This enables all voluntary Groups to enter their details and services on a computer database which will be accessible by the public via the Essex Compact's web site.

In respect of community safety, anti-social behaviour is down again in this District and Cllr. Schmitt felt that this was due to excellent policing, Neighbourhood Action Panels and all the projects that the Council was involved in through the Crime and Disorder

Reduction Partnership, and through working with schools and young people. There are also Street Pastors who patrol Braintree Town Centre on Friday evenings. It was hoped that with sufficient volunteers the churches may be able to extend the scheme to the District's other towns.

Crucial Crew events with young people are continuing, as are also the Reality Roadshows for the older youths. 'Goodies with Hoodies' was also launched in Halstead with a view to reducing the negative perceptions that some people have as regards youngsters.

In relation to community development, there is an ongoing project called 'Being Safe'. 1200 youngsters will go through this programme which is being funded by the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. The programme covers such items as bullying, race issues, homophobic issues, and knife crime. The High Sheriff's award was recently given for the excellence of this programme.

We also have funding (£106,000) for 'creative communities' which is a new concept to overcome the difficulties with fragmented societies and associated tensions. It has already been applied to an estate in Braintree where there were difficulties between young families and older people. Some planting was undertaken in a large green area so that the area that backs on to the elderly occupants provides a quiet haven. In addition, a Community Association is about to be launched for this estate to create a more integrated community and also to help reduce anti-social behaviour.

Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt also advised that Community halls, community transport, public lavatories were part of her portfolio.

In respect of the housing side, the affordable housing strategy was now out to consultation. The economic downturn is proving difficult insofar as the provision of affordable housing was concerned.

Choice based lettings are planned to go live on 29th April, subject to the computer systems being in operation.

For the past year, homelessness figures had reduced each quarter contrary to the national trend and other neighbouring authorities figures. This reflected the excellence of the Council's homelessness team who provided advice and help to homeless persons.

In relation to older people, a series of three 'Well Being' days were held last year for the elderly and other initiatives will take place next year.

A new project that has been initiated by the Local Strategic Partnership is called 'Village Agents'. This provides for a member of the village community to be trained to become a focal point for the elderly and who will be able to point them towards the various agencies that may be able to help them. A new mini-bus will be purchased that will be used for taking elderly, vulnerable persons to their hospital appointments, luncheon clubs etc. The project will be co-ordinated through a committee called the Health, Housing and Well Being Partnership, and will be led by the Primary Care Trust.

Cllr. Schmitt concluded her presentation by advising members that she would be giving a presentation at an LGA conference on how we perceive that the Olympics will be helping our young people. We are the only local authority that has been invited to make a presentation.

There then followed a question and answer session which is summarised below.

Question from Cllr. F. Swallow

Concern has been expressed by the Sible Hedingham Parish Council that the levels of policing in Sible Hedingham are diminishing. What action is being taken to restore policing levels in this location to what they were previously?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

I will highlight your concerns to the Police and will ensure that a police representative attends the next meeting of the Parish Council to listen to the Parish Council's disquiet.

Action Point: Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt to contact the police.

Question by Cllr. J. Gyford

When the Council transferred its housing stock to Greenfields Community Housing, part of the offer that was made to tenants, which they accepted in the ballot, contained a number of undertakings as to what the new housing association would do in terms of how it would operate. The Council also has representatives on the Board of the housing association. Are either you as the portfolio holder or the Council's representatives on the board, monitoring to check that the undertakings we gave are actually being complied with?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

I will need to make further enquiries and will give you a written response.

Action Point: Cllr. Mrs. Schmitt to provide a written response to Cllr. Gyford.

Question by Cllr. Mrs. J. Smith

What does CDRP stand for?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

It stands for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. It reports to the Local Strategic Partnership.

Question by Cllr. Mrs. J. Smith

What is the size of the Polish community in the District?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

The community is spread across the District. It is well integrated into the local community. Some of the District's towns have shops that specialise in Polish food, and the community has developed its own newspaper.

Question by Cllr. Mrs. C. Sandbrook

Does your portfolio include children at risk in Braintree District?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

Not directly as that comes under Essex County Council Social Services responsibility. However, any of the Council's officers or other agencies that has concerns regarding an individual child can report the matter to Social Services for investigation.

Question by Cllr. R. Ramage

As regards the Primary Care Trust situation in Witham, you referred to a public meeting that had been held. Do you know if this was publicised widely as I was not aware of it?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

The meeting was well advertised and there were adverts in the paper. As previously indicated, the GPs present were anxious to have more clinics at their surgeries. More consultant led clinics were desired. You will be aware that myself and Mrs. Dean will be meeting with a representative of the Primary Care Trust to discuss a number of health issues and how matters can be taken forward.

Question by Cllr. M. Gage

In respect of your communities and housing portfolio, when you look back over the past year in March 2010 which of your main priorities will you be happiest in achieving in respect of the two elements of your portfolio?

Answer by Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt

In respect of housing, it will be to see that we still have low figures in homelessness, and that we have not had to resort to using bed and breakfast accommodation to house the homeless.

In respect of communities, it will be to see that anti-social behaviour continues on a downward trend, and that we have used the 'creative communities' funding to deal with any particular problem areas and to encourage the development of community associations.

At the end of the session, the Chairman thanked Cllrs. Mrs. Schmitt and Mrs. Edey for attending the Committee. Cllr. Schmitt's presentation and her answers to Members questions had given the Committee a very useful insight into her portfolio responsibilities.

Cllrs. Mrs. Schmitt and Mrs. Edey left the meeting at this point.

79. WORK PROGRAMME ITEM – HOW THE COUNCIL MANAGES SIGNIFICANT PROJECTS

The Committee gave consideration to a series of draft recommendations in connection with this study.

Following discussion, a number of amendments and additions were agreed.

DECISION:

That the following RECOMMENDATIONS be made to Cabinet:-

1. We support the general thrust of the recommendations that are set out in paragraph 4.1 of the report produced by Leigh Woodside of Alexander Consultants entitled Project Management Futures report, including the establishment of a Programme Management Office (PMO);
2. We note that Cabinet at its meeting on 10/2/09 approved the setting up of a PMO initially for one year. However, we feel that the number of specific improvements identified by Leigh Woodside may require longer than a year to implement. We therefore feel that sufficient resources may need to be allocated to extend the life of the PMO beyond that period as necessary, and also to ensure that the level of maturity and capability of project management is achieved throughout the Council;
3. From our scrutiny of the 'live' Play Areas Project included in the 2008/09 Capital Programme, it was evident that the Project Management Toolkit was being properly used and the project management procedures followed in a systematic manner. However, the use of the Toolkit needs to be regularly monitored and audited to ensure that it is being properly utilised, particularly if the Toolkit is to be further refined to include all projects irrespective of scale and complexity;
4. We note that governance arrangements proposals are to be considered by Cabinet shortly, and we would highlight the need for Cabinet to ensure that the role of the local member and the Local Committees in the Project Management process are formalised. Local Members and the Local Committees have an important role to play as community champions and in acting as the interface between the project and the community on whom the project may impact;
5. The post implementation project review should ensure that specific feedback is sought from end users;
6. The PMO should establish, within existing budgets, a Project Management Forum to enable the Council's Project Managers to network, share lessons learnt and keep up to date with current best practice by, for instance, inviting specialist guest speakers. A progress report after 6 months is to be made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee by the PMO Lead Officer;
7. There should be a system for mentoring first time Project Managers;
8. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be advised of the criteria by which the success of the PMO will be judged at the end of its first year.

80. COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION

The Scrutiny Manager gave a verbal update on the position concerning the Councillor Call for Action (CCfA). He reminded members that the CCfA is a process of last resort, and provides a mechanism for a member to ask for discussions at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on matters of local concern where the normal methods of resolution have been exhausted.

The Chairman of the Committee and the Scrutiny Manager had attended a seminar at the London Borough of Harrow on Friday 6th March 2009 organised by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and the Improvement and Development Agency, at which the Government guidance had been issued.

The CCfA comes into force on 1/4/09, but because of the lateness of the guidance it was not expected that local authorities would necessarily have their full procedures in place by that time.

It will be up to each Council to specify how CCfA will work in its authority subject to the general parameters laid down in the guidance.

Copies of the guidance will be circulated to the Committee by the Scrutiny Manager.

The Scrutiny Manager will also submit a report to a future meeting of the Committee detailing the proposed procedure for members consideration.

Action Point: Scrutiny Manager to circulate copies of the guidance to members, and to submit a report on the proposed procedure.

DECISION:

That the verbal report of the Scrutiny Manager be noted.

81. TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

Fees and Charges Task and Finish Group

Cllr. Sandbrook indicated that she had nothing further to report as there had been no movement forward since the last Cabinet meeting. However, she will be contacting the Support Officer for the Group and also the Leader of the Council to ascertain how matters will be taken forward.

DECISION:

That the verbal report be noted.

82. END OF YEAR REVIEW

As this was the last meeting of the Committee in the current civic year, Members took the opportunity to review the impact of its work over the last 12 months. The Scrutiny Manager highlighted the main activities and work programme items that the Committee had undertaken, and the briefing and training sessions that members had attended.

Cllr. Mrs. Smith raised an issue regarding an item that had been raised at the briefing with Cherie Root and Lesley Day in September.

Action Point: Steve Bore, Scrutiny Manager to investigate and respond to Cllr. Mrs. Smith.

It was noted that the recommendations that had been made by the Committee and the Task and Finish Groups over the past year had been welcomed by the Cabinet.

However, there was a general consensus amongst the Committee that it was difficult to make a precise judgement on whether the work of the Committee had made a difference and added value to the community.

In this respect, it would be helpful in future to identify some criteria against which the work of the Committee could be judged e.g. in financial terms; in outcome terms, and in public image terms.

In discussing the programme for Members of the Cabinet to attend the Committee to talk about their portfolio responsibilities, the Committee felt that this had been beneficial and had provided a great deal of useful information. However, it was felt that in the context of carrying out future budget scrutiny there was a need to probe deeper into individual Cabinet Members budget priorities, and to undertake more preparatory work prior to the formal budget scrutiny process beginning in October.

In connection with the 2010/11 budget scrutiny process, it was AGREED as follows:-

- (1) the Committee to have preliminary meetings with three Members of the Cabinet at a time, as follows:-

Cllr. G. Butland, The Leader of the Council

Cllr. N. Harley, the Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Culture and Leisure

Cllr. M. Lager, the Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources

Cllr. R. Walters, the Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability

Cllr. Mrs. J. Beavis, the Cabinet Member for Customers and Communication

Cllr. Mrs. W. Schmitt, the Cabinet Member of Communities and Housing

These meetings should take place in September prior to the formal budget scrutiny process beginning in October, and should focus on Cabinet Members priorities for the year, what savings are required to be achieved, what new bids are to be made, what will be the overall impact on the budget, and what will be the effect on frontline services. Each Cabinet member should be asked to produce a concise budget working sheet with timelines.

The Committee would need to prepare its questions prior to the meeting and to have a pre-meeting discussion;

- (2) in preparation for (1) above, the Committee would divide into two informal sub-groups to look at the following:-

Group 1 to examine each Portfolio holder's budget costs (it will be necessary to seek information from Trevor Wilson, Head of Finance in this respect);

Group 2 to examine the criteria against which the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would operate in terms of carrying out its scrutiny of the Council's budget.

Of those members present at the meeting:

Cllrs. R. Ramage, Mrs. C. Sandbrook, Mrs. R. Smith and F. Swallow would serve on Group 1;

Cllrs. Ms. L. Flint, M. Gage and J. Gyford would serve on Group 2.

The Groups would meet informally and would not be serviced by the Scrutiny Manager.

The full membership of each sub-group will be determined at the next meeting of the Committee in the new civic year.

83. FORWARD PLAN – 1ST MARCH TO 30TH JUNE 2009

Members received the four month Forward Plan for the above period.

DECISION: that the contents of the Forward Plan be received and noted.

The meeting closed at 9.30pm

M. Gage
Chairman