

CABINET

15 November 2006

AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION - SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITIES

Contact Officer: Bob Merrett Tel No: 01962 848291

RECENT REFERENCES:

None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The City Council has had its Sustainable Environment services and policies inspected by the Audit Commission under its Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. It has emerged as a 'Fair' service with 'Promising prospects for improvement.' The final report makes five sets of recommendations which the Council has already started working towards. An overarching approach, working through the Local Strategic Partnership, is recommended by the Commission and is reflected in this report by proposing that the emerging, revised Community Strategy become the Council's Sustainability Strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 That Cabinet agree to the principle that the emerging Community Strategy becomes the Council's Sustainability Strategy once finalised.
- 2 The progress on the Audit Commission's recommendations be noted and that further reports on the resource implications be brought forward in the current budgetary cycle.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

1.1 As part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment programme, the City Council were inspected by the Audit Commission in October 2005 and at the request of the City Council carried out a follow-up in April 2006. The Audit Commission published its assessment on the City Council's practices with regard to a Sustainable Environment in July 2006. The inspection was classed as a 'service' inspection although it looked more widely at how we tackle the issue of sustainability corporately, and at specific elements of a number of services.

1.2 The inspection report scores Winchester City Council as providing a 'fair', one star service but the follow-up inspection particularly reviewed the second judgement and concluded that the Council was one that has promising prospects for improvement. The final report provided five recommendations, which are discussed individually below. In addition, the text highlights a number of other areas for consideration, as detailed later in this report.

2 Recommendation 1

"The Council – together with its Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) partners - should develop a clear vision for what the sustainability agenda means in practice in a Winchester context, and the priorities it is aiming to address. This vision should be based on an understanding of the main issues that are relevant to the district's future and to the Council's and partners' ability to influence them. In doing so, the Council should ensure:

- The community strategy objectives address these key issues, setting out clearly what the LSP and Council are aiming to achieve over a defined period of time in the shorter term (say by 2010) and medium term (say by 2015), and then focus areas of activity and initiatives over time towards delivering these objectives.
- It supports the objectives by targets that are practically deliverable at service level and can be monitored.
- It develops the vision and targets in such a way as to achieve cross-party consensus, so the Council can be confident that it approaches this work in a truly cross-cutting way and that the vision and targets will be maintained over time.
- It builds on the successful experience from recent informal scrutiny groups in helping to develop and agree long-term policy that all political groups can subscribe to; and

- As part of this work, it should identify how the strategic and wider aspects of this agenda relate to local community outcomes, and build the potential for local community leadership and initiatives to both deliver sustainable outcomes but also raise awareness of the relationship between 'global' issues and 'local' actions.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2007.”

- 2.1 The Community Strategy revision currently being undertaken by the LSP and out for consultation will clarify the vision for sustainability within the Winchester district and its priorities. This strategy is outcomes-focussed and developed from evidence. Members and partners have been involved in the revision to ensure it is cross-cutting.
- 2.2 The revision includes a greater emphasis on geographic community planning and encourages involvement from communities, organisations and individuals. It also includes issues of global concern which can be acted upon locally, such as biodiversity and climate change.
- 2.3 The revised Community Strategy sets out important changes that are needed to achieve the desired outcomes for the district. These changes will be reflected in indicators which will tell us whether we are moving towards the outcomes. The most worrying trends will be regarded as priorities for action and influence subsequent action planning and resource allocations within and between partnerships and individual organisations.
- 2.4 This year's corporate planning process has also made the links to the Community Strategy to ensure that the City Council is working towards the shared outcomes in the areas for which it is responsible.
- 2.5 In this way, by creating the Community Strategy, which in effect would become the City Council's new Sustainability Strategy, the City Council believes it would meet the requirements of the key overarching approach of the Inspection in delivering a sustainable framework for the community.

3 Recommendation 2

“The Council should build on its approach of empowering senior managers to deliver the sustainable development agenda in a coordinated way, by addressing the following key issues.

- The Council should define more clearly the roles of Corporate Management Team and Senior Managers Group in promoting the sustainable development agenda - specifically, what should SMG be aiming to achieve, and how should CMT facilitate this.
- The Council should recognise that senior managers may not have the capacity to deliver this work (as opposed to developing the ideas and initiatives) while maintaining their existing service responsibilities, and they may need to be supported by resource to research, develop and implement some types of project. The role of the sustainability officer needs to be considered in this context, and having regard to the balance of effort needed in future between further policy development and project implementation.

- The Council needs to be clear, when allocating responsibilities for action, that the responsible person has the authority and expertise to deliver the initiatives allocated to them. It also needs to support this with appropriate project management arrangements given the potential complexity of progressing cross-cutting issues.
- The Council – together with its LSP partners – should evaluate current plans and strategies to ensure that sustainability is embedded, and implement routine sustainability appraisal in decision making. Internally, it should track this approach through staff appraisal, the performance management system and scrutiny.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2006.”

- 3.1 The sustainability role of the Senior Manager’s Group is still relatively new, but discussion has begun on its aims and how these may be achieved. As the work progresses, project teams will be set up to take forward action. These will follow the corporate project management system guidance and should include both senior managers and appropriate staff from within their divisions. A so-called ‘think tank’ of senior managers and the Sustainability Officer has been established to support and research initiatives.
- 3.2 Issues of responsibilities given to officers with the correct authority and expertise have been raised with regard to the Carbon Management Programme. This is being addressed through the roles of the Estates Division and the Facilities team within it. Proper use of the project management system should ensure that these issues are highlighted and dealt with at the start of the project.
- 3.3 Sustainability appraisal mechanisms are being developed, with joint work on sustainability and equalities impact assessment, and through the sustainability appraisal required for all Local Development Framework documents. Further work will be needed to embed sustainability within staff appraisals, the performance management system and scrutiny.
- 3.4 Elsewhere in the inspector’s report, comments were made that “sustainability has not been integrated into day-to-day working” and the council “does not systematically build sustainable working practices into other services”. Whilst some services are embedding sustainability, the Sustainability Group, with the support of CMT, will need to raise awareness across the organisation and is an area that needs further work both inside the organisation, for officers and Members and with partners.

4 Recommendation 3

“The Council should build on the successful learning from the consultancy work on the energy implications of development, to identify other areas which would benefit from guidance and raised awareness that can shape more sustainable future development proposals. Examples might include guidance on sustainable construction practices and planning for biodiversity. The Council should consider whether there are opportunities to progress such work with neighbouring authorities, which are affected by the same development pressures.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.”

- 4.1 The Partnership for Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) is looking at the issue of sustainable construction, in order to enable the sub-regional policy on Environmental Sustainability (SH14 in the draft plan) to be effective. An officer sub-group is being set up to look at this further, with representation from Winchester to be decided. This group will look at ideas such as common policies and Supplementary Planning Documents that can be adopted by all of the PUSH authorities, and training for Development Control officers.
- 4.2 In addition, the Hampshire & IOW Chief Planning Officers group (HIPOG) has organised a conference on 18th October called 'Achieving Sustainable Design in Hampshire'. The City Council has been involved in the planning of this conference, which will be held in Winchester, and officers from Strategic Planning and Development Control will be attending.
- 4.3 The issue of planning for biodiversity is also raised through the work on the Biodiversity Action Plan, but resources to enable this are not yet determined but will be explored in the current Budget cycle.
- 4.4 Further action to develop and embed sustainable and environmental planning policies through the Local Development Framework will require extra resources, given the work pressures on Strategic Planning and Development Control Officers. The resource issue is also discussed in report CAB1328 Winchester District Local Development Framework – Core Strategy which was considered by Cabinet on 11 October 2006. No time is currently allocated specifically for additional supplementary planning documents giving sustainable environment guidance, although the partnership approach should produce efficiencies. Again a decision will therefore be needed as part of the Budget cycle on prioritisation of this work.

5 Recommendation 4

“The Council needs to build on progress to overcome its past averseness to risk and its growing recognition that value for money is about the relationship between outcomes and costs, not just about low costs. It should develop a means of ranking environmental benefit and payback from activities and planned improvements, to assess these alongside financial payback assessments in relation to its investment decisions.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.”

- 5.1 On this recommendation and indeed on Recommendation 5 below, the City Council has started to demonstrate a change in the way it assesses policy to determine actions and outcomes that espouse the principle of ‘whole-life costing’. The Results Accountability process being used in Community and Corporate Planning, demonstrate a willingness to view long term outcomes that can have environmental and social impacts as well as financial.
- 5.2 Nevertheless, the Council cannot become cavalier in relation to risk and the prudent approaches to change demonstrate a long term commitment to continuous and sustainable improvement.

6 Recommendation 5

“Councillors need to show continued leadership to ensure the alternate weekly waste collection system becomes fully operational, and have the courage to weather any opposition during the district-wide roll-out.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs over and above those already planned, and should be maintained throughout the period of rolling out the new system.”

6.1 During the decision making process to roll out the Alternate Bin Collection (ABC) methodology across the district there was cross party support for the project and the level of funding required. An indicator of this level of commitment was the fact that the decision was not called in by the Principal Scrutiny Committee for further detailed analysis following the Cabinet decision.

6.2 The project has received ongoing support following the change in political administration in May 2006 which has not affected the detail or timing of the roll out project. This roll out has included responses to the public questioning to the scheme, although this opposition has been limited due to a comprehensive communication campaign carefully planned and linked to the project.

7 Other issues in the Inspection Report

7.1 Although not specifically highlighted in the recommendations, the inspection report makes a number of other comments worth noting.

- Environmental Management

The Audit Commission notes the weaknesses highlighted in the Sustainability Strategy including the lack of guidance to staff working on sustainable procurement, the low energy and water efficiency of the offices, the recycling scheme not being consistently effective and the limited progress on the work travel plan. (paragraph 46)

Progress has been made and is continuing to address these concerns. Guidance on sustainable procurement should be included in the procurement Code of Practice due to be developed shortly. Energy efficiency of the offices has been investigated as part of the Carbon Management Programme, and plans are developing for improving this. The office recycling scheme has been recently improved to take more materials, and was accompanied by a comprehensive communications effort to ensure effectiveness. Monitoring is taking place to ensure continued effectiveness.

- Climate Change

The Audit Commission noted that the Council had made little progress on addressing issues of climate change through its own activities.

Some progress has already been made through the work on the Carbon Management Programme, in reducing carbon dioxide emissions from Council

buildings and travel. This is being built on to tackle the issue of Climate Change more widely through work just beginning on developing a Climate Change plan.

- Biodiversity

The Audit Commission commented that the Council was not taking an effective lead on biodiversity across the district.

The Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and the work associated with its implementation should help to address this criticism, but is reliant on resources to take forward the BAP, and recognition that this needs to be embedded into working within services across the council.

- Customer Service

The Audit Commission noted that face to face access to services was focused on the City Offices. Although at the time of the Inspection the Council provided benefits and housing surgeries in the southern parishes and had plans for shared facilities with Alresford Town Council, it did not have more general arrangements with town or parish councils to provide facilities for face to face contact in the rural areas.

The parish access pilot is intended to address this. By October, the Town Council office in Alresford was being used to provide Housing and Benefits surgeries, alongside the public access computer and information point that is there. The parish office at Bishops Waltham has also been 'wi-fi enabled' so that it could host similar surgeries.

The effectiveness of this pilot will be assessed as part of the Parish Hub project and subject to a further report to Cabinet.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

8 CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):

- 8.1 This report relates to the priority "Safeguarding our high quality environment for the future" and the value "seeks to promote sustainable communities through all its actions."

9 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 9.1 There are a number of resource implications in aspects of addressing the Audit Commission's recommendations. Although the Commission point out that their recommendations are, in the main, low cost, they are not necessarily 'no cost' if they are to receive a higher priority. These matters will be considered separately in proposals prepared for the Budget process

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

Audit Commission, July 2006, Service Inspection Report "Sustainable Environment – Winchester City Council"

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/BVIR/87D26B61-1978-4104-B2F8-1052ECFB8BBE/WinchesterCCSustainableEnvironment03Aug06REP.pdf>

APPENDICES: None