

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

17 October 2006

Attendance:

Councillors:

Saunders (Chairman) (P)

Beveridge (P)
Busher (P)
Godfrey
Higgins (P)
Howell (P)
Jackson (P)

Mather (P)
Rees (P)
Weston (P)
Wagner (P)
Wright (P)

Others in attendance who addressed the meeting:

Councillor Beckett (The Leader and Portfolio Holder for Economy and Tourism)
Councillor Pearson (Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Safety)
Councillor Tait

Others in attendance who did not address the meeting:

Councillors Macmillan and Wood

1. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillor Godfrey.

2. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 12 July 2006 be approved and adopted.

3. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

Councillor Tait commented on the proposal from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust to improve the husbandry of St Catherines Hill, by allowing sheep to graze. As a consequence, dogs would be required to be kept on leads. He explained that this had caused some concern with dog walkers and that the Council should investigate this further, and perhaps hold a public meeting to discuss the issues.

In response, the Chairman agreed to consult with officers and report back to Members on the best way forward.

4. **THE APPLICATION OF SEWAGE SLUDGE ON LAND**
(Oral Report)

The Director of Communities gave the Panel a Powerpoint presentation on the application of sewage sludge on land, following Members' request at the previous meeting. In addition to the presentation, the Director passed a sample of sewerage pellets for the Panel to inspect.

During the presentation, Members noted that the application of sewerage sludge on land was heavily regulated, so that only sewage cake and biosolids formed from solid human waste could be used in agriculture. These had to be turned into the land within 24 hours of spreading and the City Council had established good links with most local farmers, to ensure a rapid response to any complaints received regarding smell.

In debate, the Panel discussed the differences between septic tank and cesspool waste (both of which from 1999 could not be applied directly to land). Members were also concerned that the application of sludge was a greater problem in the north of the District, where Thames Water operated. The Director confirmed that an informal group of Environment Officers from Basingstoke and Dean, East Hampshire and Winchester City Councils had been established to consider these matters further.

RESOLVED:

That the Report be noted and that the Panel be kept updated on progress with regard to the work of the informal group of Environment Officers.

5. **DEVELOPMENT CONTROL SERVICE – UPDATE ON IT ISSUES**
(Report EN22 refers)

At its previous meeting, the Panel had raised concerns regarding IT issues within the Development Control Service. The Report provided an update on the measures taken and proposals to alleviate these problems.

Members noted that the problem essentially stemmed from the difficulties of the three software systems (which were used to perform different tasks) interacting with each other. The Director of Development added that similar problems were faced by other Councils and that, to some degree, were likely to be on-going.

The training of staff had also been an issue, especially because of a recent high staff turnover rate. Future training would be performed in-house and the Director agreed to arrange CAPs training for Members.

The Director updated the Panel that since the completion of the CAPs study, there had been a significant improvement in the performance against the recommendations previously agreed. The performance of the Planning Administration Team had improved, a procedure manual was being written for staff and Members, and that the creation of a post of System Supervisor was being considered.

In response to questions, the Director explained that minor planning applications which were submitted electronically often created more work for officers. It also generated a greater cost to the Council, as many of the statutory consultees were unable to accept electronic applications and the Council had to bear the cost of printing.

At the conclusion of debate, the Panel requested a short update at its meeting to be held on 24 January 2007 on the major issues highlighted in the Report at paragraph 2.7.

RESOLVED:

1. That the recommendations previously made, to ensure that the registration and processing of planning applications was improved and completed, be noted.
2. That a report be presented to the 24 January 2007 meeting of the Panel, setting out progress against the major issues, listed in 2.7 of the above Report.

6. **CONSULTATION ON DRAFT COMMUNITY STRATEGY 2006 ONWARDS**
(Report EN25 refers)

The Chief Executive explained that Cabinet had considered the draft Community Strategy on 11 October 2006 (Report CAB1332 refers). The Panel was asked to consider the proposals and to review the overall benefit to the public from services provided by the Council and other relevant organisations.

With regard to the High Quality Environment Section (Appendix 1 of Report CAB1332 refers), the Panel highlighted the following issues:

- To mitigate the effects of the Urban South Hampshire development
- Over-development and inappropriate development in villages
- Traffic issues arising from MDAs, traffic speeds, the need to improve the infrastructure and reduce rat-runs
- The need to protect the character of areas through good design
- Street scene issues
- Climate change
- Improvement of public transport
- The need to protect the countryside

At the conclusion of debate, the Panel agreed with Councillor Pearson's suggestion that the outcomes set out in Appendix 1 should be re-organised into related themes.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Chief Executive be asked to re-organise the issues set out in the High Quality Environment Section (Appendix 1 of the Report refers) into themes, in light of the Panel's discussion above.
2. **That Cabinet be asked to take into account the above proposals when it finalises the Community Strategy for recommendation to Council.**

7. **CONSULTATION ON DRAFT CORPORATE STRATEGY 2007-2012**
(Report EN26 refers)

The Chief Executive explained that Cabinet had considered the draft Corporate Strategy 2007-2012 (Report CAB1334 refers) on 11 October 2006. In addition, Cabinet had approved a revised draft version of the Corporate Strategy for

consultation, copies of which had been circulated to Panel Members prior to the meeting (Addendum to CAB1334 refers).

The Scrutiny Panels were asked to consider this revised version of the Strategy to review the overall benefit to the public from services provided by the Council and other relevant organisations.

During debate, the Panel highlighted the following issues as concerns and suggested the following changes to the document:

- That the wording of “Improving access to Affordable housing” should be strengthened.
- The need to emphasise sustainable/climate change actions (including methods of construction and adaptations).
- Need to reduce traffic congestion and speed and to promote walking and cycling.
- Change to High Quality Environment: “Local distinctiveness is protected and the public realm is well designed, built *and maintained*.”
- That references to “Winchester” as the District should be made clearer for the public to understand.

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet be recommended to consider the above changes to the draft Corporate Strategy to ensure that the work of the Council is directed to meet the needs of the local community.

8. **ENVIRONMENT, HEALTH AND SAFETY PORTFOLIO – SECOND QUARTER 2006/07 PERFORMANCE MONITORING**
(Report EN23 refers)

The Director of Communities and Councillor Pearson responded to detailed questions regarding the information contained in the Report.

From this it was noted that the AQMA had been delayed by DEFRA and that both the air quality and traffic-flow effect of the recent traffic management changes to Parchment Street had not yet been assessed.

In response to questions, the Director explained that an update on the recent Motocross event at Matterley Bowl would be presented to a future meeting, pending possible legal proceedings. It was also explained that the improvement in playground facilities had led to increased maintenance costs and that, following negotiations with the contractor; a request for additional money would be presented in the 2007/08 budget.

The Panel also raised concerns with regard to the performance of food safety inspections, emergency planning and the long-term cost of waste collection.

RESOLVED:

That the monitoring information contained in the Report be noted.

9. **PLANNING AND TRANSPORT PORTFOLIO – SECOND QUARTER 2006/07 PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

(Report EN21 refers)

The above item had not been notified for inclusion on the agenda within the statutory deadline. The Chairman agreed to accept the item onto the agenda, as a matter requiring urgent consideration, so as to consider both performance monitoring reports together and within the existing committee cycle.

Councillor Beckett explained that Councillor Lipscomb (Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport) had recently resigned from Cabinet. The Chairman expressed her concern that the Portfolio Holder had not attended any meetings of the Panel in the current Municipal Year.

The Director of Development and the Leader responded to detailed questions regarding the performance information contained in the Report.

The Panel noted the poor performance in relation to the determination of planning applications within the set timeframes. The Director of Development explained that, although there continued to be staff vacancies (particularly in posts which dealt with major applications), the implementation of the Planning Improvement Plan had led to some improvements. Similar concerns were raised regarding the Enforcement Team and Members also noted the number of planning appeals which had been lost by the Council.

In response to a Member's comment, the Director explained that the reduced income from parking stemmed from the reduced sale of season tickets, as more drivers used Park and Ride, and from the temporary closure of some car parks. He suggested that this may need further consideration in future as part of the Winchester Access Plan.

The Panel also discussed concessionary travel, the risk of a reduced Planning Delivery Grant and its effect on some posts in the Directorate, and the site notices that advertised planning applications.

In reply to comments on the South East Plan, Councillor Beckett agreed to update Members following the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the monitoring information contained in the Report be noted.

10. **WORK PROGRAMME – PROPOSED SCRUTINY REVIEW**

(Report EN24 refers)

The former Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transport, Councillor Lipscomb, had asked the Panel to consider undertaking a review of the process of certain planning applications, following concerns raised by local residents. The Panel noted that the Portfolio Holder had advised that a review should not consider the merits of any individual application, so as to respect Planning Development Control Committee's quasi-judicial role.

However, following discussion, the Panel agreed to not establish such a Group at this stage, so that the effects of the recently introduced Statement of Community Involvement and the Planning Improvement Plan could be properly implemented and assessed.

RESOLVED:

That, at this stage, the Informal Scrutiny Group, as set out in the Report, be not appointed.

11. **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**
(Report PS246 refers)

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Work Programme, as set out on the reverse of the agenda, and as extracted from Report PS246, be noted.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and concluded at 9.35pm

Chairman