

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
HELD ON THURSDAY 6 JANUARY 2011 FROM 7PM TO 9.40PM**

*Present:- Norman Jorgensen (Chairman), Michael Firmager (Vice-Chairman),
Chris Bowring and Jenny Lissaman*

Also present:-

Mark Redfearn, Policy Manager - Performance

Madeleine Shopland, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Nick Spencer, Website Manager

Councillors Malcolm Armstrong and Chris Singleton

PART I

42. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 6 December 2010 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

43. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Alistair Auty and Stuart Munro.

44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

45. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

46. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

47. PROCESSING OF CONSULTATION – TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel discussed the draft terms of reference for the review on processing of consultation.

During the discussion of this item the following points were made:

- Members agreed that it was important that the review was not too broad.
- Mark Redfearn informed the Panel that the Consultation Strategy had been developed in 2007 and had focused on guidance and principles for services wishing to undertake consultation and managing the workload of the Consultation Service. The Consultation Service was now part of the Policy and Performance team and was made up of one Officer. The Consultation Strategy was due for review. When a strategy was due for review it was normally examined by the officer Corporate Strategy Board. Templates were developed for strategies, making sure that they fitted with the Council's and specific service's aims and ambitions. With regards to the Consultation Strategy officers would be investigating whether a strategy or a policy would be appropriate.
- It was noted that a large consultation regarding the Local Transport Plan had been carried out in December 2008. This had helped set parameters for the draft document. Consultation on the draft document had recently been completed.

- The previous government had introduced the 'Duty to Involve' under which local authorities were required to inform, engage with and involve the community. This was still in force under the coalition government. The Localism Bill placed a greater emphasis on community engagement. However, prescriptive requirements on how this should be achieved had not been put in place. Councillor Lissaman indicated that it would be helpful for Members to receive background information on the statutory requirements regarding consultation that the Council was subject to.
- Councillor Singleton expressed some concerns regarding the consultation process. He stressed that it was vital that consultations were not overly long as lengthy documents often discouraged people from completing them.
- Members agreed that it was important to find out what people wanted and that a wide range of people had the opportunity to respond should they wish. It was also agreed that it was important that every effort was made to engage hard to reach sections of the community. Mark Redfearn commented that various methods or combination of methods were used to engage with the community and that there was constant dialogue between the Council and residents. Discussions took place with forums and Partnerships such as the Older People's Partnership and the BME Forum.
- The Chair questioned how responses were taken into account. Mark stressed that consultations were not votes or referendums and as such were not bound by the results. The results could also be about understanding public reaction to a proposal. Officers developed recommendations to help Members in their decision making.
- Councillor Armstrong commented that ascertaining who and what to ask could sometimes be problematical because the Council had such a large remit and provided a large number of services to the community. He went on to say that it was important to quantify responses so as to understand what residents were saying.
- A Member suggested that pilots may be helpful.
- Mark recommended that Members may wish to look at in what instances it was appropriate for the Council to consult and why they consulted (e.g. in line with Council's objectives or required to do so by statute). Members agreed that it would be helpful to receive information on the statutory requirements the Council was bound by with regards to consultation. Mark also suggested that common methods of consultation be looked at, how the results of consultation were analysed and interpreted and what difference results made to decisions.
- Councillor Bowring questioned whether statistics should also be looked at. Councillor Armstrong commented that whilst it was helpful that Officers condensed and summarised information for Members, Members needed more training on understanding the output of consultations. Councillor Singleton stressed the importance of transparency throughout the consultation process.
- Information that consultation responses could provide was discussed. Mark Redfearn commented that the information provided did not always relate to a specific action, project or service. Multiple choice questions were a usual means of managing responses. Councillor Firmager suggested that consideration should be given to whether it was necessary to consult in every instance and who should be consulted. Mark emphasised that advice and guidance was provided to managers.
- Councillor Singleton asked what resources the Council had for undertaking and processing consultation. Mark Redfearn indicated that the Consultation Officer was involved in approximately 30 consultations a year of varying size. She processed questionnaire driven consultations using the SNAP computer system. It was possible to use the SNAP system for multiple choice consultations. Resources were also provided by the appropriate service. For example Officers from Children's Services had been involved in the consultation regarding designated areas and Officers from Policy and Partnership had been involved in the consultation on the Core Strategy.

The Council was no longer required to carry out some of the larger central government set consultations. For example the requirement to carry out a Place Survey been removed.

- Members examined the scope.
- Potential witnesses were discussed. Members felt that it would be useful to look back at some previous examples of consultation to see what had been done successfully and what could be improved. It was suggested that the Panel may wish to gather information from Officers who had been involved in recent larger scale consultations. It was suggested that Resident Association Chairs and Neighbourhood Action Group Chairs be invited to provide information as consultees. Members agreed that it would be helpful if a representative of the Parish Councils be asked to attend. It was noted that MORI had looked at consultation questions asked by local authorities across the world. This would potentially useful for ascertaining best practice and what other authorities did.
- It was agreed that the review would be carried out by a Task and Finish Group. This would be made up Councillors Jorgensen, Firmager, Armstrong, Auty, Bowring, Lissaman, Munro and Singleton. The Members also agreed that the draft terms of reference be amended to reflect discussions and that they be circulated to all Members of the Task and Finish Group. The draft terms of reference would be agreed via email. Members agreed that a draft timetable for the review be produced, circulated to all members of the Task and Finish Group and agreed via email.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) the review be undertaken by a Task and Finish Group made up of Councillors Jorgensen, Firmager, Armstrong, Auty, Bowring, Lissaman, Munro and Singleton.
- 2) the draft terms of reference be amended to reflect discussions and to be circulated to all Members of the Task and Finish Group. The amended terms of reference will be agreed via email.
- 3) a draft timetable for the review be produced, circulated to all members of the Task and Finish Group and agreed via email.

48. BRIEFING ON COUNCIL'S WEBSITE

The Panel received a briefing on the Council's website from Nick Spencer, Website Manager:

- Council has procured a website editing system "EasySite" from supplier EIBS. The hosting of this system had been moved to EIBS from ComputaCenter. The Council now only had to deal with one supplier if there were any issues with the system. It was hoped that this would expedite the resolution of any problems. The system allowed the creation and editing of website content using a template based approach.
- The website team was made up of 3 full time Officers. Nick outlined their responsibilities. These included the management and administration of EasySite software including website look and feel, structure and permissions, training service editors on the creation and editing of content, strategic development of the site and enabling the Communications team to effectively use online media such as Twitter.
- The website received on average approximately 80,000 visitors per month. This figure included visitors accessing the site on more than occasion. Individual members of staff accessing the site at work did not contribute to this statistic as they were on a single IP address. There were approximately 320,000 page views per month. On average

approximately 4 pages were viewed per visit and the average time spent on the site was 2.5 minutes. It was noted that figures fluctuated across the year. For example the number of people accessing the website tended to increase during the Christmas period as people looked for information regarding bin collections. Nick commented that it would be important to ascertain why people were looking at particular pages. Some pages such as the news page would possibly be viewed frequently whilst others did not need to be viewed more than once.

- A Member questioned if the statistics could be broken down further that individual IP addresses were identified. He expressed some concern that the statistics were not a realistic representation of usage as if one individual used the website on numerous occasions this would potentially distort figures. The Panel were informed that a new statistical package is being used to analyse the various statistics and this measurement will become more sophisticated over time.
- A number of improvement projects were outlined. The purpose of sections of the website would be looked at. Traditionally areas had been developed on the request of the service. Development needed to be targeted.
- Consideration was being given to combining the web visit statistics and the phone statistics.
- A new governance system was under development. Whilst there was currently 150 service editors the website team were working with departments to reduce this number to 14 Super Users. The Super Users would be trained to a higher level and would be able to access the website statistics. Negotiations with services were ongoing but it would potentially be a big culture change. 8 Super Users had already been identified and agreed. Nick indicated that the Councils which had the most successful websites either had a small number of website editors or a large central team.
- One of the most consistent pieces of feedback received was that the website was not user friendly. The web team has been consulted with regards to various objective aspects of the site. A smaller group would be consulted on subjective matter such as colour.
- Transactions were increasingly moving online. This would help drive down administration costs. Self serve and other third party applications would also be looked at. The Transformation team would be leading putting transactions online for Wokingham Direct.
- Improving online media and communication to assist the Council in engaging more effectively with younger residents was under consideration.
- A new FAQ system was under development. This would be a big piece of work but was a simple and effective means of communicating online.
- At present it was difficult to put content on to the intranet. Service editors needed to be training to do this and there was some confusion about what information should be put on the website and what should be placed on the intranet. As more staff began to work from home it was important that a more appropriate system for the intranet be put in place. Work would be undertaken to assess the benefits of separating the intranet and the internet. In response to a question about who had access to the intranet, Nick commented that Members, staff and partners had access. There were restrictions regarding access to data due to Government Connect.
- The search function was discussed. Councillor Bowring stated that he often used Google to find what he was looking for on the Council's website. Nick commented that improvements were being investigated. The Council had looked at procuring Google as its search engine. However, this would be very expensive. Members felt that the menus could also be better integrated to make them more useable.
- A forthcoming 12 month project entailed the restructure and re-write of each section of the website. This would be led by statistics and consultation. The Super Users would

be responsible for the specific sections of the website and would have better knowledge of user issues. Councillor Singleton asked whether one section at a time would be tackled. In response Nick commented that it was a matter of using resources effectively and the Web Team would have to prioritise what was updated and when this carried out.

- The Web Team was looking to work with Place and Neighbourhoods on their electronic bulletin. Formerly a PDF attachment had been sent out. In future people would be able to click on separate parts that interested them and be directed to the relevant part of the website.
- Ways of increasing online communication and engagement would be considered.
- Currently the Council's website did not work well on Smart phones. The Web Team would be investigating the business case to improve this.
- Shared services and WBC companies were discussed. In the instance of shared services it was important that residents were made aware that they were still receiving a service from the Council. In the case of WBC companies they would wish to be sufficiently differentiated from the Council to allow them to compete in the commercial market.
- The document management system would be developed when the corporate document management system goes live in order to make document use online more efficient and user friendly.
- Members were assured that managers would continue to provide face to face briefings as home working increased amongst staff.
- Members asked whether Council laptops had web cams. Nick indicated that this could be looked into but that would be cost implications.
- It was noted that a third party survey popped up on the website. It was hoped that the feedback that this would provide would help inform what improvements needed to be made.

RESOLVED That the briefing on the Council's website be noted.

These are the Minutes of a meeting of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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