

**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

If you need help in understanding this document or if you would like a copy of it in large print please contact one of our Team Support Officers.

TITLE	Review into Possible Assistance to Residents during the Recession
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel
WARD	None Specific
STRATEGIC DIRECTOR	Heather Thwaites

OUTCOME

To provide an update on recommendations to mitigate the impact of the economic downturn made by the Finance Overview and Scrutiny Panel and approved by the Executive on 25 March 2010.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to consider the information provided in this report.

SUMMARY OF REPORT**Background**

Indications from the Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Small Businesses suggest that local firms are continuing to emerge from the economic downturn and are beginning to feel more confident about the future. Wokingham scored highly in a recent BBC "Experian" survey which identified the areas thought to be most resilient to public sector funding cuts and came out as the strongest overall Berkshire authority.

These findings were also reinforced by the Centre for Cities outlook published at the end of January 2011 which highlighted the Greater Reading economy including Wokingham, as one of the top five areas to watch in the UK with a high potential to create new private sector jobs.

The number of people claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) across Wokingham peaked in August 2009 and has since fallen steadily. At the end of December 2010, 1428 people were claiming JSA in Wokingham compared with 1869 in January 2010 a reduction of 24%. This trend is supported by an increase in the number of unfilled vacancies in Wokingham which was up by 55% at the end of December 2010.

Although these are all positive indicators, the economic outlook continues to be uncertain and the current volatility in global markets remains a concern.

Recommendation 1 - That advice and schemes already offered by the Council to assist residents and local businesses through the economic downturn be better publicised.

Information on the Council's website has been refreshed and pages redesigned to make them more accessible. New sections have been added, including information on vacant property units across Wokingham Borough aimed at helping individuals interested in setting up their own business (the information is updated every 48 hours). Businesses have been advised of the business rate referral scheme and the various discounts and

exemptions of business rates have also been promoted. Some 600 letters were dispatched to businesses in October 2010 providing information on changes to the small business rates relief scheme. The council has continued to help small business with their cash flow by paying all invoices below £2000 without delay – usually within 10 days.

The Economic Development Officer has continued to work closely with employer groups and local businesses and has met separately with over 30 businesses during the past 12 months. In addition, regular meetings have been held with members of the Chamber of Commerce to ensure they are kept up to date with the latest developments.

The Revenue and Benefits team have also continued to work closely with local residents providing help and guidance. In May 2010, the team received a Customer Service Award from the Cabinet Office for excellence in dealing with customer queries and promoting awareness. Between April 2010 and December 2010, there was an increase of 3.8% in the number of people claiming Housing and Council Tax benefit. During this period 2612 new cases were process with 8751 amendments (changes to existing cases). The amount of time taken to process these queries also improved during the same period.

The way the council engages with residents and businesses across Wokingham Borough is continuing to evolve as further changes to processes are made through Wokingham Direct.

Recommendation 3 - That the potential benefits and cost implications of a Berkshire wide Credit Union be further examined.

Berkshire Community Savings and Loans Ltd was launched in August 2010 based on the expanded Reading Credit Union. Its main aims were to:

- Provide loans to its members at very low rates of interest.
- Provide members with help and support managing their financial affairs
- Encourage its members to save regularly.

Targeted locations where residents need help have been identified and an initial service for has recently started operating out of the CABs office in Wokingham Town.

Wokingham has indicated to Community Savings and Loans that a contribution of £15k will be made which will be funded from the Proceeds of Crime Act monies. This is consistent with contributions made by some of the other Berkshire Authorities but significantly less then authorities such as Reading and West Berkshire.

Discussions are currently ongoing with Community Savings and Loans to ensure that the organisation is sustainable and financially viable during the coming months.

Recommendation 6 - That the Council continue to work with other organisations such as Connexions with the aim of reducing the level of those people not in employment or training in the Wokingham Borough.

Wokingham's NEET population is currently at its lowest level for four years. The actual average at the end of January was 4.9%, which is the best average score achieved since 2006 when the economic situation was far different than that faced by young people today. Wokingham's actual NEET population (16-18 yrs) at the end of January

2011 was 152 young people.

It is anticipated that the imminent changes to the measuring system, which in future will be based on where people live, will further improve the figures to be the strongest across Berkshire. However, the removal of the education maintenance allowance which means young people will not have the same level of financial support to attend further education courses is likely to have an unknown negative impact.

A further challenge will be the likely reduction in the service provided by Connexions due to changes in funding levels – the impact of this on Wokingham is currently under consideration. *A more detailed report is being prepared for the Children Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel.*

Discussions have also been held recently with Wokingham Job Support and Next Step to ensure that supported for adults seeking employment is targeted more effectively. As a result, an outreach pilot will start at the end of February in Winnersh and Next Step will be providing advice and guidance to job seekers at libraries in Woodley, Lower Earley and Wokingham.

Other Initiatives:

- A careers fair was held at Loddon Valley Leisure Centre in November 2010 attended by over 1800 young people from Wokingham's schools and supported by a wide range of businesses and education providers including HSBC, National Grid, Deloitte and Foster Wheeler. A follow up event is being planned for later this year.
- An event was held at Shute End in February to raise the awareness of apprenticeships with young people.
- The Council is supporting an initiative launched by the Forest School aimed at setting up a Business Academy to help young people interested in setting up their own business.
- Partners are being sought to provide additional help and support to individuals wanting to start-up their own business. A gap in service provision has been identified following the reduction in support services previously provided by Business Link.
- An event is being held in March aimed at promoting STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) to young people and help with future curriculum choices. It is being supported by a wide range of 'technical' businesses including BT, Sony and Proctor and Gamble.

Reasons for considering report in Part 2

None

List of Background Papers

N/A

Contact Andy Nicholls

Service Policy and Partnerships

Telephone No 0118 9746018

Email
andrew.nicholls@wokingham.gov.uk

Date 18 February 2011

Version No. 1