

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 14 December 2004.

PRESENT: Councillor Carr (Chair); Councillors Booth, Cole, Dryden, Mawston, Robson and Wilson.

OFFICIALS: T Abraham, J Bennington, G Brown, C Burnham, P Clark, E Jones, R Mitchell, J Ord, K E Robinson, P Slocombe and E Williamson.

**** PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Councillor Mrs B Thompson (Executive Member Social Services and Health) and Councillor N J Walker (Executive Member Resources).

**** APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Rogers and Rooney.

**** SCRUTINY OFFICERS**

The Chair welcomed Tracey Abraham, Temporary Scrutiny Support Officer and Georgina Brown, Assistant Scrutiny Officer to the meeting following their recent appointments to the Scrutiny Team.

NOTED

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made at this point of the meeting.

**** MINUTES**

The minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 26 and 30 November 2004 were submitted and approved.

REVENUE SUPPORT GRANT CONSULTATION PAPER 2005/06

The Director of Resources presented a report which gave an update of the proposals set out in the 2005/2006 Revenue Support Grant Consultation paper responses to which were required by Central Government by 11 January 2005.

The Board's attention was drawn to the main features of the paper in terms of the national and Middlesbrough position and to the representations to Central Government, which focussed on the following:

- a) maintained the phasing of increased Education resources to individual authorities which had resulted in £0.6m of Education resources being withheld;
- b) maintaining Council's support to the provision of minimum increase (floors) and the removal of maximum increases (ceilings);
- c) acknowledgement of the impact of the incorrect population assumptions on the Council but raising concerns as to the net migration assumptions;
- d) concern regarding the withholding of £0.6m of Education resources to Middlesbrough by the damping arrangements.

Reference was made to national special and specific grants which had increased by 7.9 % (£1.1bn) an analysis of which on the main areas of increase was currently being undertaken. It was noted that within Social Services approximately £367m of specific grants had been included within the FSS and additional funding of £100m had been made available for Children's Services (safeguarding children's grant).

The Board specifically noted the following: -

- nationally, the settlement for Local Government was above inflation for Education and Social Services;
- Middlesbrough Council had received a settlement above the average and the highest increase within Cleveland;
- an indication was given from the analysis so far that the settlement was approximately £500k better than the Council's planned assumptions;
- level of External Support had increased (6.8%) above that of the floor (4.0%) as outlined;
- an update of the Medium Term Financial Plan was currently being prepared.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted.

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2005/2006 AND 2007/2008 - REVENUE BUDGET

The Director of Resources submitted a report, which provided a broad summary of the current year's revenue issues; draft Revenue Budget 2005/2006; medium term financial position for 2005/06 - 2007/08; and Council Tax issues.

The report outlined the Budget Principles as approved by the Executive at its meeting held on 9 November 2004.

The key areas upon which the Board focussed were referred to under the headings outlined below.

Current Year's Revenue Budget:

- £1.5m efficiency savings identified, no cuts in services proposed and an extra £0.6m provided for Education to maintain its spending at the level of FSS;
- the structural budget pressures identified following the second quarters Budget Clinics in respect of the Enterprise Centres income targets £60,000, Coroners costs £43,000 and Health & Safety recharges £20,000 had been built into the Draft 2005/06 Annual Revenue Budget and the ongoing Medium Term Financial Plan.

Projected Revenue Budget - main variances from the current year's budget:

- pay awards had been provided for at the approved rate;
- the aggregate schools budget had been assumed to increase by 3% for inflation;
- additional provisions had been made within the budget for pay and inflation to meet the potential impact of job evaluation and to make a provision for potential Social Services independent price sector rises;
- provision had been made for the full year effect in 2003/04 of previous Council decisions in respect of the additional revenue costs associated with the new Art Gallery (£100,000) and the proposed new skatepark development;
- a restructuring of outstanding loans, together with the impact of Housing Stock Transfer and distribution of previous Cleveland County Council Debt had been estimated to produce efficiency savings of £1m in 2004/05;
- additional investment in relation to Environment in respect of waste recycling, junk job service, and weed control had been agreed by the Executive (12 October 2004) and ongoing impact had been built into the 2005/06 Draft Revenue Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan,
- other costs consisted of increased pension contributions £437,000; Structural budget issues £123,000, the potential additional cost of licensing £200,00 and investment in Communications, People Strategy and GIS.

Medium Term Financial Plan:

- level of resources estimated to be available had been based on the 2005/06 Revenue Support Grant settlement, released by Central Government on 2 December 2004;
- provision had been over the three year period for the fall out of specific grant funding for the warden service (£1m) and economic development activities (£0.4m) from 2006/07;
- the potential increase in superannuation rates (estimated cost £0.9m) had also been provided for from 2005/06.

Council Tax:

- Council had agreed to set the Council tax at a 'reasonable level';
- Central Government had assumed Council tax increase associated with the 2005/06 Revenue Support Grant Consultation paper was 4.8% increase;
- it was noted that Central Government retained the power to cap what they identified as excess Council tax increases.

Details were provided of the proposed consultation process on the budget proposals to be undertaken during January 2005 which would include an informal presentation to Members in December.

The Board noted that most service areas were within the overall budget limits. The current financial management arrangements in relation to Social Services, which had resulted in a small forecast net saving, were also noted.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted.

AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION - CULTURAL SERVICES

The Principal Corporate Development Officer submitted a report which outlined the Cultural Services inspection report (Appendix A) from the Audit Commission covering arts, arts development and theatres, museums, parks and open spaces, leisure centres and sports development and libraries.

Middlesbrough had been assessed as delivering a 'good service' and 'promising' prospects for improvement.

Reference was made to an Action Plan, which had been compiled, Appendix B of the report, which addressed the Audit Commission's recommendations, which included: -

- the Council should prepare a long term strategic overview for the delivery of cultural services beyond the current five year strategies;
- cultural services should focus on actions and activities to increase user numbers and to improve levels of residents' satisfaction with the service provision;
- criteria should be established to measure the outcomes of the cultural services in relation to corporate objectives and impacts on the local population.

ORDERED as follows: -

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That thanks be extended to all concerned for their efforts, which had resulted in the Council gaining an increased rating.

DRAFT COMMUNITY STRATEGY FOR LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

As part of the overall consultation process the Middlesbrough Partnership Manager submitted a report relating to the Draft Community Strategy.

It was noted that the end of the consultation period was January 2005, which would refine the Council's Community Strategy, which featured in the Council's Policy Framework.

It was suggested that the relevant aspects of the Strategy be considered by the respective Scrutiny Panel the comments from which would be considered together with an overall discussion on the Strategy by the Board at its meeting to be held on 8 February 2005.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted and the suggested way forward to consider the draft Community Strategy as outlined above be approved.

CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL – EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

The Chair of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel presented the findings of the investigation into the Educational Attainment of Children Looked After.

The Board considered the Panel's recommendations as follows: -

- (a) That where possible, when a child comes into care or changes placement, every effort should be made to try and arrange placements around a child's existing school.
- (b) That the allocation of an adequately resourced budget, to enable transportation to and from schools thereby ensuring continuity of schooling in the one school be explored.
- (c) That the school attendance of all Children Looked After is monitored at all levels and across departments, and that barriers to attendance are overcome.
- (d) That in order to have a more rounded and complete picture of Children Looked After in terms of performance and attainment in schools, a range of measures over and above performance in tests and exams be devised.
- (e) That arrangements be made to ensure that all children within this Authority's care hold an effective Personal Education Plan (PEP), which is reviewed every six months, ideally termly, and that action to meet identified needs is followed up.
- (f) That all PEPs become the joint ownership of the Authority's Social Services and Education Departments, demonstrating partnership working at both operational and strategic levels (in line with the new service area to come into operation from 1 January 2005, namely Children, Families and Learning Department).
- (g) That good practice for the PEP process be developed.
- (h) That the provision of high quality training for carers and professionals to share knowledge and information about the importance of the PEPs and its process be explored.
- (i) That this Authority, in its role of a corporate parent, be equally vigorous as carers are in ensuring that Children Looked After have their additional and special educational needs met through the special educational needs framework.
- (j) That to assist in the alleviation of bullying at school, the possibility of pairing a child looked after with a 'buddy' for friendship and support during school hours be explored.
- (k) That should a child looked after by this Authority miss school for any reason, appropriate arrangements are made to ensure that work is obtained to help 'catch up'.

- (l) That should a child looked after by this Authority be excluded from school on either a short-term or long-term basis, appropriate course work be made available by the specific school within a suitable timescale.
- (m) That Children Looked After by this Authority be supported in access to extra-curricular and non-curricular opportunities in leisure, sport and cultural activity.
- (n) That to assist in raising the profile of children in care within Middlesbrough and to impact on their ability to achieve in educational life, consideration be given to an Annual Celebrations Evening being held to recognise achievement.
- (o) That during the Authority's 2005/06 budget setting process, action be taken to allocate an appropriately costed mainstream budget to the Authority's Education of Children Looked After Service.
- (p) That a review be undertaken to explore the appropriate level of staffing to support the Authority's Education of Children Looked After Service.
- (q) That when holding future training seminars for Designated Teachers, the possibility of providing supply cover be explored to encourage attendance.
- (r) That consideration be given to Governors in taking an active role in raising the educational attainment of Children Looked After within their school, acting as a 'champion' where appropriate.

The Executive Member, Social Services and Health in supporting the scrutiny work undertaken gave an indication of the present situation and certain initiatives, which were currently being pursued.

ORDERED that the findings and recommendations of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel be endorsed and referred to the Executive subject to the following amendments: -

- i) that the title of the report be changed to 'Investigation into the Educational Attainment of Children Looked After by Middlesbrough Council;
- ii) that recommendations (o) and (p) be revised to be more specific and to reflect that such action was in response to the Panel's observations supported by the DfES and Education Protects Network regarding the level of staffing of the Education of Children Looked After Children Team; and to ensure appropriate allocation of resources to such a service.

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL - ALLOTMENTS

The Chair of the Environment Scrutiny Panel presented the findings of the investigation into the Council's approach to the service provision of Allotments.

The Board considered the Panel's recommendations as follows: -

- (a) That a Strategy for all of the Allotment Sites within Middlesbrough be developed to cover the next 5 years.
- (b) That within the proposed Middlesbrough Allotment Strategy, an Improvement Plan be compiled to include:-
 - (i) the improvement of allotment administration i.e. enforcement, site inspections, terminations and appeals procedures;
 - (ii) review of security on sites;
 - (iii) ground maintenance requirements of each individual site;

- (iv) rationalisation of under-utilisation of sites/provision of smaller sites; and
- (v) review of livestock/non-livestock sites.
- (c) That an Allotment Steering Group that represents stakeholder interests be established and accept responsibility for taking forward the proposed Allotment Strategy.
- (d) That the possibility of establishing a dedicated 'Allotment Officer' post and appropriate sources of funding be explored.
- (e) That the possibility of developing self-managed sites at Beechwood, Berwick Hills, Letitia Street and Whitehouse Farm be explored.
- (f) That appropriate support, assistance and financial resources be provided to those sites that wish to move towards self-managed sites.
- (g) That to assist in raising the profile of Allotments within Middlesbrough, publicity be undertaken on a regular basis.
- (h) That the revenue budget provision for the Authority's Allotment Service be reviewed during the 2005/06 budget setting process.
- (i) That consideration be given to re-establishing a forum where key Officers, Members and Allotment holders can effectively communicate with each other on a regular basis.

Members asked that they be involved in the development of a strategy and a further report be submitted to the Scrutiny Panel.

ORDERED that the findings and recommendations of the Environment Scrutiny Panel be endorsed and referred to the Executive subject to the following amendments: -

- i) that recommendation a) above be revised to reflect that the development of the Strategy should commence in 2005;
- ii) that in respect of recommendation b) above a review be undertaken in the first instance of the level of demand.

EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

As part of the Board's remit in terms of holding the Executive to account a report of the Senior Scrutiny Officer was submitted which identified the most recent entries to the Executive's Forward Work Programme since the last report to the Board. It was pointed out that this would not negate Non Executive Member's ability to call-in a decision after it had been made.

NOTED

SCRUTINY REVIEWS - CONSIDERATION OF REQUESTS

It was confirmed that no requests for scrutiny reviews had been received from the Executive, Executive Members, Non Executive Members and members of the public.

NOTED

SCRUTINY REPORTS - PROGRESS REPORTS

A report of the Chair of the Board and of each Scrutiny Panel was submitted outlining progress on current activities.

Specific reference was made to the following in respect of the Overview and Scrutiny Board: -

- a) Extraordinary Council meeting to be held on 20 December 2004 to consider the Council's licensing policy;
- b) following the recent LGA Conference the Chair confirmed his intention to submit a report to the meeting of the Board to be held on 11 January 2005 regarding the possible way forward in terms of a revised format in respect of Council meetings.

ORDERED as follows: -

1. That the information provided be noted.
2. That the suggested revised Work Programme 2004/2005 in respect of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel as outlined be approved.

NOTED

CALL IN REQUESTS

It was confirmed that no requests had been received to call-in a decision.