

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 5 May 2009.

PRESENT: Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors Cole, Dryden, C Hobson, J Hobson, Ismail, Khan, McPartland (as substitute for Councillor J A Walker), Purvis and Sanderson.

OFFICERS: J Bennington, G Brown, P Clark, A Crawford, J Ord, K Richards, P Slocombe, P Stephens and E Williamson.

**** PRESENT BY INVITATION:** The Mayor (Ray Mallon)
C Craig, Deloitte & Touche LLP
P Corner, Audit Commission.

****APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Cox, Mawston, J A Walker and Williams.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

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 7 and 16 April 2009 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

EXECUTIVE MEMBERS – ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

In a report of the Scrutiny Support Officer the Board was reminded of arrangements for individual Members of the Executive to attend meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and update Members on their respective work in terms of their aims, aspirations, objectives, priorities and any emerging issues. The process was part of the arrangements of 'holding the Executive to account' and also provided the opportunity for the Board to identify or highlight any issues of concern.

NOTED AND APPROVED

MAYOR

The Chair welcomed the Mayor to the meeting to advise on his key aims and objectives and any emerging issues of significance.

By way of introduction the Mayor gave an indication of the main areas of activity since being elected in 2002 the focus of which had initially been to more clearly identify the Council's areas of priority which had subsequently been refined and focussed upon over subsequent years in order to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

The Raising Hope initiative set out the vision for Middlesbrough and focussed on four pillars of environment, regeneration, business community and transport underpinning the education of young people and support for vulnerable people.

The Mayor had introduced the Reduction Agenda, which focussed on tackling priorities such as the root causes of problems on such areas as reducing crime, CO2 emissions, alcohol abuse, smoking, obesity, school exclusions, absenteeism and unemployment.

Reference was made to a document 'The Vision', which was currently being updated with a view to more clearly demonstrating to the public what Middlesbrough was all about in delivering the vision for Middlesbrough's regeneration.

The current priorities for Middlesbrough were wide ranging but Members' attention was drawn to two of the main priorities of the Youth Agenda and Public Health Agenda. It was acknowledged that there was much social deprivation and that public health had a large role to play in this regard to help tackle such issues.

The Mayor reiterated the need to address the continuing population drift, which had a significant financial impact on the Town. It was considered important to reflect the positive attributes of Middlesbrough and encourage people to instil pride in the Town. It was acknowledged that the population decline was for a number of reasons but specific reference was made to the current imbalance of housing stock with 50% of housing stock in Council tax Band A and therefore there was a need for further houses in Band B and upwards in order to attract additional and a wider range of population.

One of the key priorities in promoting Middlesbrough was to attract people to the Town Centre and despite increasing financial constraints help to encourage people to spend and assist in retail businesses to be profitable and secure employment.

In commenting on the impact of the current economic situation the Mayor referred to the likely action by the Government and referred to the highest public borrowing rate since 1945 and the likely implementation of higher taxes to fund public services. In determining the Council's budget strategy it was considered important to try and predict the likely consequences and safeguard the Council's priorities.

Whilst it was important to continue to deliver the best possible services and to maximise opportunities for the ongoing regeneration of the Town it had to be recognised that the rate of progress of some of the objectives may have to be less in view of the increasing financial constraints.

The Board discussed and sought clarification on a number of the areas highlighted by the Mayor.

The Board's attention was drawn to the varied work being undertaken as part of the Council's Youth Agenda. The Mayor spoke of his experiences in meeting with groups of young people and trying to ascertain what aspirations they had, if any. Given the extensive community based work being carried out it was felt that the overall culture was gradually changing but very slowly. It was confirmed however that the Council needed to continue to identify ways of engaging with young people.

Reference was made to the steps being taken to promote Middlesbrough and Members asked specific questions concerning a number of areas.

In terms of road signage on major roads the Mayor indicated that whilst the lack of appropriate signage referring to Middlesbrough was acknowledged it was considered less of a priority than pursuing objectives to increase the vibrancy of the Town especially take into account the current economic climate.

The Mayor confirmed the need to maximise the use of Centre Square and modify other useful areas such as Exchange Square in order to attract a wider range of population to use such areas in the Town Centre. Members suggested that it might be appropriate to undertake a scrutiny investigation on such a topic.

Although there still remained a strong will to undertake major projects as previously identified such as the Tees metro it was reiterated that the rate of progress was hindered by the economic downturn.

Whilst it was disappointing that Middlesbrough didn't receive City sub-region pilot status the Council together with neighbouring local authorities by means of Tees Valley Unlimited and the Multi Area Agreement would continue to pursue sub-regional issues.

ORDERED that the Mayor be thanked for the information provided and contribution to the meeting.

AUDIT COMMISSION – AUDIT AND INSPECTION LETTER 2008

The Corporate Performance Team Leader presented an introductory report on the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter 2008, which summarised the conclusions, and significant issues arising from 2007/2008 audit and inspection work at Middlesbrough Council.

C Craig from Deloitte Touche LLP and P Corner from the Audit Commission presented the Annual Letter to the Board and in overall terms confirmed a positive response. C Craig thanked the Authority for the work and commitment in assisting the organisation in its first year as external auditors.

The Board's attention was drawn to the following key messages in the Audit and Inspection Letter: -

- a) 'Middlesbrough was improving strongly and classified as 'four-star' in its current level of performance. There had been continued improvements in the accessibility and quality of services for local people, and the Council is making progress against all of its seven strategic priorities.
- b) The Council had been awarded Beacon status in 2007 for its approach to tackling climate change.
- c) The Council had taken early steps to monitor the changing environment in relation to the recent economic downturn and to put in place measures to minimise its impact as far as possible.
- d) The Council had improved on its Use of Resources scores. A level 4 overall assessment had been awarded due to the continued improvements in financial management and financial standing.'

The Board noted the following actions to be addressed by the Council: -

- i) The Council needed to maintain a strong, year-round focus on those areas highlighted in the annual performance assessment of services for children and young people, in particular the pace of progress against the plans to address areas for development in the Staying Safe outcome which were identified in both 2007 and 2008.
- ii) The Council needed to work with partners to address the aspects of fear of crime, which had failed to improve or have deteriorated.
- iii) The Council needed to work locally, in partnership across the Tees Valley and the wider region to address the risks posed by the economic downturn.

Specific reference was made to progress in improving services for children and young people and responding to recommendations in the 2007 Annual Performance Assessment report. The pace of progress was particularly good in relation to reducing the rate of teenage conceptions, which reflected the national trend.

The Board welcomed the positive comments and outcome of the report and extended congratulations to all concerned and noted the actions to be addressed by the Council.

Given the current economic climate reference was made to the difficulties facing local authorities in maintaining the rates of progress and improvement. It was felt that the Council could still remain ambitious but it was acknowledged that the pace of such improvements might have to change in some areas and that other ways of achieving such levels may have to be considered.

NOTED

STRATEGIC PLAN 2008 TO 2011 – REVISION 2009 TO 2010

Further to the meeting of the Board held on 7 April 2009 when details had been given of the agreed structure and outline timetable for the 2009/2010 revision of the Council's Strategic Plan 2008/2011 the Corporate Performance Team leader presented a report on the preliminary draft for the Board's consideration.

It was confirmed that the key achievements identified for 2008/2009 and planned actions for 2009/2010 had been considered by the respective Scrutiny Panels the feedback from which had been considered and a number of amendments had subsequently been made to the draft.

It was noted that further information would be provided in relation to performance indicator outturns and future targets together with comparative performance information. It was also intended for the content of the Plan to be refined in discussion with Departments with a specific focus on strengthening the action planning sections.

It was confirmed that further briefings would be held with the Scrutiny Panels and the final document presented to the Board in June 2009.

Members suggested that in future years the Board could carry out more in depth investigation of identified targets and how they compared with other local authorities.

ORDERED that the information provided be noted.

YOUTH SERVICE AND CONNEXIONS – FINAL REPORT – CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

The Chair of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel outlined the process of investigation by the Panel into Middlesbrough Youth Service and Connexions.

The Board considered the following recommendations of the Panel based on the submitted evidence: -

- i) That work is continued to ensure that the Connexions service is fully integrated into Middlesbrough Council to ensure that it operates at maximum efficiency and effectiveness.
- ii) That Connexions explores the development of links with targeted sections of local employers (for example the petro-chemical industry, local information and communication technology (ICT) providers), to assist in identifying training/employment opportunities for young people.
- iii) That work is undertaken by the Youth Service to improve contact rates and moves towards achieving targets in this area. This should include continued work with disadvantaged groups as well as promoting the service across the whole of Middlesbrough.
- iv) That work is undertaken in respect of areas which currently have little or no youth service provision such as Nunthorpe, Linthorpe and Marton – to examine how young people in these areas can be encouraged to access services. This could include, for example, use of the Outreach Team in such areas and a detailed examination of whether facilities could be provided at non-youth centre locations, such as community centres or schools, through initiatives such as the Youth Opportunities Fund or Extended Schools.
- v) That the extensive work which has resulted in the Council achieving reductions in excess of its target for young people who are not in education, employment or training ('NEET') is welcomed and that work is continued in this area to ensure that the latest, more stringent targets are also met. The Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel should be kept apprised of developments.

- vi) That, with regard to 'myplace':
- a) steps should be taken to ensure that the project is financially sustainable in the longer term – such as by ensuring that provision is made for mainstream budget funding, that income generation schemes are viable and that all external funding avenues are explored.
 - b) the issue of transport links should be fully addressed to ensure that the service is accessible to all young people. This should include links with developments such as the Boho project and Middlesbrough College and ensuring that transport is available to/from all areas of Middlesbrough at all times when 'myplace' is open.

ORDERED that the findings and recommendations of the Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel be endorsed and referred to the Executive.

CALL IN – OUTCOME – TOWN HALL COMPLEX REFURBISHMENT

In a report of the Senior Scrutiny Officer reference was made to the outcome of the meeting of the Board held on 16 April in accordance with the Authority's Call-In procedure. The Board had reviewed the decision made at an Individual Meeting of the Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development held on 26 March 2009 relating to the refurbishment of the Middlesbrough Town Hall complex.

The Board had agreed that the decision made at the Individual Meeting of the Executive Member for Regeneration held on 26 March 2009 should be not referred back on the basis of the evidence presented.

NOTED

SCRUTINY REVIEWS - CONSIDERATION OF REQUESTS – ROLE OF MEMBER – MAYORAL AND EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATION

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

The Scrutiny Support Officer submitted a report, which outlined a request from a Non-Executive Member to consider undertaking an investigation into the role of the Member in the Mayoral and the Executive Administration.

Taking into account the agreed criteria the Board considered the appropriateness of undertaking a scrutiny review into the suggested topic.

ORDERED that a scrutiny investigation be not undertaken.

SCRUTINY PANELS – PROGRESS REPORTS

A report of the Chair of each Scrutiny Panel was submitted which outlined progress on current activities.

NOTED

CALL IN REQUESTS

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

NOTED

THANKS – CHAIR – MEMBERS

The Chair thanked Members and Officers for their efforts and support during the current Municipal Year. In response Members thanked the Chair for her support and work throughout the year.

NOTED