

Annual Report of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels – 2015/16

Central Government funding has continued to decrease and the Panels have to a large extent concentrated their efforts during the year under review at achieving best value with diminishing resources, while at the same time endeavouring to explore innovative ways of working. Panels have undertaken a number of wide-ranging reviews, often through Task & Finish Groups, to consider whether key Council services continue to meet customer needs and remain cost-effective, efficient and productive.

Panels have continued to play a valuable role in strengthening relationships with partners. All three Panels have worked to involve key partners in the scrutiny of services and regularly gather evidence and views of partners during their work. The Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel invited representatives from the New Forest Business Partnership to meetings where discussions/reviews were taking place regarding the local economy and tourism. The Environment Panel continues to undertake an annual review of Project Integra and the Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel is attended by Tenant Representatives at every meeting.

Moving forward, any transformation in the provision/delivery of Council services is likely to entail new partners as well as strengthening existing relationships. The Panels recognise the need to ensure the continued involvement of external partners and service users where ever possible.

There have been two call-ins during the year under review: -

- The Health and Leisure Portfolio Holder's decision on fees and charges for Health & Leisure Centres, considered by the Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel; and
- The Planning & Transportation Portfolio Holder's decisions on car park charges, considered by the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Panel.

Both Panels confirmed the decisions made by the Portfolio Holders.

The Council adopted the Corporate Plan 2016–2020 at its meeting in February. This included the Delivery Plan which sets out how the Council aims to deliver its priorities. Key delivery actions for 2016-17 were also approved. The Panels recognise that their future work programmes will need to integrate and complement the delivery plan to ensure that decisions supporting these aims have been subject to robust scrutiny. All three Panels have taken this into account when setting their work programmes for 2016-17.

Looking ahead, the Council's scrutiny panels will play a vital part in the governance of decisions which ultimately have a significant impact on local people and the services the Council's provides.

The following pages set out some of the activities that have taken place during the year across the Council's three overview and scrutiny panels and their planned work and aspirations moving forward.

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios: Environment & Planning & Transportation)

Main Reviews 2015/16

Sky Lanterns

Consideration of the options available to this Council to address the harm being caused by sky lanterns had been initiated prior to the local government elections in May, with the substantive work being completed by a task and finish group once the new membership was in place. It was agreed that while the Council had few direct powers, it could exert influence; with town and parish councils being requested to refuse consent for the use of sky lanterns and similar items at events on their land; the inclusion of restrictions in leases/licences of council property as the opportunity became available; asking for tenants' co-operation; and joint working with the Forestry Commission and the National Park Authority, perhaps through a joint communications strategy. The relevant portfolio holders were advised of the Panel's conclusions.

Cemetery Space

A task and finish group has been working on the challenges facing this authority in providing sufficient burial space to meet the needs of local residents over the coming years. Work is progressing well towards the provision of additional cemetery space at Calshot.

The Panel, at the suggestion of the task and finish group, has supported an increase in the charges levied by this Council in order to prevent spaces within this District being more attractive to residents from adjoining areas than space in their own areas. This Council's fees, having been strictly controlled for local benefit, had fallen behind the market norm for the area. The Panel also supported a recommendation that the period for which an exclusive right of burial is granted should be reduced to 30 years. The granting of 50 or 100 year rights, historically, had sterilised the use of significant numbers of places where contact had been lost with the original purchaser. This was much less likely to happen with a 30 year grant.

Channel Coastal Observatory, National Oceanography Centre, Southampton

Members visited the National Oceanography Centre on 17 February to be briefed on their work and this Council's role in coastal protection locally, regionally and nationally. The visit was well attended. In addition to other members of this Council, members of the National Park Authority also attended.

The topics covered during the visit included an overview of the maintenance and capital schemes under development; and the funding to support the projects. There was also a briefing on the collection and analysis of key monitoring information. One of the key areas of focus for the future will be fund-raising through partnerships with a variety of organisations and individuals in order to support essential coastal protection works.

Other Coast Protection Issues

Coast protection issues, most particularly the funding arrangements for future coast protection schemes, have been under consideration during the year. A task and finish group is currently working on this issue. The Chairman of the Panel has also reported to the Panel on meetings of the Local Government Association's Coastal Special Interest Group and of the Environment Agency's Flood and Coast Risk Management Capital Grant Roadshow that she has attended.

Food Hygiene Service

The Panel has undertaken its annual review of the performance of the food hygiene service, in particular looking at the implementation of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. The scheme is proving very successful in encouraging food businesses to improve the standards of hygiene that they offer, with 95% of businesses in the District now rated satisfactory or better. The service's regulatory role continues to safeguard public safety, with action being taken where breaches of food safety standards are identified.

An issue for the future is the possible introduction of the “Eat out, Eat Well” Award which is proving successful in other areas in encouraging food businesses to offer healthier options. Some of the initial work with businesses could be done through the normal food hygiene inspection visits.

The Panel has asked for more comparative benchmarking information to be provided for future reviews of the performance of the service.

Household Waste Recycling Centres

The Panel has received an initial briefing from the County Council on their forthcoming consultation on measures to achieve significant savings against the cost of running the household waste recycling centres. The Panel has expressed some initial concerns, in particular requesting that sufficient detail is included in any consultation so that the public can make a realistic assessment of what is proposed. The Panel will consider this issue again once the formal consultation is published.

Portfolio Holder reports

The Environment and the Planning and Transportation Portfolio Holders both attend the Panel’s meetings on a regular basis and maintain a constructive dialogue on work in progress.

Project Integra

The Panel has undertaken its annual review of the performance of Project Integra, the partnership for waste management in Hampshire, in delivering its business and action plans in respect of waste disposal and recycling. The Panel was satisfied that the partnership was meeting the objectives in the action plan and was also planning for the future, aiming to increase the proportion of waste that was re-used or recycled; and also looking for ways to reduce the overall cost burden on the taxpayers of Hampshire. A proactive approach is being taken to exploring the markets for recyclable materials, focussing on those materials for which there is a market, with no net cost falling on tax payers.

Recyclable Materials

The closure of the papermill at Aylesford, Kent removed, at very short notice, the route through which Project Integra (Hampshire’s waste management partnership) disposed of the paper it collected for recycling. Project Integra had sought, as a matter of urgency, a replacement contract and the County’s waste paper is now sent to China for treatment. The Panel was concerned that the material was being transported, at significant environmental cost, in order to be treated. They therefore pursued with Project Integra why a UK based solution could not be found. The Panel was satisfied that the contract with China represented both the best economic return and a viable environmental option as the waste was transported in used containers, returning to China, that would otherwise be empty having delivered goods to the UK. The Panel has continued to urge Project Integra to seek a UK based contract once a viable option becomes available.

Call-in - Car parking Charges

Following a call-in of the decision not to raise car parking charges for 2016/17, the Panel considered issues relating to increasing flexibility in the charging structure to improve occupancy rates in certain car parks, with a consequent increase in the income realised. The Portfolio Holder advised the Panel of the rationale behind his decision not to increase charges. Having debated the issues it was accepted that the rationale behind the decision to leave the car parking charges unchanged was sound. It was concluded however that some of Cllr Harrison’s objectives could be achieved by the greater promotion of the long-stay parking clock, and this option was drawn to the Portfolio Holder’s attention.

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios: Housing & Communities and Health and Leisure)

Main Reviews 2015/16

CCTV

The Panel established a Task & Finish Group to consider the medium term position of the CCTV service in light of the fact that the current CCTV transmission and maintenance contract would expire in September 2016. The Group considered the future of the service including performance and location of cameras, as well as future investment to bring the system to current industry standards. As part of their investigations, the Group visited the CCTV control room at Bournemouth Borough Council to discuss technologies and transmission solutions with their System Manager. The visit highlighted areas where the Council's CCTV system could improve. The Group made recommendations to the Panel and the Cabinet that a joint procurement process be undertaken with Fareham Borough Council to source a transmission and maintenance provider, including priority works to upgrade the recording software. Members also requested that

- (a) Officers investigate alternative methods to fund the upgrading of CCTV equipment and examine any other revenue opportunities for the CCTV service;
- (b) A phased programme of camera replacement and control room refurbishment be undertaken, either as part of the conditions within the new transmission/maintenance contract, or as and when funds become available through achieving internal efficiencies and future revenue income; and
- (c) Officers discuss with individual Town and Parish Councils their commitment and future contributions to the system.

The recommendations of the Task & Finish Group will be considered by the Cabinet in the coming months.

Child Poverty

This Task & Finish Group was established to examine the levels of child poverty within the District and possible ways the Council could assist to mitigate the effects of these. As part of its research the Task & Finish Group invited key partners to a networking workshop. This proved invaluable in determining what services other organisations provided and where there were gaps and duplication. The feedback from the networking event was very positive and the Task & Finish Group recommended that the Council host an annual event of this nature. The Portfolio Holder was happy to support this proposal. The Group also identified ways in which the Council could improve its services, through training of front line staff to identify those in need and direct them to the services required. As the subject matter was wide-ranging and complex, the Task & Finish Group recommended that further, more focused investigation be undertaken. The Panel will now investigate the health and wellbeing of children from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community as part of their new work programme.

In addition, on the recommendation of the Task & Finish Group, a Community Transport Task & Finish Group was established to examine the Council's investment in community transport and the benefits for the local community, especially young people living in poverty. After reviewing the current initiatives being run by Community First New Forest (and part funded by the Council), the Group recommended that Community First New Forest be requested to undertake wider promotion of all schemes and undertake a feasibility study to explore the possibility of developing schemes to assist residents attending medical appointments. The Panel supported the recommendations put forward.

Credit Unions

The Panel, after receiving a presentation from the Council's Welfare Benefits Manager on the introduction of Universal Credit and the financial impact on some residents, felt that the Council could do more to signpost residents and tenants to financial assistance and guidance perhaps through Credit Unions. The Solent Credit Union was invited to give a presentation to the Panel on their services. Members heard that the Union had recently set up a service point in Hythe, with a view to opening more across the district. Service points were one stop shops, usually within a council or community building, for members and non-members, to seek basic monetary advice. The Solent Credit Union also provided loans to its members, offering individual rates depending on credit history and other personal circumstances, a 'rent direct' scheme for landlords and tenants. The Panel was keen to ensure that residents of the District, particularly those facing financial hardships, were able to access the services offered by the Credit Union easily, and requested that Officers work closely with the Union to ensure that further service points were set up within the district and well as communicating with Council tenants about the money advice and rent direct schemes available. Officers are now working closely with the Solent Credit Union to ensure that these aims are met.

Call-in – Health and Leisure Fees and Charges

The Panel reviewed the Health and Leisure Portfolio Holder's decision relating to Health and Leisure Centre fees and charges 2016 which had been subject to a call-in. The Panel considered the concerns raised by that re-defining 'senior' membership as age 65 and above from 60 and above would act as a disincentive for those aged 60-65 to exercise due to the increased cost. The Panel heard from the Portfolio Holder that the decision reflected the Government's retirement age policy. Re-defining the age policy would save the Council significant funds to re-invest in the Health and Leisure Centres which were already offering good value for money and were being subsidised by Council tax payers. The Panel decided to accept the Portfolio Holder's decision without change.

Work Programme Planning

The three new Executive Heads reporting to the Panel assisted the Panel in setting its work programme, within the context of financial challenges facing the Council and the Council's priorities/delivery action plan.

External Scrutiny

The Panel continues to value the input of key partners and Tenant Representatives as 'critical friends' in scrutinising the work of the Panel and the Council at large. The Tenant Representatives' contributions to the work of the Panel is valued, not only by expressing views in debate and sitting on Task & Finish Groups, but also by presenting recommendations to the Panel.

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL (Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios: Finance and Efficiency and Leader)

Work Programme

The Panel's Work Programme work during the year has been directed towards achieving the aims of both the old and new Corporate Plans. Government funding reductions and organisational changes mean the work programme will be updated further in the summer of 2016.

Throughout this year, there has been a strong emphasis on one of the Council's main priorities; Supporting Local Business, where the Council continues to seek to encourage opportunities for jobs and economic benefit to the area. These and other areas of the Panel's work are outlined below.

Supporting Local Business: Broadband Provision in the New Forest

The Panel has been monitoring progress with broadband provision in the New Forest, and invited representatives from British Telecom and Hampshire County Council to provide updates. It also received an update on progress with the production of the community broadband toolkit and community self-funded projects for the provision of broadband in rural areas.

The Panel believes that fast broadband has become essential for all communities, and that it is important to help deliver this facility to as many local residents as possible. Members were able to pass on to providers and facilitators the experiences of local people who have difficulty obtaining adequate broadband provision.

Arising from the Panel's involvement, it has been agreed that the Council, in collaboration with its partners, will produce a community broadband toolkit to help residents provide self-funded broadband projects in areas where superfast broadband is unlikely to be made available within a reasonable timescale. This toolkit will be launched at the New Forest Show in July 2016.

Supporting Local Business: Vibrant Villages/Town Centres

The Panel has had a number of discussions on supporting vibrant towns and village centres. It has received presentations from Ian Erridge, retailer and Chairman of Lymington Shop Watch, and Matthew Lawson, owner of Escape Yachting and Chairman of the New Forest Business Partnership.

It was noted that the New Forest Business Partnership had offered support training for retailers and other businesses at cost, and a recent session had also been run on social media. A proposal to arrange business workshops over the summer across the District has been agreed. The organisers would take on board that some areas, such as the South Waterside (Blackfield/Fawley area) were not primary tourism areas and might require a different approach.

A series of four area town and village centre workshops, designed and delivered by the Council in partnership with NFBP, are to be provided during the spring and early summer 2016.

Supporting Local Business: Young People

The Panel has established a Task and Finish Group to help bring about a reversal of the current lack of 'work-readiness' in young people. It is hoped that the Task and Finish Group will develop a workshop with schools, colleges and businesses to provide a better career profile for the hospitality industry to forge better links between colleges and employers and stimulate apprenticeship take-ups and improve work readiness.

The Panel considers that this is an important issue which should be addressed in partnership with business, the education sector and other statutory partners. It supported a proposal for the formation of a Task and Finish Group for members to gain a better awareness and understanding of the issues, and how they can actively engage schools, colleges and local hospitality businesses in the creation of a work readiness model to improve take up of local careers in the sector.

Supporting Local Business: Marine and Engineering Sector

The Panel has agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group to explore ways to help and encourage New Forest companies to export their goods and services, beginning with the marine sector.

Supporting Local Business: Promotion of Film and TV Production in the New Forest

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Screen Tourism Task and Finish Group, which had been set up to consider whether the Council should pay a subscription to Creative England to facilitate promotion of the New Forest for film making. If agreed, it was hoped the initiative could result in companies wanting to film in the New Forest, with the related commercial benefits to local hotels, the hospitality sector and other organisations.

It was noted that TV productions can spend between £500 and £20,000 per day on location, with feature film spends between £8,000 and £40,000 per day. In addition there was also the potential revenues from “film tourism”, where tourists visit film locations.

A final decision on the matter will be made in due course but Members felt the potential financial contribution was modest and could bring significant economic benefit to the local area.

Budget Task and Finish Group

The Panel received the report and recommendations of the Budget Task and Finish Group, which identified the need for a strategic review of Health & Leisure and Housing, as well as back office services. It also advocated exploring alternative service delivery models and the opportunity to provide services for other public or private organisations in a move to more commercial income generation, exploiting in-house expertise.

It also commented on fees and charges, grants, business sites, and provision of a crematorium within the New Forest.

The timing of future Budget Task & Finish Groups will be considered to improve its effectiveness and ensure the most accurate and up to date information is available to assist in the budget setting process.

A Task & Finish Group is also being set up to review customer access and more economical methods of service delivery (digital/channel shift opportunities).

Procurement Review

The Panel considered findings and recommendations of the recent Procurement Review Project (PRP). The Council’s current procurement spend is approximately £25 million. The purpose of the project was to ensure that the Council’s procurement operations were fit for purpose and took best advantage of modern technology and joint working arrangements with partners. There were opportunities to fundamentally change the approach to procurement within the Council, working in partnership to achieve maximum benefit through different delivery models, changes to corporate use of stores, and an emphasis on greater control of high value spends, whilst enabling key officers within services to undertake lower value spends with simpler processes.

Council Tax Discretionary Discounts and Empty Home Premium 2016/17

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group concerning the Council Tax Discretionary Discount Scheme for properties, including consideration of whether to apply an empty homes premium. No changes to the current scheme were proposed.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2016/17

The Panel considered proposed revisions to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for persons on low income as recommended by the Task and Finish Group.

The Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2016/17 was subsequently approved from April 2016, and a full and thorough review of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme will be undertaken in the summer of 2016.

Future reviews

- Young People – Work Readiness
- Care Sector
- Pay and Reward
- Customer Service Efficiencies (Transferring cost and demand and digitised service delivery through a fundamental review of customer services.)