

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Monday, 8th June, 2009.

Present:- Councillors Mann (Chair), Basharat, Coad, Davis, A S Dhaliwal, Pantelic and Walsh.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Grewal, Haines, Matloob and Parmar.

PART I

1. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

2. Membership of the Committee

It was noted that, since the Annual Meeting of the Council, Councillors Basharat and Coad had been appointed to the Committee. The Chair expressed his disappointment that the BILLD Group had not submitted any nominations to the Committee and he hoped that they would do so in the future.

3. Election of Vice-Chair

The Chair called for nominations of Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2009/10 municipal year. The nomination of Councillor Coad was moved and seconded. There being no other nominations, it was –

Resolved – That Councillor Coad be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2009/10 municipal year.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 16th April, 2009 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. Appointment of Scrutiny Panels

The Committee considered a report recommending the re-appointment of the four Overview and Scrutiny Panels for 2009/10 municipal year. The report set out the seat allocations that had been calculated to reflect actual political group membership and statutory proportionality entitlements. It was noted that the Council's Constitution stated that, as far as practicable, Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Scrutiny Panels should in total number reflect the political balance of the Council. This equated to four appointments to be offered to the Labour Group, three to the BILLD Group and one to the Conservative Group. The Administration had indicated that it would be offering the four Vice-Chair positions to the opposition groups.

Details of the nominations received from the political groups were submitted and the Committee was asked to appoint the four Scrutiny Panels and the

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Members nominated. Details were also presented of the co-opted Members for formal approval. It was noted that no nominations had been received from the BILLD Group for membership of the Scrutiny Panels.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Community, Leisure and Environment, Education and Children's Services, Health and Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panels be appointed for 2009/10 municipal year.
- (b) That the Committee note the allocation of seats to the Panels.
- (c) That the Committee agree the allocation of Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Panels on the basis as set out in the report and that the Panels be invited to appoint their Chairs and Vice-Chairs at their first meetings according to that formula.
- (d) That the Members as now submitted be appointed to serve on each of the Panels in accordance with the wishes expressed by political groups in respect of the seats allocated to them.
- (e) That the co-opted Members as listed in the report be appointed to the Education and Children's Services and Neighbourhoods and Renewal Scrutiny Panels.

6. Member Call-in - The Council's IT

The Strategic Director of Resources stated that as he would be reporting in detail to the July meeting of the Committee on the Council's IT, including the provision of a second computer room, he had not prepared a report for this meeting. The whole issue would be looked at in detail at the meeting on 2nd July.

7. Statement of Accounts 2008/09

The Strategic Director of Resources made a comprehensive presentation to the Committee on the Statement of Accounts 2008/09 prior to their consideration by the Cabinet on 16th June and an extraordinary meeting of the Council on 25th June. The final outturn position on the budget was a surplus of £9,000 and the position on balances was £5.1m as against his recommendation as Section 105 Officer of a minimum of £5m. He outlined the financial position of the Council in detail, referring in particular to the fact that the capital programme had achieved a spend of £56.2m, which was the highest level of spend in any one financial year. He commented on the current difficult financial situation nationally and on the measures being taken by the authority to protect the Council's interests.

On completion of his presentation, Members asked a number of questions of detail including the following:-

- A Member referred to the fact that the accounting requirements now required the authority to show a loss in respect of the reduction in the value of the Council's assets, amounting to some £50m in the current year. Whilst this was a financial requirement, it did not have a major

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effect on the actual budget and may be reversed once the economy recovered. Likewise, it did not have any major effect on the setting of the Council Tax and although it may start to impact in future years, the effect would be very small.

- A Member sought clarification as to why there had been such a large spend on the capital budget in the current financial year. The Director explained that this was partly because of the monies being invested under the Decent Homes programme but, in addition, there was a substantial General Fund capital programme including investment in major projects including Art at the Centre, the Heart of Slough, the Council's IT systems and the accommodation strategy.
- A Member asked whether the removal of ringfencing in respect of various grants made to the authority under the Area Based Grant (ABG) could have an impact on certain areas of the Council which might lose their funding stream. The Director responded that the allocation of the ABG was now supposed to be undertaken through the Local Strategic Partnership alongside the authority's partners, who would decide where to target spending for the benefit of the community based around the targets identified with the Government Office for the South-East and through the Comprehensive Area Assessment. This was intended to be a joint funding exercise, although up until now, only local authority funds had been included within the ABG. He commented that, at present, it was difficult for funding to be reallocated to other areas as there was an expectation that services would continue to be funded. However, over time, the thinking was that funding would be increasingly targeted at the identified priority areas.
- A Member asked whether the Council was likely to be reimbursed with all of its investment in the Icelandic Hereditable Bank given recent press reports that investors were likely to get their money back. The Director commented that, notwithstanding the positive messages that were being received, provision had been made in the budget for the worst case scenario as it was right to take a prudent stance on these matters.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

8. Forward Agenda Plan

The Committee noted its forward agenda plan for future meetings.

Particular reference was made to the item requested at an earlier meeting concerning the scrutiny of the implications for the town of a third runway at Heathrow Airport and the Chair suggested that it may be appropriate for a special meeting of the Committee to be held to consider the item in detail with representation from various interested parties both in favour and opposed to the proposal. Members discussed the implications of such a meeting and the need to ensure that there was a balanced debate. There was also some concern that the meeting needed to be properly controlled and as such the idea of a "public meeting" would not be appropriate as this would be difficult to manage. It was also suggested that sufficient time should be allowed so

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that proper arrangements could be made to ensure that all of the key witnesses could attend.

Following further discussion of the matter, the Chair agreed to discuss the issue with his Vice-Chair and with appropriate officers and the Committee would be offered the opportunity to discuss the matter further at its next meeting in July.

Resolved – That the forward agenda plan be noted, and that further consideration be given at the next meeting to the proposed scrutiny of the implications of a third runway at Heathrow Airport.

9. Chair's Comments

The Chair stated that one of his aims in the current year would be to widen the scope of Scrutiny and engage more people in the process, including members of the public. He was intending to establish a series of informal "Scrutiny Surgeries" where he with the Vice-Chair and an Officer would make himself available in Town Hall on a regular basis so that Councillors and members of the public could raise issues of concern that they wished to have scrutinised by the authority. If the matters were considered appropriate for Scrutiny, they would be brought forward to the Committee or to the appropriate Panel for consideration. Casework items would be directed to the appropriate place within the authority. He also hoped to engage the local press more fully in the Scrutiny process than had been the case in the past.

Whilst welcoming the proposal, some Members had concerns that any such process needed to be carefully controlled so that particular individuals or interest groups did not try to use the process as a political platform. It was pointed out that Members would have the final say as to whether any issues were subject to Scrutiny.

The Chair also requested that, in future, Officers provide details to the Committee for information of all grants made to voluntary and other organisations so that the position could be monitored by the Committee. He similarly requested that details be provided on a regular basis for the Committee of those grants received from central government for specific purposes so that the Committee was aware of the position.

10. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday, 2nd July, 2009.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 7.45 p.m.)