

25th August 2009

To: - Sunita Sharma

Copies to: - Ruth Bagley, Councillor Derek Cryer, and Members of the BILLD and Conservative Groups

Dear Sunita

Re: - The Overview and Scrutiny Process

As I explained in our recent constructive conversation Ruth Bagley asked me if I could endeavour to persuade the BILLD Group to participate fully in the Overview and Scrutiny process. I have discussed the issue with those members who are not away on holiday. The BILLD Group members are not inflexible in attitude. They all believe that an effective Scrutiny process would be beneficial and in the interests of residents, staff and SBC. Consequently they would like to participate fully and make the process a success. Recent developments have done nothing, however, to change their perception that the controlling Labour Group is still determined to manipulate and control the process. As several members have emphasised, three different BILLD Group leaders have raised the Issue at Chief Executive/Group Leaders Meetings without securing any firm commitment from the Labour Group Leader to even limited reform. (I have not circulated copies of this letter to the Controlling Group because to do so would immediately invite wrecking tactics!)

As I mentioned, after further discussion with Councillor Munkley we have agreed that I should initiate an Individual Member Call-in on an important subject. If that call-in is allowed to proceed and is not sabotaged it might encourage BILLD Group members to modify their opinions. I have not completed the Member Call-In form because the form does not provide for the call-in I have in mind. The form demands one of three criteria: -

1. A decision or proposed decision of the Cabinet or a Committee detailed, or
2. The decision of an Officer taken under delegated authority, or
3. A review of other executive functions of SBC or matters connected with those functions.

These requirements need to be revised. They are too narrow and too introspective. As defined they would prevent the cross Partner scrutiny that the Government and the Audit Commission are seeking to encourage. The topic that I have selected does not meet the above criteria. Nevertheless it is important and it is one that the Government, the Local Government Association, the Audit Commission, Ofsted, Lord Laming, Judges, the NSPCC, the Salvation Army and University Research Units have all emphasised requires immediate and continuing scrutiny. The topic is: -

*** Child Protection Policies and Practices within the Borough of Slough as pursued by Slough Borough Council, NHS Authorities, the Police, the Probation Service, the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, and any other relevant Partners within the Borough of Slough.**

I have selected this topic as my Individual Member Call-in for four main reasons: -

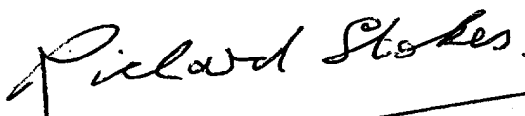
- Child Protection is of obvious importance to the people of Slough, especially all our children.
- The Government, the LGA, the Audit Commission, Ofsted, Lord Laming, several Judges, the NSPCC, the Salvation Army and University Research Units have all emphasised the lack of adequate scrutiny in Child Policies and Practices and the urgent need to initiate a thorough examination and analysis of all Child Protection Policies and Practices.
- Slough Borough Council has not previously effectively initiated this particular scrutiny.
- For some months I have been pursuing an individual scrutiny process and I have acquired enough evidence to satisfy me beyond doubt that there are serious deficiencies (especially with the policies and practices of two of our Partners).

I envisage the following scrutiny process: -

- SBC and all the relevant partners would be invited to explain and discuss their Child Protection Policies and Practices.
- The relevant Partners would be invited to separate meetings in order to facilitate the scrutiny of individual policies and practices and to assess Partner co-ordination.
- The invitations would be extended in "broad topic" terms without including detailed questions. (This is important to prevent the "public relations" responses that detailed pre-meeting questions often invite.)
- As the process could involve six meetings some meetings should be held during the day time to avoid excessive evening demands on Officers.
- Where appropriate meetings should be held on Partner premises to help with the facilitation of requests for urgent additional information which might arise during a meeting.
- Ideally the Scrutiny Panel should include some Members with investigative skills and who have read Lord Laming's reports. (For example, Councillor O'Connor is knowledgeable and is concerned about Child Protection. I do recognise that she has a health problem but as she is no longer a member of the Cabinet she might be prepared to serve on a specialist scrutiny Panel).
- During and at the end of the Scrutiny process we should make action recommendations and subsequently scrutinise the implementation, partial implementation, or non-implementation of those recommendations.

Would you please discuss any problems or difficulties with me?

Thank you.


Richard Stokes