

MEETING OF THE REGENERATION,
ENVIRONMENT HOUSING AND MEETING
OF THE REGENERATION,
ENVIRONMENT HOUSING AND
COMMUNITY SAFETY, SCRUTINY AND
PERFORMANCE PANEL

Held at the Leather Museum, Walsall on
16 March 2005 at 6.00pm

PRESENT

Councillor I Shires
Councillor Yasin
Councillor Coughlan
Councillor Robinson
Councillor Harris
Councillor Towe (substitution)
Councillor Turner (substitution)

OFFICERS

Keith Stone
David Elsworthy
Debbie Wiggins

SCRUTINY SUPPORT

Debbie Breedon
Katherine Morris

Councillor I Shires welcomed everyone to the meeting.

CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Delete:	Councillor Aslam
Substitute:	Councillor Turner
Delete:	Councillor Harrison
Substitution:	Councillor Towe

APOLOGIES

No apologies were submitted.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

The members of political groups represented on the panel indicated there were no whipping arrangements for any of the political parties in respect of the items on the agenda. There were no declarations of interest.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Regeneration Environment Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny and Performance Panel held on 26 January 2005 were agreed as being a correct record of the meeting.

WORKING GROUP FEEDBACK

REGENERATION WORKING GROUP

Councillor I Shires gave a brief update on the work of the Regeneration working group and explained that the group were arranging a demonstration of accessibility planning software. He said that the software had been purchased by the Council and the purpose of the demonstration would be to show its full potential by allowing users to layer different projects such as transport systems and infrastructure. He said the software would also help demonstrate how much strain might be put on the current infrastructure by various projects and also will show us what we would need to do, with the help of partners, to relieve this strain.

He continued that transport issues impinge on other areas and authorities, and should be of great interest to the panel as a whole.

Councillor Coughlan commented that the group need to be honest and learn lessons from the regeneration projects from the past and to spell out that regeneration will have a larger affect across the borough and benefits people in the district centres as well.

Councillor Shires agreed that this was not just about roads but also about ensuring the district centres survived and flourished.

Keith Stone agreed with members and advised that Tim Johnson and his team were currently working on projects involving the district centres and that approval had been given to recruit a small number of posts for research purposes. There followed a discussion about resources to carry out research work. Councillor Shires said that we needed to get the message back into the system to have an affect on next year's budget. Councillor Coughlan agreed and said that members need to get more involved in scrutiny to move it in the right direction. He added that information is not handed on a plate to members and it is their responsibility to ask questions.

Members noted the verbal update and agreed to receive further feedbacks.

TELECOMMUNICATION MASTS

Deb Breedon gave a brief feedback on the work to date. This includes the member development event where the Mobile Operators Association and the operators themselves will be present for members to ask questions relating to this subject. She advised that the event has been postponed due to operators schedules but will be rescheduled soon, she said other parties invited were

Serco, WHG, Development Control Committee and the Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

David Elsworthy added it was a shame that the original event was postponed as this is an important subject. He continued that we were developing a set of guidelines to support planning applications in relation to telecommunication masts and that research of other authorities in conjunction with the Government guidelines was ongoing to ensure we have the best possible guidelines and that the group has also agreed to write a letter to the LGA to support their lobby of Government to remove permitted development rights.

Councillor Towe asked if Walsall Council is talking to other authorities about this. David Elsworthy responded that officers are researching other authorities work and looking at best practice examples.

Councillor Towe informed the panel that there had been information in the press about an extra 100,000 new masts and asked if this affected Walsall. David replied that this would have an effect and that there is a need to get consultation underway, recognising that the masts need to go somewhere as there is demand for them.

David Elsworthy endorsed what Councillor Shires had said on the work of the scrutiny panel, he said members had become actively involved in the research and work of the group.

Members noted the work of the group.

CPA IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Councillor Coughlan briefed the panel members from the notes of the last meeting; he said that there had been real pressures on the housing service but that things had now settled down. He advised that a strategy had been developed, was fit for purpose and now the strategy had to be monitored. The number of properties managed now was down to 19,000 but that there was an increase in the number of privately rented properties.

Councillor Towe asked why there was a dramatic increase in the number of homelessness people. Councillor Coughlan replied that this could be the result of an increase in the breakdown of marriages and other social issues.

Members thanked Councillor Coughlan for the update and agreed to receive further updates.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW UPDATE – BUSINESS SECTOR AND MARKETS

Debbie Wiggins submitted a document that detailed the key stages of the reviews.

(See Annexed)

She said the purpose of the review was to test the existing structures of Business Sector and Markets and advised that the process of the review included; an initial assessment, assess & analyse and then a conclusion to

the review. Debbie said that there was she would be happy to keep the panel members informed of progress.

Councillor Shires asked for any comments from members and said that this is an issue the Local Neighbourhood Partnerships (LNPs) should be consulted on.

Members noted the update.

PLANNING IMPROVEMENT PLAN UPDATE

David Elsworthy referred members to the document 'Planning Performance Review Improvement Plan 2003/4'.

(SEE ANNEXED)

David outlined the improvement plan update and highlighted to members that he was happy to discuss any element of the document with them. He advised that 95% of the tasks outlined in the document are on track. He said that there had been some problems with the new MIS software system and the recruitment and retention of staff, but that there were good news stories in terms of the speed of delivery process, delivering the improvement plan and excellent customer service.

Councillor Shires asked for any comments.

Councillor Towe said that Development Control Committee was working well and that the meetings had settled down to give all parties opportunity to state their case and participate in reasoned argument, he said this was a big step forward. David thanked Councillor Towe for the comments and said that a lot of change had happened as a result of working group consisting of senior members and officers of the council to consider the best way forward. He said that the recommendations from the working group were made twelve months ago and that now systems were in place as good as any other in the country. Councillor Shires added that as part of his case work, he had noticed the number of complaints had dramatically dropped and that this was probably because issues were being addressed. He said it was a move in the right direction.

Councillor Shires asked whether during the consultation period of a planning application there was a standard practice that dictates how many members of the public should be written to. David Elsworthy replied that the legal minimum requirement is that notice is erected on site, however the council do aim to write to people who have common boundaries with a property requesting planning permission. If it is clearly a controversial application they do extend beyond the minimum but it depends entirely upon the type of application. He agreed to get back to Councillor Shires on any individual cases.

Keith Stone added that the information presented to the panel members only showed the fourth quartile figures and that the new figures for the outturn due in April 2005 will show a decrease on these figures. He said the figures are significantly better and are sustainable.

Members welcomed the improvements made and agreed to continue to monitor the update

ENVIRONMENT INSPECTION UPDATE

Keith Stone gave a presentation on the environment inspection update. He said that officers had taken a conscious decision to build the improvements identified into the service plan for the service.

(SEE ANNEXED)

During the presentation Keith Stone highlighted a number of good news issues:-

- that generally cleanliness had improved particularly in the Town Centre;
- road casualty figures have fallen and road conditions appear to have improved.
- that performance indicators were generally performing above average
- that the prospects for improvement were excellent due to the investment in services improving

In response to questions by Councillor Shires relating to garden waste, Keith Stone confirmed that the amount of garden waste collected had increased due to the recycling initiatives but that this in itself meant the authority is penalised in terms of collected waste.

Councillor Shires asked for comments. Councillor Robinson said that it was disappointing that targets had been missed on recycling at the beginning of the year. He requested that once the plan was complete could the Blakenall/Bloxwich LNP's receive the presentation to make sure that the LNP's and the council's aspirations match on this issue. Keith Stone replied that this could be done. Councillor Shires added that this is a golden opportunity to make a voice on these issues and engage the public. Keith Stone agreed that this would encourage local people to contact the council via the LNP and would assist in tackling local problems for local people. It was agreed that the presentation would be offered to all LNP's chairpersons and that the update be noted.

KEY DISCUSSION – REVIEW OF THE YEAR

Deb Breedon opened the item by briefly outlining what we wanted to achieve from this exercise. She explained that all comments would be taken back to the 'Review of Scrutiny' event on 13th April 2005. Included in the discussion for information was the work programme for 2004/05 and a document outlining the outcome over the year.

(SEE ANNEXED)

Members were asked to look through the questions we had put to them and open a discussion on how they felt.

Members were first asked how things went generally over the year. Councillor Turner said that scrutiny was picking up and moving on, although extra resources were needed for research. Councillor Towe commented that the working groups were good and were moving in the right direction. Councillor Coughlan said that there was a natural progression of improvement. A lot more work still needed to be done and that scrutiny was severely under resourced. Councillor Coughlan also commented that he could benefit from a template for task and finish subjects. Councillor Harris commented that we keep too much good news information to ourselves and we are responsible for returning best value to the constituents. He continued that we need to connect more with people on the issues that are important to people.

The members were asked to comment on any training they have received. Councillor Turner said that the training had been very useful and the only negative he could see is that there were constantly no members of the public at the scrutiny panel meetings. Councillor Shires replied that members of the public would only attend when an issue they felt strongly about was being discussed. He continued that the real work took place in the working groups and urged members to get involved. Keith Stone said that officers can assist in scoping projects for work groups and recognised the problems members have had scoping large areas of work.

Councillor Shires said that members would also benefit from some refresher training on performance indicators, service plans and risk.

Members were advised that comments would be forwarded to the annual review meeting.

FORWARD PLAN

Members received the forward plan and were asked by the chairman to make any comments.

Councillor Coughlan said that the dates on the forward plan do not give scrutiny much opportunity to find out further detail, so therefore scrutiny is failing on the forward plan. Councillor Shires commented that we need more information on each item and he proposed that all members are circulated the forward plan.

Councillor Robinson asked why on item 84/04 (Travellers Strategy) was Councillor Paul the contact member when surely this should be an environmental issue. Keith Stone commented that it was a valid point that needed to be taken back to Jason Macglip. Deb Breedon said she would contact Jason and try to action these changes for the New Municipal Year.

Members noted the forward plan

TERMINATION OF MEETING

8.20pm