MEETING OF THE ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 2005   2.30 PM

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Robert Conboy
Councillor Nick Craft
Councillor John Hurst
Councillor Albert Victor Kerr
Councillor Mano Nadarajah (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Shorrock
Councillor Ian Stokes
Councillor Michael Taylor (Chairman)
Councillor John Wilks

OFFICERS

Chief Executive
Scrutiny Officer
Director of Operational Services
Communications Manager
Elections Officer
Assets and Facilities Manager
Scrutiny Support Officer

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Brailsford

29.   MEMBERSHIP

The panel was informed that Councillor Stokes was replacing Councillor Radley for this meeting only.

30.   DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none declared.

31.   ACTION NOTES

These were noted, subject to the inclusion of an invite to BT to discuss Council information points at payphones with the conclusions for note number 20.

32.   FEEDBACK FROM THE EXECUTIVE

At its meeting on 7th November 2005, Cabinet had referred 'smartcards' and broadband for members to the DSP. These were covered by subsequent agenda items.

33. E-GOVERNMENT

<u>Customer Services Centre Update</u>

The Director of Operational Services explained that the development of the customer services centre covered the priority areas of access and communications. The introduction of this centralised service point, which would be based in Grantham and then rolled out to area offices, had also required a review of all service areas and office accommodation to ensure that back office systems would enhance the frontline service.

The Assets and Facilities Manager gave a presentation on the design proposals for the centre. Tenders for extension works to the Abbey Gardens entrance area had been received and so costs could be better calculated. Planning permission had now been granted and once a non-key decision had been made on the tenders, works could commence mid January with completion projected for July. The presentation showed proposed internal designs based on a specification provided by the Council. It included a reception desk, corporate visitor waiting area, customer waiting area, ten customer service booths, display areas, children's' play area, plan viewing area and three interview rooms. Transitional arrangements for current customer service areas were explained.

The panel discussed the proposal with the officers, and members were very supportive of the design. It was suggested that the work on the public toilets at Abbey Gardens could be combined with the works on the customer services centre to limit disruption. This was noted. Members raised a few queries about the design, which were answered accordingly. Other comments included: the need to retain an attractive exterior to the building; whether the Council's address would need changing on corporate stationery if corporate visitors would be using the Abbey Gardens entrance on Avenue Road rather than St. Peter's Hill; the need for a water-cooler as a minimum provision of customer refreshments; the need to consider theatre access and deliveries; and the need to fully engage with the public on the new centre with visual communication including design displays at the works site.

Conclusions:

(1) To endorse the design proposal by Paragon Interiors to Cabinet.
(2) That Cabinet be recommended that any promotional screens in the customer services centre include information on forthcoming council meetings.
(3) To request that a presentation be made to the DSP at a future meeting on the style of interaction between customers and the advisors and the training that will be provided.

<u>Moving Towards a Cashless Office</u>

Alongside the development of the customer services centre, the E-government working group had scrutinised cash collection. The group's report, as appended

to the agenda, was considered by the panel; Councillor Nadarajah, a member of the group, gave further details. The working group's latest action notes were appended to the report. Councillor Nadarajah highlighted the significant amount of cash handled by all area offices and the need to investigate methods of collection. The main proposal was to introduce a service such as 'allpay,' whereby payments could be made at a number of outlets throughout the district using the service, rather than at the Council's area offices. Advantages and disadvantages of this service were highlighted in the report. Most significantly, there will be year on year savings, a greater number of locations where council bills can be paid and an increased use of local shops and post offices. Car park income had also been scrutinised as a separate issue and the results of a recent payments survey were circulated.

The working group had also made a recommendation to increase the number of direct debit payment dates for council tax payers. Options were set out in the report. The Vice-Chairman stressed that even though additional dates would decrease the interest received, this had been accounted for in the cost/benefit analysis.

Councillor Nadarajah was thanked for the report and particular interest was noted in the 'allpay' style service because it would enhance rural economy. It was suggested that this be given a high priority. It was also noted that public engagement was a key factor in the success of any change in cash collection. The Vice-Chairman assured the panel that the working was paying close attention to requirements for public engagement and communication. This was discussed further by the panel. Members asked whether or not discounts could be offered for taxpayers using direct debit. It was understood that there was no provision for this within the law, but members were keen that this be looked into and confirmed.

Conclusion:

To support the recommendations of the working group:

(1) **Cash payments stop before the opening of the customer services centre;**
(2) **An 'allpay' type service be introduced, as a matter of priority, and direct debit payment dates be increased;**
(3) **A full Council decision be made on this by mid-December 2005.**

34. **MEMBERS' USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Members had before them notes from the meetings of the Members' IT Working Group on 22nd September and 20th October 2005. Notes from the meeting held on 8th November 2005 were circulated at the meeting. Councillor Nadarajah, the lead member of the working group, highlighted the recommendations contained within the notes, which were discussed by the panel.

The new system being rolled out on members' laptops was highly praised as a

simple interface for members. Councillor Nadarajah commented on the high standard of the IT helpdesk but members considered that there should be an evening provision, to which Councillor Nadarajah stated that he would look into this. The recommendation concerning training prompted some discussion on what members thought would be the best training solution. It was agreed that those in the recommendation were sufficient. It was suggested that members should only be sent the frontsheet but this was not possible as members were allowed to request full paper copies. The recommendation concerning broadband was also supported as this would provide a comprehensive desktop support for members, facilitate a better service for constituents through their ward member, reduce printing costs for agendas and assist in the expediting of information.

Conclusions:

(1) That the following be recommended to the Access and Engagement Portfolio Holder:

(a) To support the implementation of the new menu style interface for members' laptops;

(b) To recognise that individual councillors have their own problems with using their laptops and therefore need addressing individually;

(c) To encourage members to write out or print error messages to assist in the communication to ICT of problems with laptops;

(d) To approve that members of the Members' IT Working Group contact those members who did not respond to the 2005 Laptop Survey and approach them individually by setting up a meeting with the members and an appointed mentor from the working group.

(e) That training for members on the use of ICT be provided through a structured portfolio of training options to cater for the variety of training needs. This to include:

- **One on one training**
- **Small groups**
- **Self study CDROMS with video demonstrations**
- **IT Buddies (with support)**
- **Supported learning playdays**
- **An integrated learning approach to training e.g. 'laptop month'**

[Priority be given to those members with most difficulties in using their laptop and new users. Level of previous training will not affect the prioritisation of future training.

Training to be provided, where possible and suitable, on days when committee meetings are scheduled to enable members to attend both in one visit to the council offices].

(2) That the following response be made to Cabinet on its Broadband for Members proposals:

Cabinet Proposal	Scrutiny Response
1. The Cabinet supports in principle the introduction of Broadband to all Members in order to improve the utilisation and effectiveness of their home working arrangements;	Supported
2. A strategy be developed to eliminate the existing duplication of costs in printing and postage of reports as members adopt new working practices;	Supported
3. Funding to be provided for a start up programme of Broadband connectivity. These costs will reduce over time but, initially, estimates indicate between £15,000 and £25,000 in year one, reducing to an ongoing annual cost, in the future, of around £10,000, depending on negotiations with suppliers;	Supported – The Members' IT Working Group to scrutinise procurement for broadband, recommend a specification and invite the Procurement Officer and Portfolio Holder to assist.
4. Plans to deliver the equivalent savings of approximately £10,000 per annum be drawn up to fund the additional investment;	Supported – It is suggested that cost savings would be established from less printing. The Members' IT Working Group to scrutinise this with assistance from Accountancy and the Corporate Director

Alternative Option	Scrutiny Response
A – Improve the e-mail delivery access problems by ensuring file sizes being delivered are below a certain size. This should already be in place but restricts functionality.	Not supported - this would be very restrictive. It is difficult to know where to pitch the restriction level. It is dependent on too many different factors. It would be very difficult to implement.
B – Produce CD Roms with the Members mail and documents. These would be posted to the Member's address.This option could be utilised for those not on Broadband links.	Not supported – a CD Rom would only be as good as the time it is burnt. Additional information that would be instantaneously published on modern.gov would not be up to date on the CD Rom thereby limiting communication. CD Roms would duplicate work already done on producing

	committee papers on modern.gov. CD Roms would take the focus completely way from what we are trying to achieve in encouraging the comprehensive use of electronic communications, which is evolving at the present time. CD Roms for those members who cannot receive broadband, may be a suitable alternative to paper agendas.
C – Let Members introduce Broadband as they see fit with an allowance being paid as they adopt its use. The Council would negotiate with and recommend a supplier.	**Not supported - it will be cumbersome to monitor and to negotiate individual broadband deals. A cheaper deal can be achieved via one negotiation with suppliers. Members' IT should be uniform, consistent and seamless to improve usability for members as well as supporting staff.**
D – Introduce more docking stations at Council Offices e.g. Stamford, Bourne and the Deepings for quick updates on files.	**Supported – This could be an enhancement to the introduction of broadband, especially for those members who are unable to receive broadband at home.**

35.   STAKEHOLDERS' CONFERENCE

The Chief Executive presented his report number CEX309, which set out the proposals for the Stakeholders' Conference on 8th December 2005. This would take the form of a citizens' jury "judging" the council on its value for money in delivering certain priority services. The Chief Executive spoke about the proposed process for the day and how Nic Streatfield, from Rutland-on-Line would effectively compère the events in his role as the "judge". He suggested that the proposal to consider four services areas may have been ambitious and that, with the Chairman's agreement, this may be reduced on the day. So far, the proposals had prompted significant interest from the public and the event may be repeated in the future is successful.

Members suggested that the citizens' jury concept could be extended further in the future and possibly include a youth jury. Juries could be established to look at one particular service area over a longer period of time as part of a wider stakeholder conference. Various other issues were discussed and clarified where appropriate. The Chairman stated that he expected to see members present at the event.

Conclusion:

To support the proposals for the Stakeholder Conference on 8th December 2005.

36. LOCAL AREA ASSEMBLIES

The Scrutiny Officer and Chairman reported on their visits to two Local Area Forums at Spelthorne Borough Council. These had been established longer than this authority's Local Area Assemblies (LAAs) and were therefore interesting to see in operation. From observation, there were several new practices that could be adopted at this Council. They would also be visiting South Ribble Borough Council, who were also interested in making a presentation to all South Kesteven members on their area meetings. A report will then be made to the DSP, which could make recommendations to Council not before the next annual general meeting.

Councillor Shorrock then presented his report on LAAs, making a number of recommendations on their format to help encourage public attendance and engagement. This report had previously been submitted to the Grantham LAA. Given that recommendations would not be going to Council until its AGM, Councillor Shorrock asked that his recommendations be considered as part of the DSP's review of LAAs and in its forming of recommendations to Council.

The proposals were discussed briefly by the panel. No objection was made to the recommendations, although there was some concern that they would require additional staff resources and that this should not be provided by the Council.

Conclusion:

To receive a report at a future meeting on Local Area Assemblies and make recommendations to Council at its AGM if appropriate.

37. EQUALITIES

Members considered the notes from the final meeting of the Equalities Working Group, which had now been disbanded. There was some discussion on the setting of performance indicators relating to equalities and diversity but as this was not within the remit of the panel, it was taken no further.

Conclusion:

To receive minutes of the meetings of the Multi-Cultural Consultation Forum.

38. ELECTION TURNOUT

The Elections Manager had been invited to the panel to assist in the scrutiny of declining voter turnout. The Chairman stated that turnout at the last two local by-elections had been abysmal and that this reflected the steady decrease in turnout at all elections. He hoped that the panel could propose a solution to this problem.

The Elections Manager confirmed the decreasing turnout by referring to statistics from 1991. He stated that his role, along with other officers, was to facilitate elections and that politicians should be encouraging voting. He admitted that timing of elections may not always be convenient for voters and that there were various initiatives being considered to increase the ease of voting such as changing the timetable to allow a more up-to-date electoral register for elections, time for replacing ballot papers etc. Work had been done to engage with schools but this had been met with a poor response. The Electoral Commission (EC) had concluded that it was not just voting-apathy that was the problem but a general low interest and disaffection with politics as evidences by the fact that one third of wards at the last election were not contested. The following factors affecting voter behaviour had been identified by the EC:

- How close the contest is
- Identity with the party
- Voter habit
- Sense of civic duty
- Distinction between the parties
- Relevance of the public institution
- Voter awareness
- Convenience of voting methods
- Attitude to individual politicians

Members added that there was an alienation from the political process, especially as politics did not seem representative of the population in terms of sex, age, race etc. and that administrative arrangements at elections played little part in voter turnout. Many people were excluded from politics as meetings were often held in the daytime. One member added that he had read that there was an apparent direct correlation between members' expenses, tax levels and voter turnout.

Members suggested that the number of polling stations should be increased but it was commented that this played a small part in the problem and that the underlying issues needed addressing.

It was proposed that a group be established comprising local stakeholders to scrutinise this issue and that council continues to work to engage with schools and their citizenship programme. The Scrutiny Officer reported that following the last DSP meeting, he had made contact with a local college and there was a possibility that students may be interested in some related work experience.

Conclusion:

That a working group, lead by Councillor Shorrock and comprising representatives from the voluntary sector, youth service, business club, college students and other stakeholders, be established to scrutinise political disaffection and work on forming a questionnaire to be circulated with SKToday, the Council's newsletter, on the issue.

39.   BT PAYPHONES

Noted.

40.   BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Noted.

41.   WORK PROGRAMME

Noted. The Scrutiny Officer added that the Cabinet decision date for the item on Cash Collection was now 5th December 2005.