



MEETING OF THE ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2006 2.30 PM

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Conboy
Councillor Nadarajah (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor M Taylor (Chairman)

Councillor Webster
Councillor Wilks
Councillor Mrs Williams

OFFICERS

Scrutiny Officer
Strategic Director x 2
Training Manager
Customer Services Manager
Scrutiny Support Officer

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT

Councillor Carpenter
Councillor Mrs Cartwright

98. MEMBERSHIP

The panel was informed that Councillor Craft had been replaced by Councillor Webster until the next annual general meeting.

99. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

100. ACTION NOTES

Noted.

101. UPDATES FROM LAST MEETING

The Scrutiny officer reported that in relation to action 91, the chief executive had referred this recommendation to the customer services manager, who had been invited to attend during the meeting to update on this. Further to action 96, a portable closed loop induction system was being trialled and a demonstration would be made to some members shortly.

102. FEEDBACK FROM THE EXECUTIVE

The portfolio holder for access and engagement asked if he could provide

feedback throughout the meeting. This was agreed.

103. REPORTS FROM WORKING GROUPS - ACCESS AND MODERNISATION

The scrutiny support officer highlighted the two recommendations from the working group. The portfolio holder for access and engagement explained that given the degree of change throughout the authority, it was logical to provide staff and councillors an area for rest and that this shared area would encourage engagement between the two. The portfolio holder was asked how staff would be able to access the customer service centre during their lunch break. The portfolio holder replied that this was an operational issue and would be referred to the relevant service manager.

Conclusion:

To support the recommendations from the Access and Modernisation Working Group.

104. UPDATE REPORT – FRONTFACING TELEPHONY AND CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS

The business management services project officer presented report CSV44, which had been appended to the agenda, and circulated a further update on frontfacing telephony statistics for August. Further statistics were also provided on numbers of telephone calls, appointments, emails and letters received. This information was available on the internet. She explained that August was a quiet month with September/October being much busier. Service managers, when embedded in the new posts, would also get information to be able to monitor their service. Work was underway to raise the profile of standards and customer service.

A member of the panel asked why the standards were inferior for August, if it was a quieter month. The officer explained that this being a traditional holiday month, staff levels were often reduced during this month.

The panel was concerned that too many calls were not being answered. The officer was asked about how staff dealt with transferring calls. She answered that transferring calls was not set-up as a matter of course because some offices worked better on a group pick-up system. Voicemail was a good final solution to reduce the numbers of unanswered calls, but some service managers, for various reasons, had been avoiding using voicemail.

The portfolio holder explained that he whilst there was significant improvement to be had, 100% calls could only be answered by using an automated call-queuing system. He considered this latter approach to be poor customer service.

The strategic director spoke to the panel about the 'talk to me' protocol, which was currently being finalised. Refresher sessions for managers on using the

telephones, followed up with core briefings and team meetings, was considered a better solution to encouraging better use of the telephones than to just email a policy to all staff. Ways to advise customers on when our busy and quiet periods are was also underway.

The panel was very satisfied to learn that the call centre and switchboard service standard statistics were still very high.

Conclusion:

(1) To accept the report and suggest that the use of voicemail, as a final option to reduce missed calls, be encouraged.

(2) To continue to be appraised with monitoring results.

105. REPORTS FROM WORKING GROUPS - DEMOCRATIC REVIEW

In the absence of members of the working group, the scrutiny support officer presented the recommendations of the democratic review working group. The chairman explained that it was not his intention to finalise the panel's view of each recommendation at this meeting, as he considered that some needed further clarification from the group. Each was discussed in turn by the panel:

Recommendation 1: An example of the proposed publication was distributed. The panel discussed how this would be distributed.

Conclusion:

To support this recommendation in principle but would consider the circulated document and evaluate for the next meeting of the panel.

Recommendation 2: The scrutiny support officer explained that the first online jury had been a pilot and considered the council's priorities. The working group was suggesting that this should be an annual process. The initial funding from the Department of Constitutional Affairs was provided until March 2007. The portfolio holder explained that the council may have a good case to apply for further funding if the project was successful in engaging with the public.

Conclusion:

To support this recommendation.

Recommendation 3: The working group had been comprised of a number of members of the public and this had worked successfully. The working group considered that this should be encouraged for other working groups. The scrutiny officer explained that the constitution already allowed for this. The panel therefore supported this recommendation but emphasised that were members of the public to be invited to join working groups, the council must be able to show that it will seriously consider their recommendations.

Conclusion:

To support this recommendation and encourage DSP Chairmen to welcome members of the public onto scrutiny working groups.

Recommendation 4: Members of the panel were concerned about the financial implications of this recommendation. They considered the potential implications of exclusion and the current policy for councillors. They accepted the principle of the recommendation but made a slight amendment as noted below.

Conclusion:

To support the principle of this recommendation but amend the last sentence to read: “This would cover agreed expenses”.

Recommendation 5: The scrutiny support officer explained that a lot of further work could be done by the council on local democracy week. It was intended that the next online citizens jury, which was intended to be held in a local school, would coincide with local democracy week. The portfolio holder added that he had done a lot of work on identifying what people expected from their councillors; this was to be respectable citizens in the community. He was therefore not a supporter of the “I am a councillor get me out of here” element of local democracy week. The panel agreed with the principle of the recommendation and the thoughts of the portfolio holder that citizens engagement projects should be light hearted with not a silly extreme.

Conclusion:

To support the recommendation, subject to the removal of “I am a Councillor Get Me Out of Here and”

Recommendation 6: The panel considered that this recommendation provided a good method of engagement.

Conclusion:

To support this recommendation.

Recommendation 7: The panel was concerned about the potential cost implications with this recommendation, although it was noted that the first part had no cost implications. The training manager, who had organised previous youth events, emphasises that this must not be just a Grantham approach. All ages and all areas in the district should be engaged. The success of the Bourne Youth Council and their input into the Bourne Local Forum was noted, and this was encouraging.

The strategic director explained that the Lincolnshire Youth Service had met with her to discuss support for setting up a youth council in Grantham. This was welcomed by the panel. Although the support requested was minimal, the training manager explained that some projects could be very resource intensive

but they had been very beneficial and well-participated.

Conclusion:

- (1) To support the recommendation from the working group but amended to read: "Local youth councils should be informed and encouraged to join the local forums and the six-monthly youth area forums are held, jointly facilitated by the council and the youth service".***
- (2) To monitor progress with the establishment of a youth council in Grantham***
- (3) To receive feedback from Councillor Conboy at a future meeting on the church organisation youth drop-in centre in Stamford.***

Recommendation 8: The chairman stipulated that the constitution did not provide for this recommendation and that when co-option to the council had been attempted in the past, it had been unsuccessful.

Conclusion:

To not support the recommendation.

Recommendation 9: The issues raised by the panel with this recommendation were: 1) as this involved working with children, what were the CRB requirements and who was going to pay for this; 2) who was going to pay for the training; 3) are teaching staff prepared to accept councillors to teach their curriculum; 4) what assurance was there that councillors would remain politically neutral? The panel did agree that the council needed to engage with youth on how the political system works, but it should be done carefully.

Conclusion:

To ask the working group to investigate the issues raised by the panel and report back at the next meeting.

Recommendation 10: A similar recommendation had been considered several years ago although nothing had developed. The panel considered this to be a good idea, especially as the students on the working group had explained that standard work experience placements had not fully engaged them in the political process. This element could therefore be improved.

Conclusion:

To support the recommendation.

Recommendation 11: The panel required further elaboration on this recommendation, especially concerning any financial implications.

Conclusion:

To ask the working group to provide further clarification on this recommendation for the next meeting of the panel.

Recommendation 12: The panel disagreed with this recommendation because of the financial implications and the conflict with the established method of reviewing the council's priorities.

Conclusion:

To not support this recommendation.

Recommendation 13: The panel considered that this was, and should be, already carried out by the political parties and not the council. The scrutiny support officer advised that the electoral team was working on sending a birthday card to 18 year olds informing them on their right to vote.

Conclusion:

To not support this recommendation.

Recommendation 14: The panel considered this recommendation to be excessive.

Conclusion:

To not support this recommendation.

Recommendation 15: The panel considered this recommendation to be ambivalent.

Conclusion:

To not support this recommendation.

Recommendations 16: The panel considered this recommendation to conflict with the work of local politicians.

Conclusion:

To not support this recommendation.

Recommendations 17 – 21: The panel considered these recommendations appeared to be the personal agenda of the lead member of the working group.

Conclusion:

To not support these recommendations.

106. SCRUTINY OF COUNCIL DECISION - MEMBER TRAINING

The panel scrutinised the decision made by council on 23rd June 2005 in relation to member training by reviewing the relevant paperwork associated with the decision and questioning the strategic directors, training manager and the portfolio holder for organisational development.

The chairman explained that this scrutiny exercise had been referred to the panel from the scrutiny coordinating group. He considered that this decision, which essentially required cabinet and panel members to undergo compulsory training, was not legally binding. The panel scrutinised the wording of the decision and concluded that it did make member training for panel and cabinet members compulsory.

The panel members expressed their initial views of the decision. There was concern that it prevented the democratic right of members to represent their wards on the cabinet and panels and that it was the role of voters to decide the competency of whom they elected to the council. The alternative view was that a councillor might not be able to effectively represent their people if they were not adequately equipped with knowledge and skills.

The organisational development portfolio holder explained that in light of value for money and use of resources assessments, member and officer time was a valuable commodity and should therefore not be wasted by councillors who did not understand the fundamental elements of cabinet or scrutiny work. She later referred to statistics that some members present at the meeting had only attended one training module since their election. The training manager expressed a similar view in that there was a certain knowledge that councillors needed because recommendations and decisions should be made from an informed position. One of the strategic directors observed that legal advice had been sought for the initial recommendation to council. Barrister's advice had been that provision could be made within the constitution and the code of conduct to require cabinet and panel members to attend certain training within twelve months of their appointment. This, however, was disputed by some members of the panel as it was a 'grey area'. Another strategic director explained that in terms of members' responsibility for good governance it may be advisable to require members to attend certain training. The director cautioned against undermining the best intentions of council's decision to raise members' standards.

Some panel members considered that council's decision ignored the value of hands-on training, but a strategic director explained that the fact that the training would have to be undertaken within 12 months demonstrated an understanding of experience as well as training. A member, whose profession was an estate agent, explained that his profession was often criticised for not having compulsory standards. The council was open to similar criticism if it did not require certain training.

In concluding the scrutiny of this decision, it was apparent that there was no consensus on the issue. The majority of members supported the original

decision of council, whilst a minority were of strong opinion that the decision was undemocratic and could not be supported legally.

The chairman advised that panel that he would not lead the next scrutiny exercise.

Conclusion:

- (1) To support the decision of the council taken on 23rd June 2005 in relation to member training.***
- (2) To note that this was a majority view of the panel, the minority view being recorded in the note above.***

107. BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The scrutiny officer reported that he had recently received statistics for August and these showed no material change to those circulated with the agenda.

The panel questioned the decline in the %PR outputs to the media that were actually published. It was assumed that this was because they were not considered newsworthy. Officers explained that this was not necessarily the case: the more outputs produced would make it harder to have 100% published and some releases were 'bad news' stories and so was of no detriment to the council that they were not published.

Conclusion:

That the performance indicator relating to %PR outputs to the media that were actually published (SK74) be changed to a meaningful statistic.

108. WORK PROGRAMME

This was noted and a few updates made.

109. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 16.48.