

COUNCIL

25 JUNE 2008

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE POLICY & COORDINATION REVIEW COMMITTEE
2007-08**

REPORT OF THE CITY SOLICITOR

1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To present a summary of the work of the Review Committee during 2007-08.

2. Introduction

2.1 This is the sixth Annual Report of the Review Committee.

3. Operation of the Committee

3.1 A total of 75 reports were considered. 27 of these were referrals from Cabinet. Copies of Cabinet minutes (Part I and Part II) were also received by the Committee for information.

3.2 In its co-ordinating role, the Committee received regular updates on variations to all of the Review Committee work programmes.

3.3 Use of the Committee budget included support for Members attendance at the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Annual Conference in June 2007 and attendance at the first north east regional scrutiny conference held at the Stadium of Light in September 2007.

4. Policy Review 2007/08

Information & Support for Local Councillors

4.1 The draft Final Report is presented elsewhere on this agenda. If endorsed, the review will allow a package of recommendations to be pursued which are responsive to frontline councillors' community leadership roles.

4.2 In a related issue, the Committee coordinated the Council's response to the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into the Role of Councillors.

5. 'Article 4' Plans & Strategies

5.1 The Committee receives plans and strategies listed in Article 4 of the Council's constitution. The Review Committee is required to be consulted by Cabinet for advice and consideration on these plans and strategies.

:

Sunderland Strategy & Local Area Agreement

- 5.2 The Committee endorsed the vision, aims and priorities contained in the Sunderland Strategy and communicated this to Cabinet but was concerned whether there would be scope in future agreements to include private sector bodies such as the utility companies. Officers were asked to investigate the feasibility of the inclusion of private sector organisations in future Agreements.

Budget & Service Reports including the Corporate Improvement Plan

- 5.3 The Committee was consulted on every stage in preparing the Revenue Budget, with reports for advice and consideration, from Cabinet. In addition Members were invited, and gave comment on, allocation of financial resources to services and projects, setting the council tax, the control of capital expenditure and virements.
- 5.4 All Cabinet Members were invited to attend the Committee in February 2008 to talk about what they see as the key improvement objectives for the year ahead. Only a short time was available to hear from each portfolio member about the issues within their portfolio but, even in the brief time allowed, the Review Committee gained useful insight into the work being carried out and the new initiatives on the horizon.
- 5.5 The other Review Committees retain responsibility for monitoring service issues throughout the year and will no doubt benefit from continued links with the relevant cabinet members.

6. Other Review & Scrutiny

Council Workforce

- 6.1 The Committee had previously carried out a review of attendance management and continued to monitor the processes for implementing change and improvement.
- 6.2 The portfolio holder, who had been instrumental in the policy review, was invited to contribute to the debate on monitoring improvements.
- 6.3 A new corporate HR and Payroll System would be aligned to the Council's Attendance Management Policy and generate reminders to managers when absence trigger levels were reached by staff. However, at the time of reporting, the Council's performance had worsened compared with 2005/06 and the Committee asked for further consideration of the issues raised in the meeting and for further feedback to Committee.

Council Land & Buildings

- 6.4 Following last years review of employment land and premises, the Committee continued to review the Council's asset management policies.
- 6.5 The Committee reviewed the Council's disposal of land policy, and specifically the procedure in relation to abnormal development costs which lead to a reduced offer

for surplus Council land and property. The Committee asked for consideration of target timescales to prevent negotiations taking inordinate lengths of time and allowing development to proceed in a more timely way.

6.6 The Committee was also concerned that two former school sites may have gone through the same procedures and requested to review the details.

6.7 To have a clearer picture of the overall situation the Committee requested a review of the Council's property rationalisation programme.

Gypsies & Travellers

6.8 An unauthorised encampment in the Washington area prompted the Committee to consider progress on the Council's Strategy for gypsy and traveller communities. The relevant portfolio holder was invited to contribute to the discussion.

6.9 Durham County Council was cited as an example where policies had been long established with six authorised sites and also a tolerance policy for unauthorised encampments.

6.10 The Committee sought further information following a needs assessment to determine the provision required.

Sunderland Partnership Community Development Plan

6.11 The Committee was consulted on the Plan before Cabinet endorsement. The purpose of the Plan is to develop a process of working collectively to bring about social change for communities in Sunderland.

6.12 The Committee asked how the Plan would integrate the contribution from the business sector in providing staff capacity to work as volunteers as part of their corporate social responsibility. This was a recommendation of a previous policy review by the Committee and assurance was sought that this would be carried out. The emerging action plan would also be reviewed through the Review Committee.

Significant Partnerships

6.13 The Committee reviewed key information and analysis in relation to Council's engagement with significant partnerships.

6.14 Discussion took place on the Sunnyside Partnership and the buoyant assessment of future development. It was noted that in any regeneration project the development needed to be managed carefully to ensure the required outcomes and to manage risk.

Pilot Neighbourhood Agreements

6.15 The Committee considered the Council's participation in the pilot Neighbourhood Agreements initiative with other partners. There will later be an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the initiative within the pilot areas.

- 6.16 The Committee asked about the opportunity to be involved formally through the process as issues had been raised through the Ward visits. It was also suggested that the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service would be keen to be involved and this option would be pursued.

Strategic Investment Plan

- 6.17 The Committee considered the Strategic Investment Plan as a delivery mechanism for achieving the long-term ambitions of the city in order to improve the quality of life for residents and communities as encapsulated within the Sunderland Strategy, the Local Area Agreement and the Corporate Improvement Plan.

Committee Room 1

- 6.18 The Committee has taken the lead in exploring the possible benefits of modernisation of the scrutiny room by establishing a Working Group to carry out an options appraisal of new sound systems, interactive monitors and the wider benefits of new technology.
- 6.19 Technology includes products called Hexagon and Flash Meeting which are being used to provide low-cost videoconferencing for communities and may have some uses for scrutiny in its evidence gathering.
- 6.20 The Working Group are tasked to ensure the best solution for the Council, assessing options for their potential life span and for the wider uses and benefits for the Council of networked technology, although primarily the improvements will be for use by the Council's Review Committees.

Developments in Scrutiny

- 6.21 The implications of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 have been monitored by the Committee. Particular focus was given to the implications relevant for scrutiny, including the Councillor Call for Action, the crime and disorder call for action, the local petitioning process, and new powers for scrutiny in relation to partner organisations.
- 6.22 The Committee was asked to contribute to Government consultation on Local Petitions and Calls for Action. Concerns identified in consultation with members included: The risk of the process preventing scrutiny from pursuing its work programmes; the need for direct officer support for processing submissions; and the possible creation of a two-tier petitioning system.
- 6.23 A procedure will be drawn up and put in place once guidance has been produced to help Members put forward local issues of concern, and give the opportunity to engage better with communities.
- 6.24 Chairman of the Review Committees were given the opportunity this year to visit other Council's to view the operation of their scrutiny function. Members visited South Tyneside and Newcastle City Councils. Where innovative or good practice was identified these examples will be considered for use in Sunderland.

Noteworthy issues included the use of timed agendas priority attached to agenda items, reports tailored specifically to scrutiny requirements, and coordination between scrutiny and area committees.

- 6.25 Chairman also viewed the Parliamentary Select Committee process to see what practices could be used for local circumstances and implemented within the Review Committee functions.

7. Performance Improvement

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

- 7.1 The Committee considered the outcome of the Council's CPA Corporate Assessment, and give particular attention to the identified areas for improvement.
- 7.2 The report referred to the contribution of the Review Committees to many areas of policy development but stated that scrutiny is not providing sufficient challenge.
- 7.3 The Council needs to improve the role of scrutiny as an effective and consistent challenge mechanism, both to the Council and local partners. This is being considered in relation to adopting a strategic approach with work programmes including systematic review of Council priorities as set out in the Sunderland Strategy and Local Area Agreement.

Performance Management

- 7.4 Statutory and local performance indicators are received and assessed by the Committee. Performance information is used to inform decisions and drive improvement.
- 7.5 The Chairman had asked that the report not duplicate the report for Cabinet but present clear data for the purpose of scrutiny. The Committee was interested in where the Council may be failing, not where it was hitting targets. Scrutiny Members needed to understand the context of the data, and have clarity in the information presented.

8. Conclusion & Recommendation

- 8.1 Members are asked to consider the operation, achievements and impact of the Committee during 2007-08 and submit this report to Council.

9. Background Papers

Review Committee Agendas and Reports 2007-2008

