

Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2007/08

Introduction

The Community Services Department, through its Director and Senior Managers, has worked closely and consistently with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout the past year, in order always to ensure that, when external pressures affected services, or new Governmental proposals were introduced, their impact could be assessed by the Committee and when internal pressures arose, that whatever economies might be required of the Department, they should not adversely affect customer services and the Council's relationship with the people of Leicestershire. It is unquestionably the case that the achievements of the Community Services Department and its professional staff have been, and continue to be, one of the Council's major success stories.

In addition to the formal four meetings of the Committee, myself and the Spokesmen of the Committee met with the Director to discuss agendas, and future policy initiatives over which the Committee's input at an early stage might be of value. This has enabled the members not only to scrutinise the detail of current projects and commitments, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, but also assist with having a strategic overview of the Department's work. The Committee has felt it important to be fully conversant with the overall Departmental brief, and to follow projects or schemes through from inception to completion, in order to achieve robust, consistent and constructive scrutiny, and some members have said they value being on the Committee for more than twelve months in order to achieve this perspective. During the autumn, the Committee received the Annual Report for Environment and Heritage Services 2006-07, which provided an overview and perspective that was invaluable for all members, and it is hoped similar Annual Reports will normally come before the Committee as standard procedure.

There have been no 5 Member Panels set up this year, the Committee having only recently completed one on the County Arts Strategy. It is envisaged that a Panel will be set up on the National Forest – more specifically on Charnwood Forest - in the next few weeks. However, a six month evaluation of progress on the Arts Strategy did take place, and progress is being made, not least in that we have received the accolade of being selected to host a national conference on the Creative Industries in 2009.

The Committee particularly welcomed the Cabinet's Budget allocation to support the proposals for closer cultural links with the City of Leicester, notably but not exclusively through support for 'Curve', the newly named Performance Arts Centre in Leicester.

Museums & Library Services

The Committee examined issues around the Audit Commission's Satisfaction Survey and considered why some results appeared so low compared with other Counties. It became clear the issue was complex, especially in relation to the validity of the questions posed. For example, one problem lay in the diversity of provision, with not only County provision but also District/Borough and private management. More detailed testing, specifically targeted at our own Museum and Library Services of user responses showed far more favourable results

The Committee examined the Library Improvement Programme and looked at consultations over users' views. The Department was congratulated on the success of the Programme so far, which had helped to create a lively atmosphere in the County's libraries. This was a major success story with visitors up 19% compared with 1.9% in other counties, website use up 366%, user satisfaction was up to 96%, and satisfaction with staff up to 98%. 20 new or improved libraries had been created in the past few years and there had been an increase in opening hours. A report on second round of consultation on Mobile Libraries had had a large response from the public (952), 77% with disability, and 91% felt the stops 'about right', 88% felt 'enough time' in was spent in the village. The Committee welcomed the news that there would be more PCs provided by the service by August 2008 and there was a developing scheme to get helpers to collect books for less mobile village people. The Committee was also interested to hear suggestions of possible expansion that might include post office provision. It noted the slight reduction in a number of stops.

The Committee visited Rothley Crossroads in April and felt the occasion worthwhile, valuable and interesting. This followed from earlier Committee discussions with regard to changes arising from national initiatives over the book procurement system. Concern was expressed over the validity and usefulness of national performance indicators for libraries, as mentioned earlier, given the broad range of services offered at County Libraries, including our online booking reservation system and the Committee felt more needed to be done to promote this and other online services.

Members asked to be updated on disposal of withdrawn books from Libraries, following the suggestion that some might be sent to third world countries in need of updating their resources. Some books had gone to Botswana, but in many instances the state of the books precluded passing them on. The Committee received reports on Library Services for Education following the withdrawal of City Council subsidy. It agreed to continue to monitor progress and noted the desire to increase take up and be self-sufficient by 2010 to ensure sustainability.

The Committee were also pleased to acknowledge the success of a wide range of events across the Library Service celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Leicestershire's official twinning with the Sichuan Province.

This was a valuable exercise linking the County's international links with wider educational and cultural issues leading up to the Beijing Olympics.

Reports to the Committee showed that Museum provision had gone from strength to strength. Snibston visitors were up 8.4%, the Bosworth Battlefield Centre was at last open, there had been funding for the Coin Hoard Exhibition at Market Harborough and the Measham Station restoration. At the Record Office there had been an 'Act to Abolish Slave Trade' exhibition.

Service Plan 2007-08

The Committee spent some considerable time looking at the Service Plan 2007-08. The Department was congratulated on receiving a 4-star rating in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment Culture Block. A number of issues arose and the Committee has requested a report on Storage and Public Access at the Record Office, and updates on the new fashion and interactive galleries at Snibston Discovery Park on which a bid for funding has to be completed by the third quarter of 2008 with the aim of developing the colliery mine buildings and transforming the galleries at Snibston Discovery Park over next five to ten years. The Committee also wished to encourage support work for the new Area and Community Forums.

One area for future consideration was to look in more detail at the work of Regulatory Services, to see if improvements could be made and examine comparisons with other counties

Sustainable Community Strategy

The Committee examined how the 'This is Leicestershire' evidence base report related to the Committee's work and contributed to the development of outcomes for inclusion in the Leicestershire Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Local Area Agreement (LAA). The Committee advised the Scrutiny Commission that we welcomed it, but felt there needed to be a sharper focus on the needs of deprived people and areas, but also that there be a proper balance by responding to those people and areas not defined as 'deprived'. Culture and Sport as a cross-cutting theme was welcomed.

We wanted to see further work in the areas of activity which would have an influence on promoting the wellbeing of areas, namely encouraging and supporting volunteering and promoting community activities. However, there was criticism that we did not feel enough attention had been paid to the Committee's 5 Member Panel on the Arts Strategy which contributed to the delivery of several themes in the LAA. This latter concern has been repeated in subsequent discussions throughout the year, especially when the six month check was made on progress in implementing the recommendations. It was the Committee's view that more effort still needed to be made in raising the Arts profile among local communities and priority groups, and the Director undertook to submit a report on the link to the social and economic agendas of the SCS.

Medium Term Financial Strategy 2008-09

As part of Budget Consultation, the Director of Community Services and Director of Corporate Resources, together with invited Cabinet Members, met the Committee to discuss issues of growth and savings. The Committee noted that the efficiency target for the Department was particularly challenging, entailing a critical look at how the Service was delivered and managed, so that there were no adverse effects impacting on service delivery. There would be a need for a review of the Environment and Heritage Service. Efficiency savings required from the County Parks Service would be met from car parking charges and the disposal of some sites to achieve reduction in staffing and maintenance costs. The level of savings had still to be ascertained. It was also proposed there would be a restructuring of the Bibliographical Service and Development Libraries.

In response, the Committee required the Director of Community Services to submit reports during the forthcoming months on the progress or otherwise in achieving the saving targets in relation to efficiency targets, Country Parks, the review of the Environment and Heritage Service, the self-issue and return of books, Bibliographical Services and Development Librarians, the outcome of options appraisal to replace PlanCon system, and more long term, to look into village theatre provision. The Committee warmly welcomed the withdrawal of the budget savings proposals over the County Hall Library, and as stated earlier, the budget proposals for the developments with the City of Leicester over cultural and arts matters.

Country Parks & Sporting Opportunities

The Committee has paid close attention to any savings said to arise from the proposed sale of green space. It will continue to seek reassurances regarding the maintenance of access to sites to be sold. The Committee has received updates on when and how there had historically been transfers to the County of a number of parcels of land from Oadby and Wigston, Hinckley and Bosworth, and North West Leicestershire. Conditions of sale of land would clearly vary according to circumstances. A progress report is due at a meeting of the Chair and Spokesmen in June 2008.

While recognising the excellent work being done with regard the maintenance of our County Parks, the Committee is looking to set up a 5 Member Panel to consider access, maintenance, co-operation with parish councils and district/borough councils, and more generally, the role played by such parks in the local economy incorporating employment and tourism issues. It was likely that the Panel would focus particularly on the Charnwood Forest.

Members were delighted to note the success of the Watermead Country Park Sustrans bid which had won £700k of Peoples' Lottery Funding via a public vote. This was a tribute to all officers and elected members involved in the bid. On this occasion County, borough, and parishes worked closely. This, it is noted, is not always the case.

The Committee received the Annual Report of Stepping Stones Countryside Management Board, where, although progress had been made on informing organisations of the benefit of green spaces, there remained ongoing issues surrounding the non-attendance of District and Borough Board members at meetings, which was why in looking at Country Park provision it was important to see if these links between County members and other bodies in this context was actually effective, and if not, how issues could be overcome.

With regard to sport, the Committee is particularly interested in the Olympic Games 2012. EMDA have recently published their East Midlands Strategy for the 2012 Games and we will be looking at likely areas the Department could contribute to ensure a lasting legacy across the County.

Regulation Enforcement

The Committee considered the regulation Enforcement Programme for Underage Sales of Tobacco and Aerosol Paints. It welcomed progress to date and supported the approach behind the report. It was felt the activities should be more widely promoted across the County, and it was felt that one way in which this could also be done effectively was via the new Area and Community Forums. It endorsed the aim to continue top quartile scores in five key indicators in the CPA environment block and over 100 new cold call zones. Also to be added are new services for anti-counterfeiting and hygiene enforcement.

Cultural Provision for Young People Bid

The Committee welcomed a bid by the Department, working in partnership with Children and Young People's Service and the City Council, on the Entitlement for Young People to five hours culture a week both inside and outside classroom. Some of this will be provided through 'Curve'. Shortlisted schemes are to be announced soon.

Equalities

The Committee feel it important that the Department achieve Level 3 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government, and the Director has undertaken to ensure progress in this matter.

Conclusion

The work of this Committee through the year would indicate that although there are always issues that need scrutiny and interrogation, and inevitable pressures on finance and human resources, the Director and his professional staff have been fully committed to achieving high standards of public provision and a quality service. Theirs is often a 'hands on' approach, with senior officers directly involved in the preparation of major funding bids or 'out and about' in the County. It has clearly paid dividends in the excellent relationships established with appropriate bodies across the County and East Midlands.

Their stated vision is 'to play a significant role in the improvement of local community well being, to protect and enhance the County's environment and heritage, and to improve access to recreational and learning activity and resources, for the people of Leicestershire, its visitors and for future generation'. On the evidence presented to the Committee during the past year, that vision is not unattainable.



Peter Lewis

Chairman of the Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee