

Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2008/09

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Introduction

The Community Services Department, through its Director and Senior Managers, has worked closely and consistently with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout 2008/09, ensuring that, when external pressures affected services, or new Governmental proposals were introduced, their full impact could be assessed by the Committee, and when similar internal pressures arose, whatever economies might be deemed necessary for the Department, the financial strategies required should not adversely affect our customer services and the Council's relationship with the people of Leicestershire. It is unquestionably the case that despite increased financial constraints, the achievements of the Community Services Department and its professional staff continue to be one of this Council's major success stories, and we would wish this to be celebrated and more widely known to the Leicestershire public.

In addition to the formal four meetings of the Committee, myself as Chair, Mr. Max Hunt and Mr. Mike Griffiths as Spokesmen, have met with the Director and colleagues to discuss agendas, and all future policy initiatives over which the Committee's input at an early stage could be of value. This enables 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 remains fully conversant with the overall Departmental brief, and has followed projects or schemes from inception to completion, to achieve robust, consistent and constructive scrutiny. Members have said they value being on the Committee for more than twelve months in order to achieve such a perspective. As in the previous year, we received the *Annual Report for Environment and Heritage Services*, which provides an invaluable overview and perspective. Members of Council are strongly urged to read this full Report, since such detail as it presents can only be touched on here as part of an overview of the year.

There have been no 5 Member Panels set up this year. Previously, it had been envisaged that a Panel might be set up on the National Forest - more specifically on the emerging proposals for Charnwood Forest. However, full reports were presented on the Charnwood Forest Stakeholder Group, a Conference organised by the Environmental team was held in December 2008 and a further workshop with Consultants was convened in March 2009 for elected members to take part in discussions and allow both the Committee and local members the opportunity to comment on emerging proposals for Charnwood Forest. This has meant that the setting up of a Panel at this stage has proved unnecessary.

The meeting in March was held at the National Forest Centre, 'Conkers' in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, with a presentation to members on the work of the Park,

thus continuing the idea established last year to have one meeting 'outside of County Hall'.

Other agenda items of note considered during the year are set out in the **appendix** to this report.

Equalities

The Committee took a particular interest in the Department's progress towards the Equalities Standard for Local Government Level 3, and we were extremely pleased to note the successful outcome.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

Given the current financial situation, the Committee recognises that the Department had been allocated a reasonable settlement this year. Future projections are inevitably provisional, and any fall in capital receipts must entail further review from 2010/11. Capital spending needs to be kept within £300k per annum. The Committee recognised the very considerable achievements of the Director and his officers in acquiring over £4 million in external funding for 2009/10.

Further efficiency savings must in part depend on wider corporate initiatives. The Government's Pre-Budget Report had identified a need to save £5 billion in the public sector, but not how or where. However, this could mean an increase in the current efficiency target rising higher than the present 3%. Service improvements planned in the Department include the replacement of the planning database, a provision for bridge inspection on footpaths and bridleways on health and safety grounds, and some one off funding for improvement work to the Medieval Buildings at Bosworth Battlefield. There may well be additional costs arising from the Government's General Register Office staff transferring to the County Council, and some growth in rent costs in relation to Melton Library situated at Melton College.

Savings proposed to the Committee for scrutiny included changes in the County's Bibliographical Services, not, as hoped previously in joining a national scheme for procuring book stock, but instead through technological improvements to the service. There were also proposals in hand for more customer 'self-service terminals' in 16 libraries. This in turn would lead to some staff reductions, the majority however through staff turnover. A proposal was also made to reduce the number of Park Rangers from 17 to 14. Some members of the Committee were concerned over this, but after debate, accepted this recommendation.

In the Capital Programme there might need to be some review of Library refurbishment, and there were also concerns by members that the Ashby Canal Project might find future matching funding problematic. Notwithstanding this, it was welcomed that the department intends to investigate possible external funding and aims to maintain low level investment for technical work over the next three years.

Overall, the Committee noted that, due to the economic climate and the decline in capital receipts, previous commitments made could no longer be sustained, and urged the Cabinet and officers to continue to monitor opportunities for external funding in order to progress some of these important pledges.

Prior to the presentation of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, a members' workshop was held to suggest efficiency saving ideas for further exploration. In response, in March, we received a detailed progress Report from the Director. Suggestions included the seeking of opportunities for Shared Services with other Authorities, and the Director indicated shared Scientific Services with Staffordshire County Council had delivered savings. Leicester City had been approached with regard to sharing Heritage/Library Services – but at this stage they could see no benefit. Library Services were initiating discussions with other Councils in the region to discuss potential savings, mainly in back office services and buying. Arising out of another workshop suggestion, the use of Mobile Libraries by other agencies had been factored into the marketing plan for 2009/10. Discussions are now underway for offering broader community services through the use of Community Rooms in Libraries, support for local groups, council service shops, and consultations have commenced with Adult Social Care for the use of Libraries for 'social prescribing'. The Workshop had also proposed examining Service Delivery Methods afresh and there is now a major process review underway in Trading Standards, the Library self-service project, and the development of the website in conjunction with Customer First Programme. The Committee felt that the consultation process and workshop had been worthwhile and it had engaged elected members more closely with the work of the Department, facilitating both scrutiny and overview over a wide range of key issues.

Successful Delivery

Having spent many hours addressing budgets, funding and service delivery, it is important that the Committee acknowledges and celebrates success. Alongside the Department's five key objectives, it is accepted there is a need to review Service structures in order to realign to the new Government Agenda, and to meet efficiency targets. Key performance objectives for the year, as part of the Community Services Plan, were to secure external funding for the South Leicestershire Treasure Project; to complete the Bosworth Battlefield Visitor Centre and achieve museum accreditation; to meet the revised timetable and programme for the Minerals and Waste Development Framework; implement the recommendations of the 5 Member Panel on the Arts; to reposition the Service to meet the new agenda/restructure of Country Parks; create a Business Plan for the redevelopment of the Record Office. Overall delivery performance here has been excellent. Work to scope future capacity needs of the Record Office is moving ahead, with partnership discussions with Media Archive for Central England and the East Midlands Oral History Archive. Further work to identify improvements needed for accessibility footpaths and rights of way, from 72.3% up to 79%. The Department identified 270 activities over a three year period, reflecting the

range and diversity of its service functions and the high level of outcomes. In 2006/07 performance was very high, namely 97% with 253 out of 261 delivered or on track. For 2007/08 performance is at 95%.

ICT work remains a problem corporately. Poor summer weather adversely affects visitor attendance to museums, parks, outdoor events. Sometimes changing requirements and priorities at national level impede the delivery of projects. More work still needs to be done on the website. These are all issues the Committee must note for the future. Solutions often lie outside the scope of the Department alone to resolve and are corporate or Governmental.

One cannot detail all the achievements that, in an essentially highlighting overview, the Committee is very pleased to acknowledge. They are available, as noted earlier, in the *Environment & Heritage Annual Report 2007-08*. But significant successes for the year include over 600 grants awarded to local communities to enhance village halls, the environment, arts and community museums; over 1.8 million visitors to the Record Office, Country Parks, Museums and historic sites; 426,687 'visits' to the web pages; Accreditation for Bosworth Battlefield Visitor Centre (first time) and sustaining Visitor Accreditation Status for all sites and Green Flag status for Market Bosworth, Beacon, Watermead and Donington le Heath Country Parks. The Department generated externally funded projects to the value of £5.065m in 2007/08, working towards projects totalling £4.714 m in 2008/09. This includes £969,000 awarded in March to Melton Carnegie Museum development, a further £900,000 towards the Ashby Canal project and £2.4m for the three year Find Your Talent (cultural offer) pathfinder.

February saw the opening of the Bosworth Battlefield Heritage Centre Exhibition. Of note too is the restoration of Measham Station (long disused) from the Single Regeneration Budget, emda, WREN, and Measham Development Trust among others. We received a Connect2 Lottery Award of £700,000, a share of 'The People's £50 million' lottery prize for Watermead Country Park improvements in cycleways and footpaths. There have been successful mineral restoration schemes such as Cossington sand and gravel extraction now restored to wetland, grassland and pastureland. The Committee is once again pleased to note that many of these successes reflect our shared desire that the Department pursues external funding in a proactive and very positive way, with obvious and laudable success.

Conclusion

Yet again, in 2008/09, the Director and his professional staff have been fully committed to achieving the highest standards of public provision and quality services. Theirs remains 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 partnerships established with appropriate bodies across the County, the East Midlands, and nationally.

The Community Services Overview Scrutiny Committee can confidently acknowledge the significant role played by the Department in improving our

local communities, their well being, in protecting and enhancing the County's environment and heritage, and in improving access to recreational and learning activities and resources, for the people of Leicestershire, our visitors and future generations.

All elected members on this Committee have worked as 'critical friends' on behalf of the Leicestershire public, while at the same time working with the Director and our professional staff to achieve a shared vision of what 'community service' really means, when tensions and choices are inevitable in the economically constrained times in which we find ourselves.



Peter Lewis

Chairman of the Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Agenda Items of note 2008/09

Access and Storage at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland

The Restructuring of the Environment & Heritage Team

Ensuring that processes were in place to link work to the social and economic agendas of the LAA and SCS

The disposal of Country Parks

The Regulation of Consumer Credit

The Cultural Olympiad and 2012

Updates on carrying out feasibility studies to explore the replacing of PlanCon in-house planning data base with an externally supplied and maintained system

Reports and presentations on Creative Leicestershire

Community Services Awards and Recognition

Community Services Department Partnership activities

The Enforcement Programme for the Illegal Sales of Tobacco and Aerosol Paints

The Completion of the Community Heritage Initiative and its Legacy.