

POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL

28th November, 2006

Present: Cllr. Simmons (in the Chair) and Councillors Cowper, Freeman, Gibbon, Hepplewhite, Leake, Norman, Pitts, Syer, and Walker.

Also Present: Councillors: Carr, Howarth, Kellett, Lightly, Marsden, Pape and Young.

Apologies for Absence: There were no apologies for Absence.

Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 31st October, 2006

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 31st October, 2006, were approved as a correct record.

BULLET POINTS

Working with Parish Councils

Quality Council Status

- The following witnesses had been invited to attend the Panel Meeting and discuss with Members the requirements and potential benefits to Local Councils of achieving Quality Council Status.
- Lesley Swinbank, Regional Development Officer, National Association of Local Councils, Cllr. Bill Jeffrey, Leader and John Arthur, Clerk to Peterlee Town Council, Samantha Shippen, Clerk to Horden Parish Council.
- Members were again informed of the Criteria which Local Councils must meet to be eligible and the process which must be gone through to apply for Quality Status.
- The benefits of attaining Quality Council Status were also detailed, in relation to the Principal Authority, the Local Council itself, and the Community which it served.
- Policy Panel Members identified a number of significant potential barriers or disincentives to Local Councils when considering applying for Quality Status and much of the discussion took place around these issues.

Electoral Mandate

- Some Parish Councils do not have sufficient numbers standing for election and need to co-opt.

Size/Capacity

- Smaller Parish Councils may perceive difficulties in providing local devolved services because of limitations on their resources.

Funding

- For a Parish Council to effectively deliver devolved services, financial resources must be in place. The Parish Council must be guaranteed and must be confident that "the funding will follow the service".

Qualified Clerk

- Many Local Councils employ Clerks of long standing, many of whom are either already in possession of high level qualifications or have significant comprehensive experience of Local Council administration. There has therefore been reluctance amongst some existing Clerks to re-train in order to gain the Certificate in Local Council Administration qualification, which is a mandatory requirement for the Council to achieve Quality Status.

NB Cllr Pitts left the Meeting at 6.28pm

NB Cllr Cowper left the Meeting at 6.30pm

- It was suggested to Panel Members that the achievement of Quality Status was a nationally recognised Benchmark for Local Councils which gave a positive message to potential Partners and opened the possibility of attracting further funding streams.
- Members commented that the potential benefits for Parish Councils needed to be further crystallised before Parish Councils could satisfy themselves as to the advisability of giving the commitment needed to seek Quality Status.
- It was noted that further issues regarding devolved powers to Local Councils may be progressed following publication of the Local Government White Paper, "Strong and Prosperous Communities".
- It was further acknowledged that these were long term issues for Local Councils to consider but the informative contribution of all the witnesses present at the Meeting was greatly appreciated.
- The Chairman thanked all the witnesses for their contributions to the Meeting and to the Panel's Scrutiny of this topic.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.45pm.