

Item 11a

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

PROSPEROUS AND ATTRACTIVE BOROUGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Council Chamber,
Council Offices
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
29 January 2008

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor G.C. Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors Mrs. L. M.G. Cuthbertson, P. Gittins J.P., D.M. Hancock,
Mrs. I. Hewitson, B. Lamb, Mrs. E. Maddison, A. Smith, B. Stephens and
A. Warburton

**Invited to
Attend:** Councillor V. Crosby

**In
Attendance:** Councillors Mrs. D. Bowman, V. Chapman, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh,
Mrs. S. Haigh, J.E. Higgin, J.G. Huntington, Mrs. H.J. Hutchinson and
Mrs. E.M. Paylor

Apologies: Councillors G.M.R. Howe and J. Robinson J.P

P&A.24/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were submitted.

P&A.25/07 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 11th December, 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

P&A.26/07 LOCAL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME - IMPACT AND PROGRESS TO DATE

It was explained that Andrew Megginson, Capital Programme Manager, was present at the meeting to outline progress on the Local Improvement Programme. Councillor V. Crosby, the Portfolio holder for Social Regeneration and Partnership was also present at the meeting to answer any queries.

A briefing note was considered which outlined the main principles of the Programme and the criteria to be used in determining eligible projects. (For copy see file of Minutes).

The Committee was informed that £3.8m had been earmarked from the sale of land across the Borough for the Local Improvement Programme over a three year period, subject to budget approval. The Programme was due to finish in March 2009. The re-organisation of Local Government in County Durham would not change that timescale.

The purpose of the Programme was to tackle issues facing the Borough which were linked to aspects of the Community Strategy and intelligence from Community/Area Appraisals.

As part of the process, resources could be released to improve individual sites, buildings and community facilities throughout Sedgefield Borough. The funding was allocated on an Area Forum basis and related to the number of households in the area. The issue of deprivation and need was not an overriding factor in determining financial allocations across the Borough.

It was noted that local community/voluntary organisations and partner Town and Parish Councils could submit project proposals at any time. These were appraised and discussed at Area Forum meetings. The project was then considered at Council's Cabinet to assess the project and decide whether it should be supported.

It was explained that projects, eligible for support through the Local Improvement Programme, needed to meet a number of key criteria including :-

- Conformity to the Department for Communities and Local Government "regeneration criteria" which stated that the focus of activity should be on any land where the land or building on the land was vacant, unused, under-used, ineffectively used, contaminated or derelict; and that the works or activities carried out in order to secure that the land or the buildings would be brought into effective use.
- Clear linkages to the delivery of the Council's Community Strategy and its key aims and planned outcomes.
- The project also had to clearly demonstrated that strong local need backed through appraisals, measurable benefit, added value and appropriate consultation.

With regard to the success of the Programme the Committee noted that fifty one applications had been received to date, eleven of which were technical studies. Twenty six projects had been approved with a total value of £1,103,977. Fifteen applications were currently being appraised, seven of which had been considered by the appropriate Area Forum. Of the applications for Local Improvement Programme funding thirteen projects had been withdrawn or rejected and twenty two projects were in the pipeline across the Borough. It was explained that it was often a lengthy process to develop a project proposal. The timescale was dependent upon a number of factors including :-

- How well the project was developed before the application was submitted.
- The Area Forum timetable.
- Matchfunding timescale.
- Planning permission process.
- Tender process.

It was pointed out that all projects started at a different point and some needed more information than others.

A number of projects had been completed and some were in operation. The Local Improvement Team had a key role to play in monitoring projects to ensure outputs were achieved and evaluating the evidence of additional activities and local improvement.

With regard to matchfunding for projects it was reported that £703,000 of external matchfunding had been secured to date for approved projects. This equated to a ratio of £1 from Sedgfield Borough Council to 70p from external match funding. Local Improvement Programme Team were working with applicants to try to maximise external funding and identify matchfunding opportunities.

Issues facing the Local Improvement Programme were identified, particularly in relation to differing levels of activities across the respective Area Forum. It was noted that the role of the Area Forums were key to processing applications and the timescale of meetings was sometimes an issue.

Local Government re-organisation was also on the horizon and consideration needed to be given to a “cut-off date” for new applications to enable the Local Improvement Programme Team to assess the remaining funding, how many projects were still outstanding and to allow time for community groups and other organisations across the Borough to submit applications and assess resource implications. Reference was also made to the linkage with the Neighbourhood Enhancement Programme Member funding.

Members were given contact details in respect of Local Improvement Programme applications and informed that the Local Improvement Programme Team were happy to discuss individual project ideas/comments with Councillors or community groups.

Queries were raised in relation to match funding for projects. Members of the Committee questioned whether match funding was mandatory and whether Town and Parish Councils were requested to provide a certain ratio of match funding. In response it was explained that it had never been mandatory to provide match funding for a scheme. Each scheme was considered on its merits and advice given on match funding opportunities. The aim was, however, to attract a target match funding figure of approximately a third of project cost from Town and Parish Councils.

It was then questioned what form the Town and Parish Council contribution could take and whether the contribution had to be met from precepts. It was explained that the funding from Town and Parish Councils did not have to come from their precept. Other forms of match funding were considered. It was recognised that raising funding by precepts would be an issue for smaller Town/Parish Councils and therefore Parish and Town Councils were not automatically requested to pick up revenue costs of the schemes. The Policy was to maximise match funding whenever possible.

Clarification was also sought as to whether the Neighbourhood Enhancement Programme could provide an opportunity for Town and

Parish Councils to provide funding for projects other than through precepts and whether it could be linked to a bigger project. It was pointed out that the Neighbourhood Enhancement Programme and Local Improvement Programme did have differing criteria. In respect of the Local Improvement Programme the focus was on underused land and/or buildings. This criteria was, however, difficult to interpret and had Community Strategy implications. The criteria for the Neighbourhood Enhancement Programme funding was flexible as long as a strong local need had been demonstrated.

If those criteria were met there was a possibility that it may be an opportunity for an application to be linked to a bigger project. However, both the Local Improvement Programme was Borough Council funding and the Neighbourhood Enhancement Programme and as such project applications had to meet agreed criteria. A project that did not meet the criteria could not proceed.

In response to a query raised regarding the complexity and timescale of technical studies, the Committee was informed that technical studies were requested to assist Groups in identifying development opportunities. The process was often lengthy and increased the timescale of the of the project's development. However, a technical study did provide valuable information for groups on developing the project. The studies were usually completed in stages such as specialist surveys. Applicants were advised at each stage of the process on the viability of the project.

Clarification was sought on VAT issues and timescale for identifying those areas which were VAT zero rated. In response it was explained that HM Revenue and Customs had been requested to provide guidance in relation to those issues.

Members of the Committee queried the "cut off" date for LIP applications. It was explained that there was a need to provide information to applicants that a project had to reach a certain stage by a specific date to allow projects to be developed and progressed prior to the new authority coming into being.

- AGREED :*
- (1) That the Committee is satisfied with the progress on the Local Improvement Programme to date.*
 - (2) That the Committee reviews the progress of the Local Improvement Plan at a future meeting.*

P&A.27/07 BUILDING CONTROL SERVICE PERFORMANCE

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Planning Services (for copy see file of Minutes) relating to progress on Building Control Service Performance Indicators.

The Committee was reminded that at its meeting held on 6th November, 2007 the Committee had considered Performance Indicators relating to its ambitions for the period 1st April to 30th April 2007.

At that meeting concerns had been expressed regarding performance on the following Indicators :-

- LPI32 – Percentage of Applications Considering the Building Control Service Good or Better, and**
- LPI34 - Percentage of Building Control Plans Approved/ Responded to within 3 weeks**

The purpose of the report was to explain the current performance levels and identify actions to improve the performance of those Indicators.

It was explained that for some time the Building Control Service had been understaffed and there had been difficulty in recruitment and the pool of available, suitably qualified and experienced officers in the Durham County area had diminished. It was difficult therefore to provide an effective and efficient Building Control Service. The long serving Manager of the Building Control Team had also left the Council's employ during the specific period in question and this had exacerbated the situation.

Furthermore, the Service had to compete with the private sector which had made significant gains in recent years at the expense of traditional local authority Building Control services. To meet those challenges changes to the staffing structure of the Building Control team had been endorsed and principally pursued inter authority working with adjoining councils in order to safeguard the future of local authority led Building Control Services.

In respect of actions to address the issues it was noted that a new Building Control Manager had been recruited and was now in post. That Manager was eager to provide a new impetus to service delivery and to introduce different methods of working with a renewed emphasis on performance management. In particular new monitoring measures had been implemented within the team to enable the Manager to apportion workload more effectively.

The outsourcing of plan vetting to an external consultancy had also been reviewed and steps had been taken to assess the type of work to be kept in-house in order to improve performance. The new Manager had been in discussions with the consultants regarding their expected performance.

It was considered that the Building Control Manager should be allowed time to address the issues and a further report be given to the Committee in the middle of the next financial year.

- AGREED :**
- 1. That the Committee is satisfied with the progress in relation to Building Control Service Performance Indicators LPI32 – Percentage of Applications considering the Building Control Service good or better and LPI33 – Percentage of Building Control Plans approved/responded to within 3 weeks.*
 - 2. That a further update be given in nine months.*

P&A.28/07 PERFORMANCE IN RELATION TO THE PROVISION OF CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISALS

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Planning Services (for copy see file of Minutes) regarding progress in relation to BV219(b) – Percentage of Conservation Areas in the local authority area with an up-to-date character appraisal.

It was explained that Charlie Walton, Head of Planning Services was present at the meeting to outline progress and answer queries.

The Committee was reminded that at its meeting on 6th November, 2007 consideration had been given to Performance Indicators relating to its ambitions for the period 1 April to 30th September 2007.

At that meeting concerns were raised and further information had been requested on performance in relation to BV219(b) – Percentage of Conservations Areas in the Local Authority Area with an up-to-date character appraisal.

Concerns were raised by Members that a target had been set to appraise 20% of the Borough's Conservation Areas and last years performance was 6.7% with current performance 0.6%. The report provided an explanation of current performance levels and actions to improve that performance.

It was explained that conservation area appraisals and management plans were required for the fifteen conservation areas across the Borough. The majority of which were designated in 1993. The only conservation area with a complete appraisal was Cornforth. This year work was continuing on conservation area appraisals for Shildon and Bishop Middleham.

Draft conservation area appraisals had been prepared by the Forward Plans Team in 2003/4. Subsequently Best Practice Guide had been issued by English Heritage on how to prepare the appraisals. This had involved revisiting all the draft appraisals with a view to having them revised. This was time-consuming and fell primarily to the Team Manager to oversee.

Work associated with conservation areas was not the only work undertaken by the Team. Other major pieces of work which had to be undertaken included, preparation of grant application and delivery plan for English Heritage in relation to building repairs and restoration, work allocated in the Capital Programme, planning statement and design brief, shop front improvement grant schemes and specialist advice on planning applications.

It was also acknowledged that some newer, less experienced staff in the Development Control Team had required more advice and guidance and conservation design, tree protection and landscaping matters than would have been the case in the past when the staffing situation was more stable.

It was clear that the nature and scope of appraisals had changed involving more work than originally anticipated and in that sense, targets had perhaps been too ambitious and over-optimistic. The Team Manager was therefore to produce a conservation appraisal action plan setting out realistic timescales for the production of the remaining appraisals. That action plan would be given priority status in the Team's work plan for 2008/9.

Reports would be prepared to update Members on the progress attained and presented to Development Control Committee.

- AGREED :**
- 1. That the Committee is satisfied with progress in relation to BV219(b) – Percentage of Conservation Areas in Local Authority area with an up-to-date character appraisal.*
 - 2. That a further update be given at a future meeting of the Committee.*

P&A.29/07 CORPORATE PLAN INDICATOR, CPA02 NUMBER OF PEOPLE SPECTATING IN A CULTURAL ACTIVITY

Katy Banner, Arts Development Officer, was present at the meeting to outline progress towards Corporate Plan Indicator CPA02 – Number of People Spectating in a Cultural Activity.

It was explained that the focus of Arts Development was in five areas:-

- Education
- Community Arts
- Cross Agency and Departmental
- Project Development
- Public Art

In relation to Education, it was explained that the focus of Arts Development was on people with low educational attainments and engaging with those people to try increase achievement through the arts.

With regard to Project Development it was noted that there was a £40,000 budget for Project Development. Fund raising raised around £200,000 a year.

In relation to Public Art it was noted that in 2006 the Culture 2006 award had been received in relation to the project at Spennymoor.

Examples were given of areas of Arts Development including :-

- Arts in Health – Dealing with GP Referrals and in particular Singing for Health Initiative
- Young People – dance initiatives, cultural programme
- Arts grants, festival support, performance and music initiatives

Figures were given in relation to participants and audiences in relation to the Arts Development priorities. It was noted that the Arts Council required a further breakdown of information such as the age range of participants along with the overall number of art sessions and professional artists employed.

It was pointed out that the Arts Development Team had measured the return on every £ invested in Arts Development and on average fund raised over £250,000 including capital per year.

The Committee was reminded that not only performance had to be taken into account but also the quality of projects, the amount of time spent and other factors.

- AGREED :**
1. *That the Committee is satisfied with progress in relation to Corporate Plan Indicator CPA02 – Number of People spectating in a Cultural Activity.*
 2. *That a further update be given at a future meeting.*

P&A.30/07 WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the Work Programme for the Prosperous and Attractive Borough Overview and Scrutiny Committee (for copy see file of Minutes).

- AGREED :**
1. *The report be noted.*
 2. *That the following be included on the Committee Work Programme :*
 - *Local Improvement Programme – Progress Update.*
 - *Progress towards LPI32 – Percentage of Applications considering the Building Control Service Good or Better and LPI 34 – Percentage of Building Control Plans approved/responded to within 3 weeks.*
 - *Progress towards BV219(b) – Percentage of Conservation Areas in Local Authority Area with an up-to-date Character Appraisal.*
 - *Progress towards Corporate Plan Indicator CPA02 – Number of People Spectating in a Cultural Activity.*