



OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the meeting of the OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on THURSDAY 4TH DECEMBER 2003 at 6.00 p.m. at The Town Hall, Peckham Road, London SE5 8UB

PRESENT: Councillor Kim HUMPHREYS (Chair)
Councillor Linda MANCHESTER (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Barrie HARGROVE, John FRIARY, Eliza MANN, Andy SIMMONS and Neil WATSON.

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor James GURLING, Executive Member for Communications & Performance Improvement
Councillor Lorraine ZULETA, Executive Member for Resources
Nancy Horwood, Chair SGTO
Piers Corbyn, Taplow Tenants Association

OFFICER SUPPORT: Richard Abraham, Consultation Manager
Joe Brady, Head of Income Management
Chris Brown, Head of Housing Management
Keith Broxup, Director of Housing
Shelley Burke, Head of Overview & Scrutiny
Mike Carroll, Best Value Manager
Bill Murphy, Asst Chief Executive (Improvement and Development)
Christos Pishias, Project Manager

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were none

NOTIFICATION OF ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMED URGENT

The Chair agreed to accept a deputation request from SGTO.

DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were none.

RECORDING OF MEMBERS' VOTES

Council Procedure Rule 1.17(5) allows a Member to record her/his vote in respect of any motions and amendments. Such requests are detailed in the following Minutes. Should a Member's vote be recorded in respect to an amendment, a copy of the amendment may be found in the Minute File and is available for public inspection.

The Committee considered the items set out on the agenda, a copy of which has been incorporated in the Minute File. Each of the following paragraphs relates to the item bearing the same number on the agenda.

1. CALL-IN: Modernising Face-to-Face Services for Customers

The Committee agreed to receive a deputation from the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO) and from Piers Corbyn on behalf of Taplow Tenants Organisation.

The key concerns of the deputations were lack of consultation over closure of cash offices and that a decision had already been taken as to the future number of housing offices. The deputations felt that a knock on effect of closing cash offices would be a reduction in the level of rent collection. The deputations stated that no consultation had taken place on the second issue of housing offices.

Members who had requested the call-in expressed concern that the Executive seemed to have taken an in principle decision and to be consulting only on the implementation of that decision. The role of Overview & Scrutiny Committee was to ensure that existing consultation processes were fully used. The call-in focused on the lack of consultation, not on the merits or demerits of the case.

The Executive Member for Communications & Performance Improvement responded that the report sought to draw together a range of disparate issues around improving services to customers, office accommodation for staff and IT facilities. It took a long-term view of the need for IT capable of supporting modern functions. The report was based on research into people's real use of services, and he agreed that it should now go to consultation.

The Director of Housing responded that the review of face-to-face services was running in parallel to the best value review of housing management. It had not been practical to consult on forum areas and office arrangements in one exercise, and forums had therefore been dealt with first. The report (paragraph 26) made it clear that further consultation was planned, and paragraphs 40 and 42 both addressed some specific proposals currently subject to consultation. The changes at Taplow had brought another manager in, thus improving support to the Aylesbury Estate New Deal for Communities (NDC). He confirmed that there was no Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) or Registered Social Landlord (RSL) in place on the Aylesbury Estate, and that no one had made an application for ALMO status since December 2002.

The Assistant Chief Executive (Improvement and Development) responded that there had been 1850 face-to-face interviews with customers since December 2002, a significant sample, and that there would be a continuing need to talk to more people as the process continued. The issue was how to widen access to services. The report set out what was practical and possible.

Members asked why the idea of developing multi agency accommodation in recognition of users' needs had not been followed through.

The Assistant Chief Executive responded that the Council was talking to the health service and the police, but needed to have a picture of its own provision first. The package was flexible and would not stop another agency joining a One Stop Shop, for example. The research indicated that the Council currently ran a variety of services of differing quality and that it was better to run a wider range of services from a fewer points. The research had mapped usage data against transport routes.

Members asked whether the current administration had changed existing policy on briefing Ward Members on changes affecting their wards. The Executive Member for Communications & Performance Improvement was not aware of any change in instructions to Officers regarding briefing Ward Members.

Members asked about the proposed new process for acknowledging receipt of rent payments. Some tenants were extremely concerned about moving away from having a rent card stamped. There must be some compromise possible. The Director of Housing pointed out that tenants would be issued with a wallet in which to keep receipts and would receive a monthly rent statement through the post.

- RESOLVED:**
1. Overview & Scrutiny Committee asks the Executive to set out clearly the current position on consultation with regard to the housing management best value review and how it relates to the reviews of face to face services and cash offices, and for the Executive to report back specifically on these questions to Overview & Scrutiny's January meeting;
 2. Overview & Scrutiny Committee asks the Executive to separate the cash offices from the other aspects of the report and subject the proposals on cash offices to urgent consultation through the housing consultation process;
 3. Overview & Scrutiny Committee asks the Executive to consider how it briefs Members on sensitive issues affecting their wards; and
 4. Overview & Scrutiny Committee resolves to consider how it wishes to make use of pre-scrutiny at a future Committee meeting.

CHAIR:

DATED: