

Agenda Item 7a) refers

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF SCRUTINY

Introduction

Following discussions with officers and members we are making two significant changes, one to the format of meetings, the other to recording outcomes.

In order to capitalise on our Research Assistant's skills, we are asking Simon Antrobus to lead open debates on major policy issues, such as the Rural White Paper and Budget Consultation. In the latter case we were able to conclude the matter in a single meeting, in my opinion solely because officers were able to join in the debate rather than have to lead it. The Rural White Paper is, of course, a much bigger subject and we will be drawing on the input of Simon's colleagues at DMU at future meetings.

It has long been clear that a new function like Scrutiny needs a new means of reporting to Council. So much of what we do is longterm and in most areas we make suggestions rather than formal recommendations. We are therefore going to try producing reports rather than just minutes – separate documents which can be presented to Council and form (for want of a better term) a "Scrutiny Library". As I write this before I know exactly what is going to appear on the Council agenda, I can't say for sure how many reports will come before you tonight. Certainly Cllr Fuch's excellent guide to finances will be before you, and certainly the Rent Arrears Panel's findings will ultimately be produced in report format.

Policy Development

The Resources Panel on October 18 investigated and approved a new General Contingency Reserve, thus allowing more delegation to Executive and speeding up their decision-making process. With regard to the ongoing Asset Review, members decided to oversee the preparation of a vision statement for the possible future role for a new Council building within the community.

The Policy Panel on November 1 considered the Notice of Motion by nine Market Harborough members regarding a Local Area Committee for the unparished areas of Market Harborough and Little Bowden. The Commission workplan is full for the remainder of this civic year and officer resources are overstretched until the New Year. Mindful that this is an important topic with wide-ranging implications across the Council, Panel Members believe the best way to expedite matters is with a brainstorming session as soon as possible after Christmas – basically, let's identify all the questions before we ask officers to answer them.

Overview

I reported to the last Council my concerns that Best Value is slipping badly. This has been pursued over the last cycle and I am now convinced that many of the multi-agency reviews cannot be concluded by the set dates. For example, the Community Safety Review BV is countywide and, as Mr Chester pointed out, can only progress at the pace of the slowest partner. It seems to the Panel that there is no real possibility of

* It hopefully goes without saying that, following our work on e-government and our suggestions on budget consultation, we intend these reports to appear on both intranet and internet.

completion by the set date of March 2002 and, as Cllr Brewer observed, "Targets are meaningless unless they are realistic."

The BV Review Health & Community Development Theme raised concerns at the meeting, largely because Scrutiny Members were not given the Executive's reasons for focusing solely on Leisure Services. This is not a criticism of the Executive, which we are all sure had perfectly sound reasons; however, it reinforces my concerns about minuting style and cross-referencing in the preparation of reports.

Both the Dog Warden and Pest Control BVs are now complete and testify to how well we can now do internal reviews. These were "light touch" reviews – the first, to the best of my knowledge – and are excellent examples of what Best Value really should be. Where there is no real problem, why waste months and months looking for one?

Scrutiny

The Services Panel looked in detail at our standards for void properties. The consensus was that there is no problem.