

# SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1 April 2008

\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

AGENDA ITEM No.

**8A**

## TITLE OF REPORT: QUESTIONS

The following answers to questions have been provided.

### (G) Hitchin Town Hall – Market Testing

At the Committee meeting on 22 January 2008, Members regretted that precise cost information regarding officer time spent on the Hitchin Town Hall Market Testing exercise was not available, but asked that officers report back to the Committee with an indicative estimate of such costs.

#### **The following response has been provided by the Head of Financial Services.**

“As detailed in the original response, we do not record officer time to the level of detail required to provide a costing as it is not cost effective to do so. The Scrutiny Finance Sub-Group will receive a report on this in due course. Any indicative figure provided therefore would be meaningless as it would be based on officer recollection several months on of how much time they think was spent on a particular item. It would not therefore be possible to place any reliance on the figure. The best indication we could give is that hourly rates for Heads of Service would equate to £38 per hour, for Strategic Directors, £59 per hour and for other staff involved in this work, a range of hourly rates from £19 to £28 so if a team of 4 say were involved comprising a Strategic Director, a Head of Service and two other staff, the cost per hour could be £144.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the Council sets its required number of staff based on an assessment of the services to be provided and the affordability of providing those services. It employs a range of staff to meet its overall objectives. The cost is incurred when the number of staff required is agreed and those staff are appointed to posts. Projects are agreed by Council and staff allocated accordingly to achieve the project aims. Working on one particular project represents an opportunity cost to the Council in that the staff are unable to spend time doing something else.

As an example, the possible opportunity cost of the response to the original question required two Heads of Service to spend approximately 3 hours (6 in total) at £38 per hour = £228 (this excludes overhead charges such as Premises, IT, Management charges etc). The follow up response has required further work by two Heads of Service for approximately 2 hours and the involvement of two strategic directors for approximately 1.5 hours (7 in total) = £329.

In total the response to this question and follow up to reiterate the point that we do not keep such information **may** have cost 13 hours of time equal to £557. If, however, any of the officer recollections of time input were inaccurate by 30 minutes either way, the cost might be as little as £422 or as much as £692. This has not increased costs to the Council but has meant that these staff have not been spending 13 hours on other work.”

**(J) Slippage of strategic reports to Cabinet**

"In view of the slippage of a number of strategy reports to Cabinet, is sufficient attention being given to prioritising the strategic management of the authority to ensure that leading officers and elected Members are able to make their contributions?"

**The following response has been provided by the Chief Executive.**

"The Council is required to publish a forward plan each month to give brief details of the key decisions it is likely to take over the following four month period. The plan is an indication of a possible decision time frame and is intended to raise public and member awareness of potential key decisions. The plan is reviewed by the Corporate Management Team prior to its publication.

Following concerns raised by the Scrutiny Committee about some items appearing late on the forward plan, the Corporate Management Team considered how the process could be improved to maximise the period of notice given. It was considered prudent to ensure that items appear on the plan in good time and slip rather than appear on the plan late. As a result, all report writing officers were instructed by the Corporate Management Team to ensure that they erred on the side of caution and put things on the plan with an anticipated earliest possible date for decision. In doing this, it was recognised that items might slip from the indicated date and it was considered better to have public awareness of the potential for a decision to be taken rather than risk criticism for lack of notice. The Forward Plan provides contact details for an officer and the relevant portfolio holder and this enables Members and the public to make early contact on items of interest to them.

The Forward Plan published for the 1<sup>st</sup> March 2008 showed the following strategies due for consideration by Cabinet at its April meeting

- Green Space Strategy
- Revised Rural Strategy
- Climate Change Strategy
- Communications Strategy
- Annual Review of Procurement Strategy
- Housing Strategy

In all cases the appropriate portfolio holder has been kept informed of progress and in some instances the items have slipped as a result of additional questions raised by the portfolio holders.

The April Cabinet meeting now has a report outlining the approach to the Climate Change Strategy and the review of the Procurement Strategy is being dealt with under delegated powers by the Finance Portfolio holder and will be considered by the Finance Scrutiny sub group on 31<sup>st</sup> March.

In terms of those strategies which have slipped, the Green Space Strategy needs to tie in with the LDF timetable and members of Scrutiny will be aware that consultants were appointed to carry out necessary work. When officers reviewed the work provided by the consultants, they were unhappy with the quality and, following consultation with the portfolio holders have required the consultants to redo the work. This has had implications for the timetable and the report is now expected to come to the June Cabinet.

The Revised Rural Strategy is the incorrect description of the decision required and has been corrected for the April Forward plan. The actual piece of work required is a review of the rural strategy action plan in light of the outcomes of the Working with Parishes Task and Finish

**SCRUTINY (1.4.08)**

Group. This work has been delayed by staff absences in the Policy, Partnerships and Performance team and redirection of available resources to focus on work on the Sustainable Communities Strategy consultation. A meeting is being arranged with the Community Engagement portfolio holder to review the position in time for a report to June Cabinet.

The Communications Strategy is being improved at the request of the portfolio holder, Councillor Strong, who had raised some queries on the draft strategy and asked officers to carry out some further work. It is anticipated that the June Cabinet should receive the report.

The draft Housing Strategy was produced and is currently out for consultation. The original plan saw the consultation end in time for report to April Cabinet. Following representations from Parish Councils and discussion with the Housing portfolio holder, the consultation period has been extended to allow a greater opportunity for interested parties to respond and this meant that it was not possible to meet the deadlines for reporting to April Cabinet.

Therefore the answer to the question is yes and as explained above some of the timetable changes actually allow more time for people to contribute to these important issues.”

**(K) Graffiti removal standards**

"How well is the authority meeting its standards for the removal of graffiti and are these standards sufficiently challenging to meet the aspirations of residents?"

**The following response has been provided by the Head of Leisure & Environmental Services.**

“ **ANALYSIS OF GRAFFITI 2006/7 AND 2007/8**  
Snapshot taken from Council database

	2006/2007		2007/8 (still ongoing)	
	Incidents	Notification of cleaned & closed cases	Incidents	Notification of cleaned & closed cases
NHDC owned	49	49	102	76 <sup>*(1)</sup>
Private	220	160	319	209 <sup>*(2)</sup>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>421</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>Priority 1</b> (extreme racist graffiti) Policy: to clean within 1 hr	1	1	0	0
<b>Priority 2</b> (other racist/offensive graffiti) Policy: to clean within 24 hours	5	5	2	2
<b>Priority 3</b> (general graffiti that is not racist, offensive or poses danger: (i) on NHDC property: policy to clean within 7 days of report (ii) on private property: to clean within 14 days of permission being granted		47 216		102 317

\*<sup>(1)</sup> With graffiti on NHDC properties, cleaning is always actioned but cases are not closed until notification of actual cleaning is received. Sometimes Youth Offenders' team are commissioned; NHDC need to accept that when they clean, this cannot meet the 7 day target.

\*<sup>(2)</sup> With graffiti on all private properties; this is notified to owners, where known. NHDC will offer to clean subject to written permission via signed indemnity form. With residential properties, owners are offered a free cleaning service. On commercial property we have built up a contact list and we notify owners. A quote is offered although some large companies have their own maintenance teams (electrical/rail) and will not instruct us to clean nor will they notify us when they have carried out cleaning. Therefore cases have to remain open for long time. However we are proactive & have negotiated with NTL and are in process of agreeing a cleansing policy with HCC to clean their underpasses. With other HCC depts and companies eg NHH and Transco we have built up an adhoc arrangement for cleaning. Hence number of incidents on database have increased.

The public are encouraged to report graffiti on our website and the current copy of Outlook, which has already gone to print, re-affirms how the public can inform us of graffiti. They can contact us by via phone, post or email. Each incident is photographed and placed on database (as evidence, in case prosecution results) and NHDC will then endeavour to arrange cleaning. Enviro-Crime audit will soon be published that will provide an independent view of this service. Funding has not been an issue with regard to graffiti."

The following question has been submitted by Councillor Paul Clark.

**(L) No Cold Calling Zones**

"This Council now has experience of a few "No Cold Call Zones" in the District. What plans do we have with the Police to create them in other areas of the District where they are needed such as the Oakfield Estate in Hitchin?"

**The following response has been provided by the Head of Policy, Partnerships & Performance.**

"Hertfordshire Constabulary have been working with the local Crime Disorder and Reduction Partnership, in particular Trading Standards, to introduce NCCZ as a tactical response to Bogus Caller, Rogue Trader and Artifice Burglary.

A NCCZ gives out a message to would be criminals that the door will not be answered unless prior arrangements have been made. Neighbourhood Watch Schemes (NHW) operate within the Zones and the residents look out for each other. The Zones are a way of empowering a local community. The residents within the Zones receive additional support from the Police by way of increased patrols, additionally vulnerable residents are referred to the Easter Area 'Safe' scheme where a representative of 'SAFE' will fit any locks and bolts required, additionally smoke alarm referrals are made. Trading Standards are very involved and offer a hot line for reporting to residents.

When deciding where a NCCZ is to be placed firstly Hot Spots are determined as follows:

- The analysing of Bogus Caller, Rogue Trader and Artifice Burglary activity (Any Repeat Victimisation)
- The demographics of the Area, identifying where clusters of older more vulnerable people live (This is important as over 70's are at a greater risk of these crime types)

This alone is not enough information to constitute a zone. The residents within the Zone must be committed to its introduction and be involved in NHW. Therefore resident surveys are an important part of the implementation process.

To date the cost of zones have been supported by Trading Standards and the Police. However each time a zone is introduced the funding has to be sought. The funding pays for:

- Signage
- Customer packs, providing key contact numbers, stickers for doors and other crime prevention / Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) advice.
- Public consultation
- Post evaluation

Our Neighbouring County of Bedfordshire have announced the whole County as a NCCZ, however this approach has raised some concerns within Whitehall as the decision not to allow people to knock at the door should be one the resident makes rather than the local CDRP. Trading Standards are not advised to operate in this manner , nor would they not be able to cope with the increase in calls. Hertfordshire Constabulary are in agreement that a targeted approach is the best and most effective way forward.

NCCZ are currently in the following areas:

- Knebworth
- Codicote

There are plans to add NCCZ to the areas listed below during 2008. These areas have been identified through the analysis stated above, however residents commitment still needs to be sought.

- Hitchwood
- Gravely
- Wymondley
- Kimpton"

The following question has been submitted by Councillor Alan Bardett.

**(M) Planning Decision Notices**

"Why does the Council charge £20.00 to produce additional copies of a planning decision notice to members of the public?"

**The question has been referred to the Head of Planning & Building Control for a response.**

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