The Role of the Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny and Performance Panel

The Panel focuses on the County Council’s activity in the areas of Economic Development & Enterprise and Sustainable Development. The Panel is responsible for scrutinising: economic development; business support; tourism; transport and highways; local and regional strategic plans; planning and development control; environment; waste disposal; climate change; and employment (including adult education and skills).

Outcomes from the Panel’s work in 2008/09

The outcomes from the Panel’s work over the past twelve months include:

- **Overview**

  The Panel has maintained an overview of the procurement process for Project W2R, a major Private Finance Initiative project to build an ‘energy from waste’ plant. Members who were not also members of the Planning Committee considered and endorsed the criteria for evaluating bids for the waste management facility contract. Final tenders are due in June 2009 and final selection is expected to be in May 2010; with the plant scheduled to be operational in April 2013. The Panel are assured that the project remains on budget and on schedule.

- **Scrutiny Review**

  The Panel considered the role of Network Management in providing a well-coordinated highway network, as well as the implications of the relevant legislation for the service. Members found that Staffordshire is rated excellent by the Government for its Network Management Plan and is also leading seven authorities in the implementation of a West Midlands wide permit scheme. The Panel highlighted the need for support from, and liaison with, Members (as representatives of local communities) in the co-ordination of major schemes.

  Following on from this, the Panel took an overview of the development of the approach to delivering the Staffordshire Highways service, including work in partnership through the maintenance and construction contracts. Members welcomed action to improve to operational efficiency and the response to issues that are raised in local inspections and by customers through: project management, work planning and allocation; contract management; and the role of Community Teams to focus on local issues and improve communications with communities and local Members.

  The Panel considered the current economic climate and the County Council’s ongoing work, in partnership with other agencies, to develop economic prosperity. The Panel endorsed the specific measures being taken to respond to the current economic climate. These include: speeding up payment of invoices; bringing forward capital schemes; freezing rent increases at County Council managed Enterprise Centres; developing new
programmes supporting rural services and market towns; the development of the Staffordshire loyalty card by the Destination Management Partnership; work in partnership with other agencies (for example promoting local traders and products and accelerating affordable housing); lobbying the regional development agency to focus resources on area of greatest need; and developing retraining and volunteering activities to support people back into the workforce.

Through a workshop, the Panel contributed to the preparation of the County Council’s Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Development Thematic Improvement Plan; establishing priorities and corresponding performance measures.

The Regional Spatial Strategy is drafted by the West Midlands Regional Assembly (as the Regional Planning Body) and takes into account the views of a wide range of local stakeholders, including the County Council. Government Office for the West Midlands then scrutinises the strategy on behalf of the Secretary of State and organises a public examination to test the soundness of the document. Following a call in of a Cabinet decision on this matter, it was agreed that Members would have an opportunity to comment on further submissions prepared on behalf of the County Council for the Panel conducting the public examination. The Panel made comments about: empty properties; affordability in rural areas; wind farms; open space and public realm; and sustainability, which will inform the submissions.

The Panel has considered progress with the business plan for the Shugborough Estate, visiting the Estate in July 2008. Members made comments on: funding; developing the Walled Garden; transport on the Estate; the County Council’s relationship with the National Trust; targets for visitor numbers and income; and events, which were taken into account in moving business at the Shugborough Estate forward.

The Planning Committee asked for a review of the level and standard of the Planning Regulation Service. The Panel appointed a Scrutiny Working Group to carry out this review. The Panel endorsed the final report provided by the Working Group, concluding that that they were generally satisfied and supportive of the level of service being provided but making several recommendations aimed at supporting the service to perform effectively. The recommendations were endorsed by the Planning Committee, agreed by the Cabinet Member for Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Communities and are now being implemented.

- **Performance Management**

As a result of a referral from the Corporate Policy Scrutiny and Performance Committee, the Panel investigated performance in respect of the indicators for the percentage of the local authority principal road network and the non-principal classified road network where structural maintenance should be planned soon. Members received an explanation of the indicator definition and how the figures were derived; finding that action taken had ensured that performance was on target.
Following the conclusion of the Climate Change Scrutiny Working Group, the Panel have assisted the Corporate Policy Scrutiny and Performance Committee to oversee the County Council’s progress in responding to climate change by considering quarterly updates on: the implementation of “A Hard Rain” (the corporate climate change strategy); promotion of the Staffordshire Declaration on Climate Change; and leadership and communications activity. The Panel has advised the Committee that there is a great deal of progress to be commended (the County Council is ahead of its target for reducing carbon emissions) but has highlighted the need to ensure: the implementation of the policies that support “A Hard Rain”; the production of adaptation plans across the Council; and help for schools to reduce energy use and associated costs (and contribute to meeting the target for reducing emissions). In this way, the Panel has helped to make sure that that thinking and action on climate change is embedded across the County Council.

Members also considered progress with the new Renewable Energy Project, intended to establish Staffordshire and Shropshire as UK leaders in renewable technology, which secured some funding from Advantage West Midlands. The Panel highlighted the need to ensure that companies signing up to the project had an interest in installing renewable energy - rather than as suppliers.

The Panel reviewed progress with the implementation of the agreed recommendations arising from their previous Section 106 Agreements scrutiny review. The review examined the County Council's roles and responsibilities in relation to Section 106 Agreements (which oblige developers to contribute towards the infrastructure and services provided by local authorities in connection with the development) and how the relationship between the County Council and District/Borough Councils in Staffordshire could be enhanced. Members found that progress included the development of a revised Section 106 Agreements database by Legal Services, to be made available to directorate clients.

**Approaches Taken**

The Panel fulfils its responsibilities in a range of ways including:

- Considering regular reports from the Cabinet Member for Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Communities on any County Council decisions and developments (such as in street lighting, road safety and the work of the Staffordshire Destination Management Partnership) relevant to the Panel’s role - as well as the action taken in response to petitions
- Asking questions of Cabinet Members on subjects of interest to Members and their local communities (such as on the Clarence contact centre for reporting highway faults or waste and recycling)
- Responding to consultation on County Council draft plans
- Challenging progress with improving performance
- Undertaking in-depth reviews of specific issues, producing recommendations for improvement.
The Panel considers evidence from County Council Members, officers and others during the course of their work.

**Matters for Consideration after June 2009**

The County Council has elections in June 2009. It will be for the appointed Overview and Scrutiny Members to agree the subjects that they wish to include in their 2009/10 work programmes. However, there are a number of issues considered by the Panel where further scrutiny has been proposed. These include: the implementation of Decriminalised Parking Enforcement across the county; the implementation of the Street Trading Policy; the further development of Network Management (including incident management); Renewable Energy Project - feedback on the success of events aimed at encouraging more companies to install renewable energy technology; Section 106 Agreements and Planning Regulation Service scrutiny reviews - continued monitoring of the implementation of the agreed recommendations; Shugborough Estate - progress with the business plan; the County Council’s continued response to the current economic climate; the County Council’s progress in responding to climate change; and any longer term strategy for the Council’s highways depots. Members have also recommended a visit to Lymedale business park to new Members.

**Membership**

The membership of the Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny and Performance Panel is County Councillors:

Pater Haynes (Chairman)
Tim Corbett (Vice-Chairman)
Jack Barber
Eric Drinkwater
Frank Lewis
Gill Heath
Madeleine Lovatt
Robert Marshall
Janos Toth.

For more information on the work of the Economic Prosperity and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny and Performance Panel, or the work of Overview and Scrutiny in Staffordshire, please visit the Scrutiny pages of the Staffordshire County Council website at:

http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/

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