Maidstone Borough Council

Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 1 July 2008

Work Programming 2008-09

Report of: Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1.   Introduction

1.1   On 20 May 2008, the Overview and Scrutiny Team hosted a Work Programming Workshop to generate ideas for the 2008-09 overview and scrutiny work programmes. The event was attended by a large number of Councillors, senior officers and external representatives.

1.2   At the workshop, Members were provided with a list of work programme suggestions received from members of the public and external organisations and asked to mark the four of these ideas that they felt most worthy of further investigation. The relevant results of this exercise to the Committee are as follows:
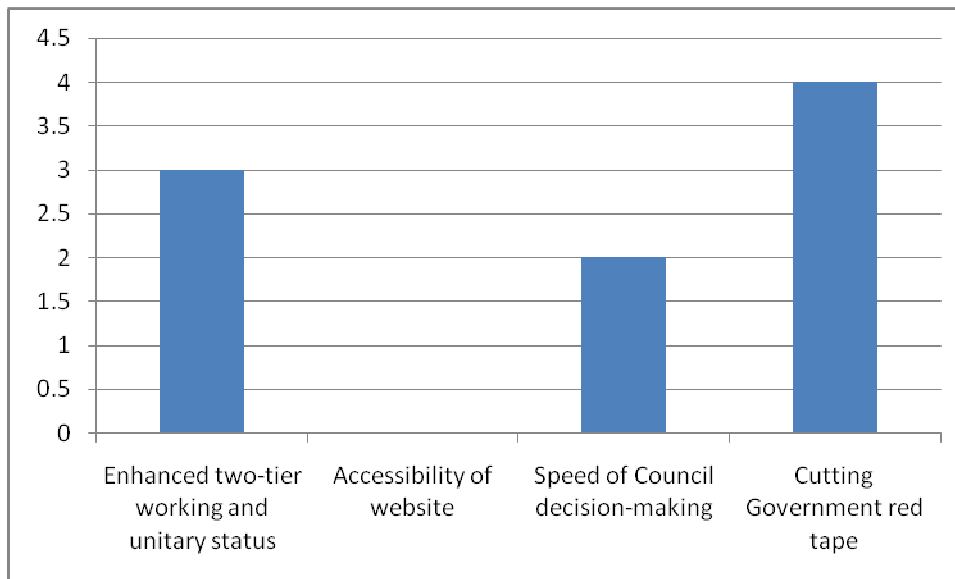
1.3   As a result of the workshop, a number of ideas have been proposed for the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee to take forward as reviews or one-off investigations. These have been listed below with further information for the consideration of the Committee.

1.4   A table is included at the end of this report outlining how each work programme suggestion relates to the Council's Corporate Priorities and the Principles of Good Public Scrutiny as outlined by the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

2.   Work Programme Suggestions

2.1   <mark>Enhanced Two-Tier Working and Unitary Status</mark>

2.1.1 A cross-party working group was set up in the Municipal Year 2007-08 to look into enhanced two-tier working and progression toward potential unitary status, in accordance with the Council's 20/20 Vision.

2.1.2 It is recommended that the Committee monitors the work of this working group, as to look into this issue separately would be a duplication of effort.

2.2   <mark>Speed of Council Decision-Making</mark>

2.2.1 This topic was recommended by Marden Parish Council, who highlighted that "decision making, on some issues regarding the parishes, seem to take a longer amount of time that it is felt necessary".

2.2.2 This review would need to consider:

- Legal requirements for taking decisions, for example giving notice of a decision to be taken
- The Council's requirements for taking decisions
- The key delays in taking decisions and how these could be overcome.

2.2.3 This issue could be taken as a one-off review and would consist largely of a consideration of desk-based research by the Overview and Scrutiny Team.

2.3   <mark>Cutting Government Red Tape</mark>

2.3.1 This review was suggested by a Councillor who noted that a book by Ross Clark, "How to Label a Goat", highlighted the need for local authorities to have a "shopping trolley policy" to deal with abandoned shopping trolleys. The book states that:

"1.   Before any trolley can be removed permission must be sought from the occupier of the land where the trolley was found abandoned. If permission is not forthcoming the local authority may serve notice on the occupier stating that it wishes to recover the trolley. If no notice of objection is received within 14 days, the local authority may then proceed to remove the trolley.

2.   The local authority must then store the trolley for six weeks, during which time it may be claimed by the owner. In the first 14 days of this period a notice must be served on the shop which appears to be the owner of the trolley. If the owner comes forward, the local authority must then deliver the trolley to the owner. In return for doing this it may then recover the costs of transport, administration costs and storage. The shop may, however, appeal against these costs if it can prove that it was not the owner of the trolley at the time it was found abandoned."

2.3.2 If the Committee wished to pursue this as a review, it is recommended that the review begins with an investigation into the Council's own regulations, which the review could have a more immediate impact on. The review could then be broadened to look into the 'red tape' imposed upon the Council by Government.

2.3.3 This review, if undertaken as a major review by the Committee, could be combined with the "Speed of Council Decision-Making" review detailed at 2.4.

2.3.4 Key areas for this review to investigate could include:

- What process do Council reports need to go through, from initiation to decision-making?
- What causes delays in decision-making and action-planning?
- What issues to officers and councillors encounter in their day-to-day work?
- What issues do members of the public encounter when trying to access Council services?

2.3.5 This review could include mystery shopping exercises, and could result in more streamlined processes for the public and officers.

2.4 <mark>Partnership Working Between Districts</mark>

2.4.1 The Council is increasing its partnership working with other district councils in Kent in order to increase efficiency and improve services. This is being consolidated with the establishment of the Mid Kent Improvement Partnership, which will be considered by Cabinet shortly.

2.4.2 Some Councillors have raised concerns that, while partnership working is a positive step forward, this must not be at the expense of services, and should in fact result in both improved services and savings. There are also some concerns that the Council's partners are gaining more from the partnerships than the Council is, as the Council is an excellent authority.

2.4.3 This review would take between one and two months, and would need to look at issues such as:

- What formal partnerships are in place with other district councils
- Areas in which informal partnership working is taking, if any
- Proposed areas for future partnership working
- Savings to the Council as a result of partnership working
- Effects on Council performance as a result of partnership working
- Effects of partnership working on Council officers
- Uniformity of partnership working contracts
- Overall responsibility for management of partnership working

2.4.4 Witnesses for this review could include Council officers from MBC and partner authorities involved in partnership working.

2.5 <mark>Review of Past Reports</mark>

2.5.1 A number of Members at the Work Programming Workshop expressed a keen interest in reviewing the outcomes of all of the past reports by Overview and Scrutiny, as the section had been in operation since 2001.

2.5.2 This would be a significant amount of work, requiring interviews with a wide variety of officers, along with individual research by Councillors. It is therefore proposed that a working group be set up with Members of each Committee to investigate this.

2.5.3 The working group would need to be available during working hours in order to ensure enough time to interview all of the required officers and witnesses.

3.   Recommendation

3.1   Members are recommended to consider the suggested work programme items and discuss which items they wish to take forward as reviews during the 2008-09 Municipal Year.

3.2   The Committee is recommended not to take on more than <u>two</u> large reviews during the year in order that sufficient time and resources can be dedicated to these. The Committee could of course identify several one-off items to be explored at scheduled meetings.

Topic	Corporate Priorities and Core Values (STRIVE)	CfPS[1] Principles of Good Public Scrutiny	Councillor Notes (do you wish to take this forward as a review? What are other avenues that you think could be explored as part of this review? What are the potential outcomes?)
Enhanced Two-Tier Working and Unitary Status	Value for money and efficiency	Drives improvement in public services	
Speed of Council Decision-Making	Integrity and high standards of corporate governance	Drives improvement in public services	
Cutting Government Red Tape	Superb customer service	Drives improvement in public services; Enables the voice and concerns of the public	
Four Yearly Elections	Sustainable Communities	Drives improvement in public services	
Partnership Working Between Districts	Value for money and efficiency	Drives improvement in public services; Provides 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers	

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[1] Centre for Public Scrutiny