

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**REPORT OF THE LEISURE AND CULTURAL STRATEGY SCRUTINY
REVIEW PANEL**

26 JANUARY AND 12 FEBRUARY 2004

PARKS AND OPEN SPACES POLICY STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

1. This report provides the Scrutiny Review Panel's analysis on the Executive's proposals for Parks and Open Spaces as contained within their Policy Statement for consultation purposes.
2. On 20th November 2003 the Executive approved the Policy Statement for consultation. It was launched at a presentation on 18 December 2003 by the Executive Member for Leisure and Community Development, Councillor R. Ellingham. At that time the purpose of the Policy Statement including some of the tensions and challenges that the service had to manage were considered in some depth.
3. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had, in anticipation of the Executive publishing the Policy Statement, established a Scrutiny Review Panel to examine the robustness of the proposed Policy Statement.

PART I

BACKGROUND

4. The Panel met on two occasions to consider the consultation edition of the Policy Statement. At the first meeting held on 26 January the Panel received an in depth analysis and presentation of the issues associated to the proposed Policy from the Director of Services to the Community, Graham Cook and the Head of Leisure Services, Gill Wilson. At that time the Panel sought additional consultation on the Policy Statement to assist in informing its report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This included the issuing of a press release, placing public notices in the local papers, advertising the consultation on the Council's notice boards and on the web site. The Policy Statement was placed on the Council's website along with an online feedback form.
5. The Surrey Mirror followed up on the press release with a sizeable article and, resulting from the other measures put in place, the Panel received further public interest in the consideration of the Policy Statement.
6. At the Panel's second meeting on 12 February 2004 it received evidence from the Director of Services to the Community, Graham Cook and the

Head of Leisure Services, Gill Wilson who responded to questions put to them by the Panel and Members of the public present.

7. The Panel noted that, in putting together its report to the Executive it needed to evaluate the evidence received, to establish objective and constructive recommendations based on a systematic approach by measuring the proposals contained within the Policy Statement. It did this by investigating the following measurements and associated points with the Director and Head of Service.

Measurement One

Does the Policy Statement accord with the priorities contained within Community and Corporate Plans?

Measurement Two

Are the Panel satisfied that the Policy Statement was based on sound evidence, resulting from stakeholder consultation, to support the proposed action?

Measurement Three

Does the Policy Statement contain a reasoned approach to adopting/rejecting the proposed action?

Measurement Four

Does the Policy Statement reflect legislative requirements, latest Government guidance and/or relevant best practice?

Measurement Five

Does the Policy Statement adequately address the operational and financial aspects of implementation in a realistic manner?

PART II

ROBUSTNESS OF THE EXECUTIVE'S PARKS AND OPEN SPACES POLICY STATEMENT

Measurement One: Community and Corporate Plan Priorities

8. The Panel sought, and received, confirmation that the proposed Policy Statement was in line with the Council's overall Strategic Policy structure. In particular the Panel sought assurances that the following key objectives were reflected in the Statement:

- Caring for the Environment;

- Creating a Safe Place to live, work and visit;
 - Safer Communities
 - Healthy Living and Leisure;
 - Helping Families with young children; and
 - Managing our Assets
9. The Panel explored a specific concern that had emerged from the community concerning the safety for users of the Parks and Open Spaces and whether it was a realistically affordable option to have Rangers/Wardens available on a permanent basis.
10. This aspect of the community's concern had been recognised in the Policy Statement and was being addressed by seeking to align the presence of staff working within the parks to the times that the community use the parks. Additionally the current level of facilities in Parks etc was being examined to consider whether current underused buildings could be replaced with other buildings to make better community use of the facilities. The Panel recognised that there would be a range of resourcing, planning, consultation and other considerations to be taken into account before such developments could take place, but that the Policy Statement was seeking to achieve this as a positive development for the future use of parks etc.
11. The Panel also gave consideration to the development of the Council's website for the provision of information such as Agenda/Minutes from the voluntary sector 'friends of' groups within our Parks. It was acknowledged that the Web Site was to be re-launched in May 2004 and that this could be taken into account at that time.

Panel Conclusions: Measurement One

12. Overall the Panel were satisfied that the Policy Statement had taken clear account of the objectives contained within the Community and Corporate Plans. The Panel supported the proposed action to put in place a staff presence within the Parks at the times that the community use them. The Panel also supported the development of the facilities within the Parks etc provided that sufficient consultation was undertaken with user groups and public on specific proposals.

Measurement Two: Sound Evidence based Policy Statement

13. The Panel were informed that the Council had employed a consultant to undertake and analysis surveys with users of the parks and open spaces. This had included face to face interviews and had resulted in a 38% response rate.
14. The Panel considered the evidence that had supported the Policy Statement on 10 levels, as follows:
- National picture;

- Local picture;
- National Playing Fields Association standards;
- Allotments;
- Staff
- Vandals
- Play areas;
- Star ratings;
- Hierarchy; and
- Watercourses

15. The evidence had indicated that the respondents were happy with the national context but on the local context there was a desire to achieve an even spread of the facilities across the Borough.
16. There was a mixed response to the NPFA standards with those supporting locally set standards suggesting that this be following professional advice from the Planning Department.
17. There was an acceptance that the Council provides an over supply of allotment facilities, and that the lengthy deregulation process through the secretary of state would be required. However what proved to be more challenging was to achieve agreement on the possible future uses of such sites.
18. There was considerable demand to have more staff on the ground. This point was addressed in the analysis of Measurement One above.
19. Vandalism problems were recognised as a key problem and some of the solutions suggested included more staff, CCTV, and lighting. Vandal proof materials, better links with the police and increased use of better facilities.
20. The priorities attached to the provision of play areas was generally supported but the Panel did explore whether they are in the right locations and discussed the rationale based on the premise that in general youths play where they live.
21. The proposed hierarchy and star rating of the parks and open spaces received a mix response. The biggest issues being the geographic spread of the facilities and the resources that would be available to the different tiers of provision.
22. The Borough's watercourses were considered to be important and a suggestion was received about whether funding could be sought from BAA regarding issues in the Horley area.

Panel Conclusions: Measurement Two

23. Overall the Panel were satisfied that the Policy Statement had taken clear account of the consultation comments received and was closely focused

on the issues raised. It was recognised that community aspirations could only be achieved within the overall prioritisation of proposed actions.

Measurement Three: Reasoned approach to adopting/rejecting the proposed action

24. The Panel felt that they had considered this measurement carefully as part of Measurement Two above and that overall the proposed action had been based on reasoned approaches.

Measurement Four: Legislative requirements, Government guidance and best practice

25. The Panel considered the issues that had been addressed in the national context, the legislative requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, Health and Safety legislation and Building Regulations.

26. It was noted that much of the building stock would require work within the near future. Any rebuilding work that is undertaken will comply with DDA, Health & Safety and building regulations requirements.

27. In relation to best practice the Panel explored the self-management of facilities option and concluded that this level of community engagement worked well. The Council could help such groups to get up and running, but once they are operative the Council would maintain an arms length involvement, largely leaving them to progress their facility.

Panel Conclusions: Measurement Four

28. The Panel were satisfied that sufficient arrangements are in place to ensure that the Service meets with legislative requirements and Government guidance.

29. The Panel supported more work to assist and encourage greater take up of the Self-management of facilities.

Measurement Five: Operational and Financial aspects of implementation

30. The Panel were advised that the Executive, through the Budget setting process for 2004/05, had put forward proposals to support the injection of capital resources to fund the necessary alterations to the parks and open spaces service. This was subject to being agreed at the Budget Council meeting on 19 February 2004.

31. If the capital proposals were agreed it would provide resources for a 9-year horizon for the service and giving it a sound-planning platform.

32. The Panel explored the option of commercial partnerships within the Parks etc addressed within the Policy Statement and that more communication

work would need to be taken to attract the private sector into dialogue about their future involvement. The preliminary work appears promising.

Panel Conclusions: Measurement Five

33. The Panel expressed support for the proposed Capital bid for the service and the arrangements that are proposed for the involvement of commercial partnerships.

PART III

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

34. The Panel in general were supportive of the Policy Statement that the Executive had put in place to develop the Parks and Open Spaces service.

35. The Panel tested the robustness of the Policy Statement against five significant measurements.

36. The Panel recognised that the Executive face a number of challenges in meeting the demands on the service and, in a reasoned and constructive manner, has identified a number of suggestions for the Executive to consider. These are set out in the body of the report and the Executive is asked to take them into account when receiving the responses to the consultation on the Policy Statement at its meeting on 18 March 2004.

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