

APPENDIX E

BEST VALUE DESKTOP REPORT COMMITTEE SERVICES

Guildford Borough Council

Committee Services (Desktop
Study)

November 2001

Contents

Contents	70
Report	72
Desktop Study Disclaimer	72
Context	72
The locality	72
The Council	72
The Council's best value review	72
How good is the Service?	73
Are the aims clear and challenging?	73
Does the Service meet these aims?	74
How does the performance compare?	75
Summary	75
How likely is the Service to improve?	75
Does the best value review drive improvements?	75
How good is the improvement plan?	76
Will the Council deliver the improvements?	77
Summary	77
Recommendations	77

[continued over.../](#)

Appendices	78
What the inspector did	78
Documents reviewed	78
List of those interviewed	78
Response of Guildford Borough Council	78
COMMITTEE SERVICES - RESPONSE TO BV INSPECTOR'S REPORT	78

Report

Desktop Study Disclaimer

- 1 This report was compiled following a review of documentation and written evidence submitted by the authority. The inspector did not carry out on-site reality checks. The Best Value Inspection Service reserves the right to carry out further inspections following a re view of the documentary evidence.

Context

The locality

- 2 Guildford Borough covers an area of around 104 square miles in the south east of England. The population of 129,000 is centred in the main town but also spreads to a number of rural areas with villages of varying size. Unemployment is low at 0.7 per cent, well below regional and national averages. However, although the Council is the 26th least deprived area nationally, there are parts of the borough such as Stoke, Westborough and Ash that are nearer to the national average. The close proximity to London and the M25, has a significant impact on all employers in the area with regard to recruiting and retaining staff.

The Council

- 3 The Council has no overall political control with 19 Liberal Democrats being the largest group out of the 45 councillors. The new cabinet structure has been running since May 2001 and the Council now runs with an executive, four committees and three policy panels.
- 4 The Council's mission statement is 'We are committed to be the Local Government of Guilford providing high quality goods and services to meet the needs of the community'.
- 5 The Council's strategic priorities are:
'Building on the strengths of Guildford's communities and working in partnership with them, to enhance the quality of life for all residents, workers and visitors, with particular emphasis on:
 - improving the well being of the community
 - continuing to promote key areas of Council policy
 - focussing on transport'

The Council's best value review

- 6 The Service consists of the Council's committee administration function which is delivered within the committee services section. The review was a pilot review undertaken during 1999 and 2000; this desktop inspection recognises that there was little guidance available at that time and that the early reviews were breaking new ground.
- 7 The committee services section comprises six staff of which the equivalent of two and a half work on committee administration. The cost of this work in terms of salaries (excluding overheads) was £67,000 in 1997/98 and was the figure used when the review was carried out.

How good is the Service?

- 8 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the Service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the Service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 9 Challenge is the key to achieving significant improvements in performance and targets set by the Council and Government. Without challenge best value will be ineffective. It requires the Council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.

- 10 The aims of the Service are set out in the Best Value Review as follows:

- ◆ 'The purpose of the Committee Services Section is to provide administrative support, including agenda and minute preparation, to the Council and its various committees and sub-committees'

- 11 The Service has the following objectives:

- ◆ To ensure that the decision making process of the Council works effectively and in the interests of the Council as corporate whole;
- ◆ To ensure that the committee process is managed in accordance with the law, standing orders and corporate procedures;
- ◆ To ensure that reports to Committees, Sub-Committees and working parties are clear and concise, follow the standard format and reflect a corporate view;
- ◆ To ensure that the meetings are conducted in a business-like manner, are properly informed and that decisions are properly recorded;
- ◆ To lead the way in the development of new initiatives and improving existing procedures by revising formats, content and style of agendas, minutes and reports;
- ◆ To support the Chief Executive in the efficient management and execution of the Council's functions and for maintaining a corporate approach to its activities;
- ◆ To implement decisions of the Council and to undertake tasks arising from the work of Committees and Sub-Committees within the section's remit;
- ◆ To ensure proper support for Members of the Council at all levels in the performance of their duties;
- ◆ To provide an agreed level of administrative services to outside organisations supported by the Council;
- ◆ To provide advice and information to Parish Councils and seek to enhance relationships with the Council;
- ◆ To provide an efficient administrative service for the Clerk and Solicitor's Department and;
- ◆ To prepare and monitor the budgets of the Clerk and Solicitor's Department

- 12 The aims and objectives are clear and meet the primary requirement to ensure that the democratic decision making process within the Council is properly run and legally sound. However the aims make no reference to communicating those decisions to the local community – there could, for instance, be an aim of ‘communicating clear and timely information to the public’.
- 13 Whilst the aims are clear they are not in themselves particularly challenging. They represent the services that would be expected to be provided by a committee administration team and do not include continuous improvement targets. However the objective ‘to lead the way in the development of new initiatives.....’ may lead to improvements if properly implemented.

Does the Service meet these aims?

- 14 Having considered the aims the Council has set for the Service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is performing in meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the Council’s approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.
- 15 In the interview I was given the following examples of how the aims and objectives are met:
 - ◆ the statutory requirement of agendas being dispatched 3 days prior to the meeting is met. The target is for at least 60% of agendas to go out eight days before the meeting and 100% seven days before;
 - ◆ draft minutes are checked by the service head, the solicitor and the Head of Committee Services;
 - ◆ an electronic cross-reference system is being developed;
 - ◆ the committee team are generalists and try to ensure that agenda and minutes are understandable to the lay person;
 - ◆ all minutes since 1990 are now on an electronic data base;
 - ◆ the committee services team operate a system for checking whether committee recommendations have been implemented and;
 - ◆ the Head of Committee Services is the liaison person for parish councils.
- 16 An agenda management system is in place which sets out the matters to be brought to the executive and committees in future cycles.
- 17 The decisions of the executive are put on the Council’s web site by the Council’s IT team. However other committees (eg planning committee) are not. The responsibility for doing this seemed unclear – that is, whether it is the responsibility of the committee services team, the service manager or the public relations section.
- 18 In respect of engaging the public in the decision making process the Council allows, within set down criteria, members of the public to ask questions of, or make representations to, the full Council, committees and policy panels. Leaflets are available which set out the relevant guidelines. A leaflet has also been produced which describes the new arrangements for decision making within the Council.

- 19 In conclusion it appears to me (given that no reality checks have been carried out) that the objectives of committee administration are met and that the Council's decision making process is properly managed.

How does the performance compare?

- 20 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required.
- 21 The Council undertook a benchmarking exercise for committee services with the 10 other Surrey district councils and a further three outside district councils. The participants included six of Guildford's family group.
- 22 Guildford had the highest total salaries of the total committee services section of six staff and also had the highest average salary. However when considering only the staff working on committee administration the cost per meeting was the third lowest. Of the 14 authorities included in the exercise, Guildford had the fifth lowest total salary costs allocated to committee administration.
- 23 The total number of meetings serviced by Guildford's committee services team was 235 in a year which was the fourth highest out of 14. Almost half of these meetings (113) were officer meetings. This was the highest level of such meetings to be serviced with half of the Councils servicing no officer meetings at all.
- 24 In conclusion, the Service compares well in terms of cost per meeting serviced but this is primarily because of the large number of meetings.

Summary

- 25 The aims of the Service are clearly set out but could be more challenging and should include an aim about communicating decisions to the public. The evidence suggests that the aims are met and that the service compares well in terms of cost per meeting serviced.

How likely is the Service to improve?

Does the best value review drive improvements?

- 26 The best value review is the mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the Services they provide.

Challenge

- 27 There was no specific section in the review devoted to challenge. Although the scope for challenging the existence of the service may be limited it is possible to challenge how the service is organised and the work that it does.
- 28 In particular the benchmarking exercise showed that a very large number of officer meetings are serviced. The review should have challenged whether all (or indeed any) of these meetings should be serviced. No policy is in place

which sets out what meetings should be serviced by the committee services section.

Consultation

- 29 Detailed consultation exercises were carried out with both officers and councillors. These showed in general high levels of satisfaction (e.g. 97% of councillors and 95 % of officers said that overall the service provided was either good or very good).
- 30 However 42% of councillors did not feel that agendas were sent out sufficiently in advance of meetings. As a result the new targets of 60% sent out eight days before the meeting and 100% seven days before were set.
- 31 Thirteen recommendations came out of the consultation with officers and these have fed through into the improvement plan.
- 32 A large number of comments and suggestions were made by councillors. I was told that these had substantially been implemented (for instance press/executive summaries are now included at the beginning of each report).
- 33 The consultation exercise would have been improved if it had been extended to include outside bodies, for instance the press and parish councils.

Competition

- 34 There appears to be no realistic opportunity for this service to be provided by the private sector.

Comparison

- 35 As a result of the benchmarking group with Surrey districts and three other councils a number of improvements were identified which have been included in the improvement plan. These include:
 - ◆ revision of guidance to report authors (including format, content and advice on what should be reported to committee);
 - ◆ review of closing dates for the receipt of committee reports and the date of despatch of agendas to members of committees; and
 - ◆ procedures for monitoring and dealing with reports received after the closing date.

Summary

- 36 In conclusion, and taking into account that this was a pilot review, I feel that the review exercise was undertaken well. The consultation and comparison exercises highlighted areas for improvement and these fed into the improvement plan. The challenge element could have been stronger and consultation with outside bodies would have been helpful.

How good is the improvement plan?

- 37 The improvement plan sets out actions that have arisen from the review process. Responsibilities and timescales are clearly laid down. The plan contains 20 actions including:
 - ◆ improved agenda planning;
 - ◆ achieving quality assurance accreditation through ISO 9000;

- ◆ introducing electronic access to agendas minutes and;
- ◆ introduction of improved standards for dispatch of agendas.

38 However half the actions in the plan are 'to review'. Even if all the reviews are completed there is no guarantee that improvements will result.

Will the Council deliver the improvements?

39 Inspectors look for evidence that a council will deliver what it has set out in the improvement plan. We look for a track record of managing change within the Council and, ideally, within the Service itself. The plan should also have sufficient support from councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders, particularly those responsible for delivering it.

40 I was provided with an updated version of the improvement plan with progress up to date. This indicated that plan was generally on target and was likely to be delivered.

Summary

41 The best value review appears to have been properly undertaken and has resulted in an improvement plan which links to the issues raised. Current progress suggests that the improvement plan is likely to be delivered.

Recommendations

- 42 Review the number of officer meetings that are serviced by the committee services section. Establish clear guidelines for the officer, councillor and outside bodies meetings that are supported by the committee services team.
- 43 Extend consultation to include the press and parish councils.
- 44 Extend the aims of the service to include the provision of clear and timely information to the public.
- 45 Clarify the responsibilities for publicising committee decisions.

Appendices

What the inspector did

Documents reviewed

- ◆ The best value review of committee services
- ◆ Updated improvement plan

List of those interviewed

Joanne Green

Chief Administrator

Response of Guildford Borough Council

- 46 The response of the Council to the initial draft of the report of attached below. The report has been amended to reflect any factual inaccuracies:

COMMITTEE SERVICES - RESPONSE TO BV INSPECTOR'S REPORT	
	The specific comments are as follows:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Guildford" is not spelt correctly throughout the report.• Paragraph 7 – the figure of £67,000 related to 1997/98• Paragraph 11, bullet point 2 – this should read "orders" not "regulations"• Paragraph 12 – I am disappointed at the lack of any reference to my response to this question. Ultimately, the public are stakeholders of all services. Clearly it would be a nonsense to include them in all the separate plans. I particularly feel that as the Council has a Public Relations Section this aim should be part of their role. Services should not duplicate anything which is another services' role. It must also be pointed out that the Committee Services Section is primarily a support service and its clients are, first and foremost, the Members of the Council, rather than the public. In talking to the inspector about the new requirements of the Local Government Act 2000, the inspector was also informed about the work programme we have put in place which is a document which includes reference to all major items of interest to the public, not just key decisions as laid down in this legislation. The inspector was also supplied with copies of the series of leaflets the section produces setting out the rules for public participation in the Council.• Paragraph 13 – I feel it is better to included targets in the action plan rather than in the aims.• Paragraph 15, bullet point 1 – it is 60% of agendas not minutes which we aim to dispatch in advance of the meeting. Bullet point 2 – It should read "Head of Committee Services" not "Member Services"• Paragraph 17 – the Council's IT Section posts the Executive's decision list (not the minutes) on the web site. The Committee Services section has included in its action plan an item about the posting of minutes etc in the action plan (implementation during 2002/03). This was in the copy handed to the inspector.

- **Paragraph 22- 24** – This is not quite correct and should be amended to read as follows:
"Of the 14 authorities included in the exercise, Guildford had the fifth lowest total salary costs allocated to committee administration.

The total number of meetings serviced by Guildford's committee services team was 235 for the year in which the exercise was undertaken, which was the fourth highest of the fourteen authorities. Almost no officer meetings at all.

Taking into account the salary costs allocated to committee administration and the number of meetings serviced, Guildford's cost per meeting was the third lowest of the 14 authorities studied.

In conclusion, the service compares well in terms of cost per meeting, due to the relatively low costs allocated to committee administration and the high number of meetings serviced."

Paragraphs 29 – 33 – this paragraph on consultation concentrates on the negative rather than the positive results e.g. 97% of Councillors and 95 % of Officers said that overall the service provided was either good or very good. The figure for Officers rose to 100% in 2001.

- **Paragraph 32 – line 3**, should read. "(for instance summaries are now included at the beginning of each report)".
- **Paragraph 36** – there are 2 "feel that"
- **Paragraph 43** – we are happy to do this, however, as discussed with the inspector, annual meetings are held with Parish Clerks to discuss matters such as this already so we would not wish to duplicate effort.
- **Page 11** – the reference to Internal Audit is not correct.