



meeting	CROSS SERVICE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS SELECT COMMITTEE	
date	11 April 2005	agenda item number

Report of the Head of Scrutiny

REVIEW OF THE FORWARD PLAN

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to inform Members of a proposed review of the use of the Forward Plan by Select Committees, to seek initial Member comments on the current format of the Forward Plan and to get an indication as to whether or not the Forward Plan should be a standing item on the agenda of this Select Committee.

2. Introduction

- 2.1** At a meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs' Forum on 31 January 2005, the Members present indicated that it might be beneficial for Select Committees to have on their agendas a standing item concerning the Forward Plan.
- 2.2** In addition, the Chairs' Forum suggested that the Corporate Strategy and Co-ordination Select Committee might wish to review the format of the Forward Plan drawing on best practice from elsewhere.
- 2.3** Given that the County Council is nearing the end of its present four-year cycle, it makes sense to gather views on possible improvements to the Forward Plan at this stage so that Committees can incorporate any changes when they start meeting again after May. It should be remembered that the new County Council may not necessarily maintain the Select Committees in their current format.

3. Information

- 3.1** To underpin the principles of greater accountability and transparency, regulation 13 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2000 requires the executive to set out its programme of work in the coming four months, as far as it is known, in a

forward plan. Regulation 12 requires an annual statement to be published by the proper officer of the local authority giving notice of when forward plans will be published for the coming year, explaining what a forward plan is and how it can be obtained from the local authority. The forward plan must be made available to the public and should be made available to the relevant Scrutiny Committee at least two weeks in advance of the commencement of the period covered.

3.2 The forward plan should be updated on a rolling basis. In accordance with the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) Regulations 2000, the forward plan should set out:

- a short description of matters under consideration and when key decisions are expected to be taken;
- who is responsible for taking the decisions and how they can be contacted;
- what relevant reports and background papers are available; and
- how and when the decision maker intends to involve local stakeholders in the decision making process.

3.3 A key decision is an executive decision which may be taken by the Cabinet, a Cabinet Member or an officer. This decision will have a significant effect in two or more electoral divisions and/or result in savings or expenditure to the Council in excess of £1 million (£1 million is a discretionary figure set by the County Council).

3.4 A copy of the County Council's March 2005 Forward Plan is attached as Appendix A.

3.5 Sections 3.1 – 3.3 set out the legal requirements for the forward plan; local authorities can add extra information if they wish. Other councils, for example, have included more extensive information about the proposed decision, the names of electoral divisions affected, and the name of the relevant Select Committee to undertake any scrutiny. Clearly the County Council could expand the detail of its forward plan if it wished.

4. Issues

4.1 To assist in this review, Members views are sought on the following at this initial stage:

- What do you think of the current Forward Plan?
- Is there enough detail?
- Can you understand what decision is being proposed from the information given?

- Do you get to see the Forward Plan regularly?
- Have you tried to get background papers to Forward Plan items?
- If so, did you receive them with reasonable time limits?
- Would it be helpful to have the Forward Plan as a standing item on each Select Committee agenda?
- Are there items on the Forward Plan which Members would wish to scrutinise before the matter is discussed by Cabinet?
- Is the Forward Plan a helpful document in assisting Select Committees in drawing up their work programmes?

5. Next Steps

- 5.1** The views of other stakeholders will be taken into consideration before a final report is produced. This should enable the County Council to consider any possible changes to the Forward Plan system after the May 2005 elections.

6. Recommendation

- 6.1** It is recommended that members discuss possible changes which might improve the Forward Plan and agree whether or not the Forward Plan should be a standing item on the agenda of this Select Committee.

Lynn Senior
Head of Scrutiny

Background Papers available for Inspection:

None.