SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 9 September 2008 at 6.30pm

WRITTEN MINUTES – PART A

Present: Councillor David Osland (Chair)
Councillor Lynne Hale (Deputy Chair);
Councillor Tim Godfrey (Vice Chair);
Councillors, Eddy Arram, Graham Bass, Sue Bennett, Bernadette Khan,
Greta Sohoye, Brian Udell

Apologies: Councillors Pat Clouder and Sue Winborn.

A50/08 MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW COMMITTEE
MEETINGS HELD ON 7 JULY (Call-in) and 22 JULY 2008
(Agenda item 1)

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the meetings held on 7 July 2008 (Call-in)
and 22 July 2008 be signed as a correct record.

A51/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (Agenda item 3)

There were no Declarations of Interest made at the meeting.

A52/08 URGENT BUSINESS (Agenda item 4)

There were no items of Urgent Business

A53/08 EXEMPT ITEMS (Agenda item 5)

RESOLVED that the allocation of business on Part A of the Agenda be
confirmed.

A54/08 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME (Agenda Item 6)

Councillor Gavin Barwell, Cabinet Member for Resources and Customer
Services was in attendance to respond to questions previously circulated.
from members of the public.

In response to a supplementary public question regarding the figures for the one stop area the Cabinet Member agreed to look at the figures for the 1 September 2008. However for last quarter (April-July) the service performance level was 91% showing an average wait time in July of less than 4 minutes. It was, however, accepted that the first Monday in any month was a peak workload.

In response to a supplementary public question regarding the involvement of young people in the Joint Scrutiny Review regarding knife crime it was confirmed that young people will be able to give evidence at the closed session scheduled for Tuesday 30 September. This was an important issue with great efforts being made to gain the maximum input from young people with their views being incorporated in the final report.

In response to a supplementary public question regarding incapacity benefit administration it was confirmed that the forthcoming changes to incapacity benefit will not affect existing clients.

A55/08 ATTENDANCE BY CABINET MEMBER/SENIOR OFFICERS (Agenda item 7)

Councillor Gavin Barwell, Cabinet Member for Resources and Customer Services together with Nathan Elvery, Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services were in attendance for this item.

In the question and answer session the Cabinet Member accepted that residents faced steep increases in the cost of food and fuel which will need to be considered when the Council fixed the level of Council Tax next year. However, the Council also faced increasing cost pressures. These are likely to be declining Council Tax rate collection, decline in Land Charges income and the effect on the capital programme as a result of declining land values.

It was the Cabinet Member’s view that there was no change in the government’s position regarding published targets for housing rents and the Council’s contribution to the National Housing Pool. The Council’s Decent Homes standard is funded by increased housing rents whilst still contributing to National Housing Pool. The issue was being considered as to whether it was appropriate for a Judicial Review as in total £½ billion was currently being retained within central government finances from UK Council contributions. It was accepted that when the contributions was first introduced the sums involved were small but these were now significant.

The Cabinet Member felt that following the independent review of the apportionment of the cost of the Freedom Pass there should be possible savings of £600,000 per annum.

The closure of the Fell Road cashiers office was an efficiency measure which followed detailed work on cash payments facilities. Overall there was no impact on either residents or the Council’s cash receipts as more locations, with longer opening hours are now available where residents
can make payments. The Cabinet Member complimented the officers who had been involved in this change.

The Cabinet Member referred to the triennial review of the pension fund which was an independent assessment of the Fund and the assumptions made for its funding. It reviewed the increasing longevity of members for the next three and ten years and accordingly the Council’s contributions were set to increase annually to a level of 23.2% in 2010/11. It was noted that the size of the fund was now £½ billion. Not only was it one of the best performing funds in the UK; keeping pace with increases in liabilities but it had also improved its level of funding from 57% to 68% of liabilities as at 31 March 2008.

A review of the Pension Fund asset allocation strategy had noted that whilst its large equity exposure gives the potential for high returns in a rising market there was also a high level of risk. Accordingly a revised strategy had been adopted to invest in safer financial instruments. Overall the fund was performing well but the challenge will be to face its increasing liabilities in the future. It was expected that there will be changes to the Local Government Pension scheme over the next 5-10 years.

The Cabinet Member gave details of the flexible retirement arrangements being developed so that the knowledge base and service delivery skills of employees retiring at 65 are retained.

It was stated that energy management was a key strategic project. There were a number of projects under way to achieve better use and management of energy by metering, and automatic switching facilities. However it was too early to provide detailed cost savings but these would be given when available. The reduction of waste across the Council’s estate has also been addressed with Taberner House being a pilot for recycling much of the waste produced. Generally the Borough was facing a difficult issue in the targets for the reduction of landfill waste. These could be achieved by reductions at source e.g. reduced packaging, reuse, composting, recycling and other options rather than landfill.

It was noted that the budget setting was a continuous process with major landmarks being the July Financial Review, consideration by Cabinet of the Options package in December and setting of Council Tax levels by Cabinet and Council in February.

Details of the new arrangements for procuring agency and temporary staff through the Comensura contract or consultants through the new framework contracts were given. These were expected to produce substantial cost savings although managers were not required to use the framework contracts if they did not believe it would give good value for money.

It was confirmed that the Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services monitors the use of consultants which are only used where it was key to the organisation. Consultants were also used where they had skills not available to Council staff. Council staff will also work alongside such consultants in order to expose them to more strategic ways of thinking. It
was not normal practise for Council staff to leave and then return as Agency staff or as a consultant.

The Cabinet member expressed confidence that the Council was clear on the use of data gathered as part of the new Geographic Information System (GIS).

It was confirmed that there had been a marked increase in calls to the contact centre regarding refuse collections but these had now returned to normal levels following the deployment of a special team of operators. It was agreed that spot checks would be instituted to review the procedures for handling customer service requests. It was also the aim that customers should use direct dial numbers where appropriate.

Councillor Gavin Barwell, Cabinet Member for Resources and Customer Services together with Nathan Elvery, Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services were thanked for attending the meeting for this item.

A56/08 JULY FINANCIAL REVIEW 2007/8 (Agenda item 8)

Councillor Gavin Barwell, Cabinet Member for Resources and Customer Services together with Nathan Elvery, Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services were in attendance for this item.

The Cabinet Member explained that in June each of the Executive Directors and their Management Teams present to the Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services their strategic budget and policy pressures. The Chief Executive and Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services in September consider the requests of chief officers as to how to fund their services including efficiencies offered. The process was designed to review the bulk of Council expenditure. Agreement on staffing levels were part of the budget setting in February but would have been challenged as part of the process described.

It was confirmed that the change in apportionment of costs for the Freedom Pass to one based on usage rather than population was advantageous to Croydon. This was because Croydon was the most populous London Borough, with no access to the London Underground system and with few 24 hour services.

The Cabinet Member stated that the financial pressures leading to the Council’s Budget Gap were demand led. He felt confident that it was possible to address these pressures. It was stated that efficiency targets for 2009/10 were set at a lower level than previously as it was felt that funding on some services was below a level to ensure their viability. This issue would need to be addressed corporately in the future. Overall the Budget Gap is unlikely to be bridged solely by efficiency gains.

Councillor Gavin Barwell, Cabinet Member for Resources and Customer Services together with Nathan Elvery, Executive Director of Resources and Customer Services were thanked for attending the meeting.
RESOLVED: to note the report.

A57/08 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE 15 JULY 2008 ON ROAD SAFETY (Agenda item 9)

The report of the Chief Executive was considered following the meeting of the Community Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee on 15 July 2008. and

RESOLVED: that the Committee agree and commend the recommendations detailed below to the Cabinet for their consideration. The recommendations were:-

R1. That as part of the Street Lighting Replacement Project the Community Services Department conduct an audit across the Borough of illuminated signs, bollards and beacons to determine their appropriateness for replacement or removal.

R2. That in order to drive up road safety across the Borough the Cabinet approach the Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis and other London Boroughs, on behalf of the Council, with a view to re-building the Metropolitan Traffic Patrol Service to a size and expertise capable of dealing with current and future traffic flow and law enforcement .“

A58/08 SCRUTINY AND OVERVIEW WORK PROGRAMME 2008/09 (Agenda item 10)

Joan Matlock, Scrutiny Support Team Manager was in attendance for this item.

The Knife Crime Investigation was continuing with separate meetings with young people and Head Teachers followed by the drawing up of a report.

RESOLVED: that the Work Programme as circulated be agreed.

A59/08 DATE OF NEXT MEETING/ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION

Tuesday 4 November 2008 at 6.30pm.

Issues to be raised with the Deputy Leader should be submitted to the officers.

PART B

None

The meeting ended at 8.20pm