



Cllr Shaun
Osborne
(Chairman)

ANNUAL REPORT SAFE AND ATTRACTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD JULY 2005 – MARCH 2006

“ The last Municipal year has again been both an interesting and challenging one for the Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods Policy & Performance Board. There has been considerable progress within the organisation of the Board in order to develop further our policy formation and scrutiny roles. The members of the board should be congratulated for their efforts in adapting quickly to changing roles.

Prior to the beginning of the financial year the Policy and Performance board received details of the budget proposals for 2005/06.

The Board noted the national and local financial settlements, consequences of data losses, pressure on local government to passport money into education and the expectation from central govt that Council Tax increases would be held to low, single figures. It was immediately clear that the financial pressures would hit hard at members concerns to develop policy in order to improve the Councils direct services in the short term and resolved that cuts in expenditure in the following year would be unacceptable. In future years we would be anticipating financial growth to maintain and improve our service to the public.

Members of the Board have worked diligently with our excellent officers to bring about effective change and improvement to many of the important direct services, despite financial pressures.

During the course of the year services within the remit of the SAAN Policy & Performance Board have received independent national recognition and awards for development and performance. These services are now recognised as areas of ‘best practice’ bringing representatives of other local authorities from across the UK to Halton in order to learn from our experiences.

The Board will further develop this year and continue to improve services for the residents of the Borough.”

**Councillor Shaun Osborne
Chairman, Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods
Policy and Performance Board**

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

During 2004/05 the Board comprised ten Councillors – Councillors Cllr Osborne (Chairman), Cllr Nelson (Vice Chairman), Cllr Dennett, Cllr Marlow, Cllr Morley, Cllr Philbin, Cllr E Ratcliffe, Cllr Redhead, Cllr Swift, Cllr Thompson.

The Board is responsible for scrutinising performance and formulating policy in relation to waste collection and disposal, waste minimisation, recycling, environmental health, consumer protection, Registration, Agenda 21 strategy, derelict land reclamation, neighbourhood services, landscape improvement and management (including parks and open spaces) and the development of area based environmental improvement projects to complement area forum agenda.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The full Board met 5 times during the year, set out below are some of the main activities and issues that the Board has worked on during the year.

ESTABLISHMENT OF WORKING PARTIES

At a special meeting of the Environment Policy and Performance Board on 17th February 2004 the following list of suggested topics were approved for examination/review within the 2004/5 work programme of the new PPB:

- Managing continuous improvement in the delivery of bereavement services;
- Anti Social Behaviour
- Contaminated land;
- Waterfront areas;
- Waste Management Strategy.
- Alcohol

The following working groups were established to consider the above topics identified for scrutiny;

- Parks and Open Spaces
- Waste
- Contaminated Land
- Anti Social Behaviour
- Bereavement Services
- Alcohol

In addition, it was agreed that an annual report on progress and expenditure by the Area Forums be submitted to an appropriate meeting of the Board.

The above Working Parties met on a regular basis throughout the year and reported to the Policy and Performance Board in order to inform the decision making progress.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

Waste Management

Waste Management remains one of the most challenging issues facing the Council, given the EU and UK targets which impose new requirements upon LA's and demand a major step change in levels of recycling and diversion of waste from landfill disposal. Halton's targets under the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATS) have a far greater regulatory and cost impact than the statutory recycling performance standards imposed on Halton so far and in order to meet these challenges a major new waste management treatment facilities infrastructure will be required. The Division was successful in acquiring direct financial support from central government to commission technical and financial consultants as part of the on-going evaluation of options for Halton. Joint working arrangements between Halton and Warrington Borough Councils were further developed in 2005/06 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the two authorities.

During the course of the year the Board received several reports concerning the development of the waste management services and the Council's Municipal Waste Management Strategy. The requirements to enter into new contracts for waste disposal and associated services in 2008 emphasised the need to ensure that the project to secure a new contract is driven forward effectively and efficiently. This, together with the need to develop and monitor performance in an area of considerable financial and government interest was recognised in a new Waste Management Staffing Structure that was detailed in a report to the Board in January 2006.

With the support of the Board the Waste Management Division continued to utilise all statutory provisions available to it for the purpose of addressing issues of littering, graffiti and other forms of environmental nuisance within the boundaries of the Borough.

Bereavement Services/Consumer Protection/Registration Service

During the course of the year the Board received several reports on meetings of the Bereavement Services Working Party and was able to contribute to the ongoing development of policy in this sensitive area of the Council's activity.

The Board recommended that the Executive Board supported the roll-out of the government driven Consumer Direct Contact Centre in the North West (CD). This has led to the re-direction of all initial telephone enquiries from Halton's consumers to CD from February 2006 and early indications are that Halton's consumers are receiving an enhanced service, that Halton's advisors are able to deal with the more complex issues and engage with the harder to reach groups locally, and that cashable efficiency savings have been delivered – all from supporting this one initiative.

As part of the modernisation of the civil registration service, the Board

recommended that the Executive Board deregulated the marriage room at the Register Office in Runcorn Town Hall. This was linked to the review of fees for civil weddings with the result that more realistic income streams (based on cost recovery) may be expected for 2006/2007. Additionally, recommendations were made regarding the provision of civil partnership registrations (a new statutory duty that fell to the Council from December 2005). This led to the seamless introduction of civil partnership registrations in Halton.

PROJECTS AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Landscape Services

In September 2005 the Landscape Services Division began the implementation of 'Streetscene' a neighbourhood approach to the delivery of front line landscape maintenance and street cleansing services. Six Neighbourhood Spaces Manager posts were created (5 from existing positions) and each was given a geographic area of responsibility based around the Area Forums. Presentations were given to the each Area Form and to the SAAN P&P Board which explained how 'Streetscene' would work. Since September 2005 two distinct workforces have been integrated, new job descriptions issued, new work plans developed, new vehicle branding introduced and many local improvements implemented. In the first 3 months of 2006 the Streetscene Operation collected 383,940 kg of litter and waste from the streets, parks and open spaces of Halton.

As part of the back-up arrangements for 'Streetscene' the Landscape Services Division completed a re-furbishment and undertook improvements to its Picow Farm Depot. New front line office facilities have allowed managers to work more effectively and to increase front line productivity.

Throughout 2005/6 work has continued on the restoration and enhancement of Victoria Park utilising a £1.6m grant from Heritage Lottery Fund. The past year has seen the completion of a new Junior Children's Play Area, a new lake (on the site of an earlier original), the restoration and enhancement of the War Memorial, the creation of the Appleton Garden, the restoration of park buildings and the completion of a new Park Pavilion. Work will continue through 2006/7.

The Wild About Halton project has continued to support the Borough's Natural Assets Strategy. In 2005/6 the project established a powerful working relationship with the 'City Learning Centres', organisations designed to support and linked to existing educational establishments. Through a project called the 'Artery of Life' the Learning Centres have assisted the Wild About Halton Project to promote Halton's Green Spaces as outdoor field centres using pioneering techniques involving technologically advanced teaching aids such as data loggers and hand held computers. High Schools from surrounding Borough's within Greater Merseyside and Cheshire are now visiting Halton to conduct educational field visits which is helping to promote a positive image of the Borough. Events run as part of the project have continued to attract increasing numbers of participants from local areas and further a-field.

Unfortunately funding for the Waterfront Maintenance Team (established in July

2004 for 2 years with NWDA funding from Mersey Waterfront Regional park project) came to an end and further funding could not be secured. The team was disbanded in March 2006. Throughout 2005/6 the team had been responsible for major enhancements to the Waterfront Estate bringing sites up to the Green Flag Award Standard. Improvements were carried out at Runcorn Promenade, Wigg Island, Victoria Promenade and Spike Island. Spike Island and Wigg Island were submitted for a Green Flag Award in Feb 2006. Judging will take place in May/June. The work that was undertaken by the Waterfront Team has been re-distributed to other 'Streetscene Teams' but obviously maintenance frequencies have had to be reduced.

In the last months of the 2005/6 period the new Phoenix Park in Runcorn which forms part of the Castlefields redevelopment was completed. This state of the art park includes a new Children's Play Area, a Skate Park, Climbing Boulder and a Pavilion. The park has site based staff in the form of a Ranger and a Site Based Gardener.

The Landscape Services Division continued to facilitate the activities of Friends of Parks Groups. In the year 2005/6 a new Friends Group was established for Hale Park. Since its establishment a master plan for the park has been drawn up and many site improvements delivered. Elsewhere the Friends of Crow Wood Park have continued to bid for funding to complete the enhancement of their local facility. In 2005/6 the Phase 1 Improvements were completed. Crow Wood Park now has a new central boulevard that links it to The Bongs, a new Ball Court and a Skate Ramp with Youth Shelter. On the adjacent area 'The Bongs' many small scale environmental improvements have been delivered including improvements to the vegetation alongside Halton View Bridge to remove a litter trap.

Officers from the Landscape Services Division have been asked to address numerous professional bodies to share the Borough's best practice. Many authorities have visited the Division to learn about its activities.

Furthermore;

- Satisfactory delivery of landscape maintenance and street cleansing services.
- Further improvements to high profile public spaces, e.g. roundabouts and major traffic routes.
- Continued improvements to formal parks in line with the 5 year Management Plans
- Maintained school grounds maintenance contract, a total of 47 schools representing over 70% of the Borough Total.
- Secured nominations for APSE Service Team of the year 2005 and for APSE Most Improved Council of the Year 2005.
- Secured 5 Green Flag Awards (Hough Green Park, Rock Park, Runcorn Hill Park, Pickerings Pasture and Victoria Promenade).

Waste Management

The Waste Management Division contributed towards the successful implementation of the 'Streetscene' initiative. The resulting transfer of the neighbourhood cleansing operation into Landscape Services enabled the Division to focus upon the more strategic waste management functions, including graffiti removal, fly-tipping and major highway and strategic route cleansing. At the same time it allowed the Division to concentrate on other functions such as BVPI recording, enforcement, and waste strategy development. The Government has set a national standard for cleanliness which states that the proportion of unacceptable sites for 2005/06 should be below 15%. The changes made in the last year saw Halton's figure improve from 17% in 2004/05 to 8% in 2005/06.

Throughout the year there were a number of successful prosecutions for fly tipping and illegal disposal of trade waste. The Division continues to work closely with other sections of the Council and other external agencies to adopt a more co-ordinated approach to litter prevention and enforcement activities and will be embracing new legislation that will increase the authorities powers to tackle environmental nuisance and crime. Through NRF funding the Division acquired mobile surveillance equipment to support its enforcement and litter prevention activities. This will enable cameras to be installed at known 'black spots' in both neighbourhood and remote areas of the borough to deter fly tipping and other environmental crime. The erection of a network of signs will support the campaign by informing the public of the penalties for fly tipping and will act as a visible deterrent to discourage this practice. The signs will also increase residents awareness of the Council's efforts to tackle environmental crime, a matter frequently raised at Area Forums.

As part of the Council's waste minimisation activities, the Division successfully secured Halton's involvement in a government backed Home Composting campaign for a third year in 2005/6. The scheme secured external funding for every resident in Halton to purchase a choice of home composters at highly subsidised rates. The object of this scheme was to work with WRAP (Waste Resource Action Programme) in order to test how successful home composters are and the effect they have on reducing levels of household waste produced in the borough. Over 400 local authorities applied for this project but Halton was one of only 22 in the country to be successfully chosen in this scheme, which also offered support by way of marketing, advertising, promotional incentives and a dedicated home compost expert to offer advice to residents. The scheme was very successful with more than 1600 residents purchasing a home composting unit in the last year.

The Division operates a successful service that sees abandoned vehicles removed within 24 hours of being reported. With NRF funding a further development of the service is to involve partnership working with the Police and Fire Service. This will see improved removal response times and an increase in the number of dangerous and nuisance vehicles removed.

The Division, with direct financial support from Defra, continues to make

progress on the development its next stage waste management strategy. In the last year external consultants were commissioned and have produced a further series of reports to assist the Council in determining and procuring the most favourable long-term sustainable waste management solution for Halton.

Halton's Recycling and Household Waste Centres continue to be amongst the top performing in the country and our overall recycling and composting performance of 23% remains above the regional average and in line with the national average.

Bereavement Services/Consumer Protection/Registration Service

On 1 April 2005 the Consumer Protection Division (which comprises the above Services) joined the Health and Partnerships Department of the new Health & Community Directorate, following on from the Council's Strategic Management Review. Later in the year, the Consumer Protection Service re-located its office base from Grosvenor House, to Rutland House. Front-line service delivery continued seamlessly during these changes.

During the course of the year work on phase 1 of the preparation of the western strip of Widnes cemetery for burial ground was begun and completed. In November 2005 evidence was provided to a public planning enquiry to ensure that land adjoining Widnes cemetery was protected in case it was required to extend the present cemetery grounds

The Consumer Protection Service took the regional lead on a research project identifying how youngsters gain access to alcohol, a project for which external funding was secured. Combating the sale of alcohol and other restricted products to children continues to be a high priority for the service.

The Registration Service received an inspection from Her Majesty's Inspector of Registration in August 05. The Inspector's subsequent report concluded that Halton's plans for the implementation of modernisation changes, including the new web-enabled registration systems for Registrations, Births, Deaths and Marriages, were well on schedule. This was evidenced when, in December 2005, the Registration Service registered Halton's first civil partnerships.

WORKING PARTY ACTIVITIES

Parks and Open Spaces

In 2005/6 the Waterfront Parks and Open Spaces working party broadened its remit and took on the task of investigating existing standards of quality of management and maintenance throughout all open spaces.

The working party met twice during the year and examined the funding and on-going improvement and development works planned for park sites.

Waste

This working party was established to provide member input into the development of policy on the provision of the authority's waste collection, recycling, disposal and street cleansing services and litter prevention, education and enforcement measures by evaluating the options for achieving the targets and pledges contained within the authority's Municipal Waste Management Strategy and Litter Plans.

The working party considered matters arising out of the Council's Municipal Waste Management Strategy and the continuing developments with regard to the Council's public and private sector waste partnerships. The working party also discussed a range of matters relating to the Street Cleansing services, and in particular the Division's enforcement activities.

Contaminated Land

Contaminated land inspection

The Contaminated Land Inspection Strategy, published in 2001, is the core document for the implementation of the Contaminated Land Regime. This sets out the overall approach taken in Halton and how the specific characteristics of the borough determine the key issues and work programmes. A working party was established to overview and scrutinise the ongoing development and implementation of this significant strategy for the inspection of contaminated land under the chairmanship of councillor Philbin

The major piece of work has been to scrutinise work on the a review of the existing Strategy for the inspection of contaminated land and progress on projects arising from that strategy and the recommendations of the Lancaster study into factors the affecting health in Halton

Environmental Health has a core list of sites that are at varying stages of investigation and assessment under the formal contaminated land regime (Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990). The sites are those which the Council has had involvement with prior to Part IIA coming into force in 2001 and those which have been selected from those identified under work in line with the Council's Contaminated Land Inspection Strategy.

The Part IIA process is long, slow and complicated, ad Halton is now in a position where there are several sites on the verge of the detailed investigation work starting, along with maintaining momentum on more advanced projects. However, all Part IIA work needs input from the EA and Halton finds itself in a position where it is very difficult to progress any of the sites and to produce accurate work programmes. In the last 12 months there has been considerable discussion and negotiation with the EA to ensure that St Michael's Golf Course remains a priority and genuine progress is made.

Key projects

1. St Michael's Golf Course

This is a very public and significant project that is being run by Major Projects

and Environmental Health.

2. Stenhills Quarry

This is one of several former sandstone quarries in Runcorn that have been backfilled in part with waste.

3. Runcorn Hill Quarry

Another of the former sandstone quarries now used as recreational open space; Runcorn Hill has also been partly filled with waste by the Council.

4. Johnson's Lane Landfill

Johnson's Lane Landfill is a large closed landfill formerly owned and operated by ICI Ltd. It was the main disposal site for a wide range of solid and drummed wastes from ICI's manufacturing plants in Widnes and Runcorn.

5. Speke Road Landfill

The closed landfill site that was operated by Cheshire County Council lying alongside Speke Road has problems with leachate.

6. Weston Quarries

The former sandstone quarries at Weston were national headline news in 2000 when the problem of contamination of the adjacent residential properties by chlorinated hydrocarbons arose. The main issue of the contaminated housing has now been settled with the demolition of the majority of the effected properties. However, there are a number of problems remaining, including the effect on groundwater beneath the site.

7. Waterloo Road Area

This area covers a mix of industrial, commercial, vacant and open space land, which historically formed part of the early chemical works in Widnes.

Consumer & Environmental Matters

The remit of this WP is to meet when significant issues need to be reviewed or investigated. During the year there were no such issues referred to the WP and the need to meet did not arise.

Service delivery

The Food Safety Inspection Service

The effective delivery of this key environmental health function is scrutinised by the board firstly by receipt of an annual service delivery plan, which is a mandatory plan, demanded by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and through regular scrutiny of the performance returns. The Food Standards Agency appeared on the scene in 2000 and took over from the audit commission in receiving and publishing the performance figures for local authorities food inspections. The FSA introduced a far more exacting regime of scrutiny with a framework agreement for all local authorities. For a variety of reasons including resources the return to the FSA in this initial year showed a very poor performance and Halton found themselves on the list of worst performing local authorities for food safety and food standards. Quite rightly the board made it clear that this was unacceptable. Making use of overview and scrutiny and offering its support to managers the board set out to:

- Establish the size of the task so that they could recommend the correct level

of resources

- Review working practices to maximise use of available resources
- Maximise use of IT to improve accuracy eliminate any prospect of underreporting

In the longer term the aim was for Halton to be recognised by the FSA as a capable authority who delivers what it promises and any new challenges from them but also flexible enough to meet local needs and challenges. The net result of working with the officers and supporting improvements to the service is that Halton have moved up the performance listings of the FSA and are now in the top 30 or so UK Councils.

Responsible dog ownership

Although there continues to be an improvement owners allowing dogs to defecate in public areas remains a cause of complaint. The board received a report on the inadequacies of the enforcement policy and the potential benefits of moving to a fixed penalty notices. The enforcement policy was strengthened to allow officers to issue notices on a first offence. Although only seventeen fixed penalty notices have been served it has streamlined the system and the immediate threat of issuing one has been an invaluable tool for officers patrolling public spaces.

Health and safety regulation by project working

The board received a report on the changes to health and safety enforcement guidance. The key national targets set for the health & safety regulatory system are to;

- reduce the number of working days lost per 100,000 workers from work-related injury and ill health by 30% by 2010.
- reduce the incidence rate of fatal and major injury incidents by 10% by 2010
- reduce the incidence rate of cases of work-related ill health by 20% by 2010

The need for more-effective progress towards these health and safety targets and increased momentum for better working between central and local government has led the health and safety commission to set out in its strategy a significant change in the way its enforcing authorities – LAs and HSE – interact. The principal aim of the Strategic Programme is a more-effective use of HSE's and LAs' collective resources – working in partnership locally, regionally and nationally – to minimise harm to those in the workplace or those affected by workplace activities by reducing ill health and accidents.

The board endorsed Halton's response to the challenges set by the strategy. The environmental health division is enhancing the current mode of regulation with a series of campaigns around set topics set by the HSE throughout the year that incorporate a number of different strategies to engage local businesses, including but not exclusively, through inspection.

The division will be able to look at local problems within topic areas and plan a

local approach by employing different means of communicating with businesses, including that of enforcement. By planning projects around HSE national media programmes our campaigns can benefit from raised national awareness and allow us to translate these issues to the local situation.

This has proved highly successful and the council in a national were recently commended by the regional director of the HSE to north west authorities, attending a regional road show, as a beacon example for our successful adoption this of new working strategy.

Bereavement Services

The Bereavement Services Working Party met on four occasions during the year. These meetings encouraged member input on policy on a wide variety of cemetery and crematorium issues. Matters of particular significance included policy issues surrounding the Council's strategy for safe headstones; policy on contingency planning for a future Flu pandemic; developing options for the longer-term provision of new grave space in Halton and receiving updates as information trickled through on the subject of mercury abatement and its impact on the crematorium operation.

One of the meetings welcomed members of the local clergy plus local funeral directors, and encouraged an open dialogue aimed at improving our partnership working for the benefit of the members of the community we serve.

Alcohol

Work has progressed on alcohol harm reduction. An Audit has been carried out, a draft strategy is in place which will shortly be presented to a Member Seminar, and an Alcohol Harm Reduction Co-ordinator will shortly be recruited.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Bereavement Services maintained its "Charter for the Bereaved" best value quality standard
- The Consumer Protection Service retained its ISO9001 registered body status

PERFORMANCE ISSUES

There are no relevant performance issues to report upon.