



To review the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) process to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of the process and to improve Councillor knowledge and future involvement in the BVPP process.

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FOREWORD

This Overview and Scrutiny Working Group was set up because Councillors had been frustrated for the last two years regarding the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) process; especially last year's BVPP that had been presented to Full Council for approval on 27 June 2005 but 19 sections had required further information.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee set up a Working Group consisting of Councillor Brian Hoare (Chair), Councillor Michael Hill and Councillor Anjona Roy to carry out the work.

The purpose of the Working Group's scope was to review the BVPP process to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of the process which should include Councillor involvement and add value.

The Scrutiny activity was designed to examine a diverse range of information. Interviews were arranged with senior staff from NBC and the Unison Secretary. Information was taken from Councils whose BVPPs were seen as best practice and baseline information was received.

The Working Group commenced mid-May 2006 and concluded in June 2006.

This piece of Scrutiny activity proved to be interesting and informative giving clear evidence of ways that the Council can progress with its BVPP process.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Hoare', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Brian Hoare
Chair of the BVPP Working Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee set up this Working Group in response to Councillors' concern over the last two years regarding the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) preparation and approval process. Last year the proposed BVPP was presented to Full Council for approval on 27 June 2005 but had 19 sections with missing information and was referred back for further work.

Since the establishment of the Improvement Board during 2005 a new focus has been introduced within the Council on Performance Management and the integrity of its measure systems. This places the Council in a better position to prepare its 2006/08 BVPP plan however the process has been hampered by the lack of corporate priority areas.

Evidence was mainly supplied by Council staff with responsibility for performance and planning matters but other evidence was secured from desk research from other councils and interviews with NBC staff.

Whilst the recent focus on improving performance management activity across the council has helped the BVPP process, it has been identified that the key shortfall in the process is the lack of integration within the corporate planning process.

Flowing from the prime recommendation of starting the BVPP process at least six months earlier and as part of the normal planning process supporting recommendations have been made covering: -

- Greater democratic involvement in setting targets,
- The introduction of quarterly BVPP progress reports highlighting adverse performance
- Improved communication to all councillors on performance achievement.
- Greater clarity in the use of the traffic light system
- Greater focus within O&S projects on explicit PI improvements.
- Improved public communication regarding the council's improvement ambitions as expressed within the BVPP.

The working Group is confident that this year's BVPP plan has been better prepared than in the last two years but believes that the introduction of its recommendations will consolidate the BVPP process as a key driver of improvement within the Borough Council.

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN WORKING GROUP

Purpose

The purpose of this Overview and Scrutiny Working Group was to review the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) process to ensure the integrity and effectiveness of the process and to improve Councillor knowledge and future involvement in the BVPP Process.

2 Context

This Working Group was set up because Councillors have concerns about the last two years by the BVPP process. In 2005 Councillors felt that for the second year they were being presented with a BVPP document for approval which had received little Councillor involvement,

The document presented to the Council on 27 June 2005 had 19 sections that required further information. Whilst the document was being presented as a matter of urgency for approval, to enable the Council to comply with Government deadline, the Councillors decided not to approve the document until it was complete and councillors had had an opportunity to properly review the contents. An extract of the minutes of Full Council of 27 June 2005 is attached at appendix A.

The Financial Strategy and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the BVPP at its meeting on 7 July 2005 and made various recommendations for consideration of the Executive. An extract of the minutes of that meeting is attached at Appendix B.

A special Full Council meeting was then called for 21 July 2005 and the BVPP was approved and published but not within the Government deadline of 30 June.

The result of the BVPP process in 2004 and 2005 has been that new Councillors elected in 2003 (53% of the 2003 intake) have not experienced an effective BVPP process and their knowledge of the potential of this process and how it should be used during the year to bring about improvements to services in line with the organisations corporate goals was limited.

Councillors stated at the time their dissatisfaction with a process that failed to involve them and failed to add value to the improvement of the council.

It was recognised that there was a potential to disrupt the 2006 process and it was clearly stated to officers that this was not the intention nor should it be allowed to happen.

3. Evidence

In scoping the Scrutiny activity it was decided that evidence would be taken from a variety of source.

3.1 BVPP process for the previous and the current year.

Dale Phillipson, Corporate Manager, NBC, provided baseline information, which detailed the timetable for the BVPP in previous years and the current 2006/2007 BVPP plan.

Given the low profile and last minute approval of the recent years BVPP plans it was apparent that there is a need for clarity for Councillors as to their role and responsibilities.

The key points were: -

- The practice of “best value” has changed in recent years, we are still required to produce a BVPP but there are fewer requirements to prescribe a series of best value service reviews. The purpose of a BVPP is to formally report our progress against BVPIs and to set out targets for three years.
- The Council is in a better position to prepare this year’s BVPP plan given the focus on the Performance Management as a key recovery activity for the council in recent months.
- The production time scales of previous years BVPP plans appear to have been influenced more by the availability of “previous years out turn results” i.e. where are we coming from rather than where do we want to get to in three years time? Which requires clarity of corporate objectives.
- This year’s BVPP process is constrained by the lack of a corporate plan setting out corporate priorities informed by a programme of citizen engagement.
- The BVPP process needs to be added to the annual Corporate Plan timetable and not seen as an ancillary exercise to satisfy Government requirements.
- There is a need to communicate the BVPP and Corporate Plan processes effectively with Councillors, stakeholders and citizens.
- There is a need to recognise the particular demands on the Borough Council given the current political balance and the need for corporate priorities that command the support of more than one political party.
- There is also a need for a better understanding of the format options for the production of the BVPP with consideration given to best practice in other councils.

(Appendices C, D and E refer).

3.2 Corporate Plan process.

S Wade, Operations Manager (Recovery, Policy and Governance), provided baseline information for this year’s Corporate Plan which detailed the

timetable and further information relating to the Corporate Plan process. The draft Corporate Plan 2006/2007 had been circulated to all Councillors.

The key points were: -

- A Corporate Plan setting out the council priorities for the next 3 years is not a mandatory requirement for local authorities but it is considered to be good practice.
- Previous year's BVPP plans have not been informed by a Corporate Plan / Priorities and therefore have not conformed to best practice.
- The 2006/09 BVPP plan would ideally be informed by Corporate Priorities drawn up within a Corporate Planning process which needed to start in the Spring of 2005.
- In the absence of a three-year corporate plan, a one year 2006/07 corporate plan process commenced. This plan is relying heavily on the Cross Party discussions setting Corporate Priorities for the 2007/08 budgetary process.
- The current focus on producing a one year (2006/07) Corporate Plan is beginning to impede the commencement of the next Corporate Plan (2007/08) which will be required to inform the next BVPP Plan (2007/2008)
- If future BVPP plans are going to effectively set out the key performance / improvement activities of the council then the production of the corporate priorities needs to start early at least 12 months ahead of the completion deadline of the BVPP plan.
- Labelling in the Council's strategies, plans and documents was inconsistent.

3.3 Witness Evidence

The Performance Manager and the Trade Union representatives from Unison and GMB were interviewed regarding the BVPP process.

The Key points from the interviews were: -

- There had been a dramatic improvement in performance activity
- Data collection now takes place regularly via the repository
- Performance Indicators and general performance is discussed at management meetings
- The main sticking points with the process are: -
 - Corporate Plan process
 - Need to bottom out what are and what are not priorities
 - Need for an annual consultation process
 - Need for summaries of the consultation of what people are telling the Council
 - Need to collate information on consultation, audit and political manifestos
 - Need for an agreed methodology in defining plans on the basis of the data/evidence and allocated responsibility

- There is a need for all 47 Councillors to receive performance information on a monthly basis. Currently it is only issued to the Improvement Board.
- Union involvement in this year's BVPP process had not been ideal. There is a need for Unions to be consulted on the medium term financial strategy, corporate priorities and then the draft BVPP.
- The BVPP is not published on the Council's website.
- Information relating to Performance and Improvement was not available on the Council's website.

Appendix F refers.

3.4 BVPP Best Value Guides

Examples of Local Authorities' BVPPs that were seen as best practice were required, including: -

- Kent County Council
- Winchester City Council

Examples of best practice includes:-

- The inclusion of 'the Golden Thread', a concept also used by Northamptonshire County Council, to explain how plans and strategies dovetail each other.
- The use of a two-aspect happy/sad face analysis for assessing success. The happy face means that the Council has exceeded its target or is in the top quartile, a sad face that it is not.
- More condensed BVPPs, which are easy to read, and presented in a user-friendly format.
- The inclusion of a summary of headline financial figures.

Appendix G refers.

4. Conclusions

4.1 After evidence was taken from witnesses; it became apparent that some improvements to the BVPP process had been put in place, such as:-

- A dramatic improvement in the focus and profile of performance activity
- Data collection now takes place regularly via the repository
- Performance Indicators and general performance is discussed at management meetings and at the Improvement Board.

However there were still many gaps in the process to ensure that the BVPP plan is an effective process in the improvement of the council

4.2 The production of the BVPP plan in the last two years not been part of the main Corporate Planning process and has been undertaken as a "backend exercise" to comply with Government requirements.

- 4.3 The lack of Corporate Priorities has prevented the setting of Performance Indicators across the BVPP three-year time span that reflects the priorities of the council.
- 4.4 The Political balance of the council, with the administration having no overall control, adds an additional level of complication to the agreement of a BVPP plan.
- 4.5 There is a lack of public engagement or communication to the citizens of Northampton of the aspiration to achieve improvements in services provided by the council.
- 4.7 Witnesses evident from interviews with the Unions indicate that the staff had not been thoroughly consulted during this year's BVPP process.
- 4.8 Communication to and involvement of performance management information to back bench Councillors has deteriorated in the last two years and currently only the Improvement Board and Cabinet are receiving PI performance reports.
- 4.9 The labelling in the Council's strategies, plans and documents was inconsistent and there was a need for uniformed labelling to add clarity and understanding.
- 4.10 The lack of the 2004/05 BVPP on the Council's website is an indication of a wider problem of communication with the public regarding the council's priorities and ambitions.
- 4.11 The BVPP documentation produced has been written to comply with internal and Government requirements and there is a need for "user friendly" summaries to aid internal and public communication.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 That the Council adopts the integration of the production of its BVPP plan into its mainstream Corporate planning cycle which will ensure robust public consultation and staff involvement in the BVPP process.
- 5.2 That the Chief Executive, with the Leaders of the Political Groups, reviews each year, at the start of the planning cycle, the process of setting the future Corporate Priorities.
- 5.3 That all Councillors be given the opportunity to engage during quarter three with Corporate Managers, setting future performance indicator targets.
- 5.4 That in financial quarter three, the Chair and Deputy Chairs of Overview Scrutiny considers how the work of Overview and Scrutiny should inform the setting of target PI indicators in the departmental service plans.
- 5.5 That the Council reviews the current low level of monthly Performance Management information supplied to all Councillors and the general public.
- 5.6 That consideration is given to a quarterly BVPP progress and exception report to the Cabinet and made available to all Councillors.
- 5.7 That Overview and Scrutiny amends its scoping template to include appropriate BVPP indicators and considers as an output from its work recommendations for future targets for this Council.
- 5.8 That the current traffic light system is arbitrary and should be improved by the introduction of a "rules based system".
- 5.9 That a version of the approved 2006/08 BVPP plan should be posted on the Council Website within 4 weeks and a plain language printed summary of the plan should be made available to the general public. This should aid the Councils drive to improve communication with the public and be standard procedure for the BVPP annual plan.
- 5.10 That the council reviews and establishes a clear set of user friendly labels for the various components of its overall planning regime which help users, particularly the public to understand their role and function.

More detailed suggested actions to implement these recommendations are set out in Appendix I under the following headings: -

- **Current Best Value Performance Plan (2006/07)**
- **Future Best Value Performance Plans**
- **Review Activity**

Future Work

This Work Group set itself a very limited remit and the Overview and Scrutiny committee should consider in its future work programme how the following can be achieved.

- How future Councillor training on BVPP / Performance Management should be achieved. Should this be signposted to the Councillor Development Programme Project Board or reviewed by another Overview and Scrutiny Working Group?
- How to ensure that future Corporate Planning schedules include adequate weight and attention to the preparatory work for future BVPP Plans?
- How Overview and Scrutiny should monitor the Performance Management activity of the council and ensure that the BVPP process is an effective programme to improve this Council?
- How does the Council determine the strategic improvement of service delivery through a programme of service reviews?
- How Corporate Planning training and Performance Information is incorporated into the induction process for new Councillors in May 2007?

Appendices

Extract of Full Council minutes of 27 June 2005

BVPP

“Consideration was given to the Best Value Performance Plan copies of which were circulated at the meeting. It was noted that under the Local Government Act 1999 and Statutory Instrument 2002/305 the Council had to publish its best value performance plan by the 30 June each year. Under the constitution this document was part of the Authority's Policy framework and only the Council could approve or adopt it. Attention was drawn to the fact that whilst there was no specific sanction for failing to meet the deadline in the Councils present position such a failure could very well lead to direct intervention by the Secretary of State. In order to meet the deadline members were therefore requested to pass the resolution adopting the plan subject to final collation and adjustment with a view to publication on the 30 June 2005 and that in the interim any comments by members on the document be sent to the Chief Executive by 12.00 o'clock on Wednesday the 29 June 2005.

Concerns were expressed from members over the fact that this had been presented at such short notice and guidance was sought on the implications should the plan be postponed to enable further consideration. In view of the concerns expressed Councillor Lariat recommended that the Best Value Performance Plan be withdrawn and therefore not published on the 30 June and brought back to a special meeting of the Council in July for further discussion to allow in the meantime for the proper consultation process to take place. This cause of action was duly agreed.”

Extract of Financial Strategy and Performance Overview and Scrutiny minutes of 7 July 2005

BVPP

“The Chair introduced the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) explaining that it reported on the performance of all services. Only the first part being new as all other documents included had already been seen. The BVPP laid out strategic priorities from the Corporate Performance Plan.

At the outset the Chair commented that he hoped to see: -

A summary

- *The purpose of the Plan*
- *Key priorities (8)*
- *How the Plan was to be used, and when.*

Ella Yeshin, Interim Corporate Manager, was invited to outline the document.

Ella commented on the legal requirement for the BVPP to be a public document. It would be placed in public places such as libraries, and posted on the Council's intranet and Internet sites. NBC's BVPP summarised the authority's main achievements of the previous year and set out its priorities for 2005/06. Performance of services was detailed.

The appendices included:

- *Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI) 2004/05*
- *Corporate Plan 2005/06*
- *Community Strategy 2002-2012*
- *Corporate Performance Assessment Report March 2004*
- *Recovery Plan and Annexe*
- *The Committee discussed several aspects of the BVPP:*

Some targets were not NBC's responsibility but were encompassed the Local Strategic Partnership's priority areas:

- *Tackling unemployment*
- *Improving health*

- *Reducing crime and creating safer communities*
- *Raising educational attainment*
- *Improving housing quality*
- *Improving the environment in which we live*
- *The need for detailed benchmarks for all priority service areas.*
- *Appendix A's BVPI's and last year's outturns.*
- *2004/05 results not yet audited, therefore not included, but necessary.*
- *The Committee requested the latest benchmark details, the latest figures and regular information for the Council's three service priority areas, in order to ensure full Scrutiny:*
 - *Housing Services*
 - *Revenue & Benefits*
 - *Street Scene*

In relation to information on page 33, regarding changes in circumstances, whether this Council was particularly strict in comparison with others; it was noted that our target had improved and we were 3rd best. On comparison we had fallen behind and were 4th worst. Having gone from taking 30 days to just over 10 meant an improvement. Clarity was needed.

The Committee was referred to numerous pages in several areas causing comment that a comprehensive cross-referencing table was needed.

It could be seen on page 39 of Appendix A that in April changes in circumstances were effecting in 28 days, in May although the target was 15 days, we achieved 12 days. However, personal experience reported to Councillors seemed to indicate that the situation had worsened.

The Committee requested that collated figures were explained and analysed for greater accuracy.

The difficulties of ensuring all necessary information was to hand at the outset was discussed and the need for greater help for claimants at this stage.

The apparent inconsistency of measuring and comparison.

Ensuring we did not get so caught up in recording performance that we overlooked the real aim of providing swift and accurate benefit, and to avoid blaming claimants for their non-receipt of benefit.

The need to find Local Authority family comparators, who recorded as we do.

- *The need to ensure we provided sufficient information and help to claimants.*
- *The importance of speed as the date of application dictated the date of allocation of housing benefit.*
- *The complexity of changes of circumstances and the frequency when a claim began, the effect of overpayments and the pitfalls for claimants.*

The Chair expressed the view that examination of our housing benefit system was an area of work for this Committee, even more so as a key, priority area.

The Chair explained that this Committee's role was to ensure the robustness of this BVPP to ensure it was accepted by Council without further delay. Further comments were invited to inform any revision:

The need to begin collating data for the new BVPP in a more timely fashion using the data from the new monthly performance management system.

- *The need for regular opportunities to monitor this data so the BVPP did not bring surprises.*
- *The need to ensure our partners were on board, as they must act on the BVPP too, and theirs must agree with ours.*

The committee was impressed with the BVPP, especially in such a short time, and considered it to be comprehensive and fit for purpose. Councillors recorded their congratulations to the team and offered some recommendations for improvement in a spirit of collaboration, not criticism, and provided reasons for consideration of the recommendations.

Councillors found it useful that all performance information and priority targets were contained within the one document. However, making comparisons between statistics and BVPIs was complicated. This would be easier if there were means of placing comparative data together, alongside benchmarks.

The committee made the following recommendations for inclusion in the Chair's report to the Executive on 18 July:

Recommendation 1

That a means of providing comparative data, benchmarks and BVPIs is devised, for ease of reference and meaningful comparison, in future

BVPPs.

To aid navigation of the BVPP, especially when being used by Overview and Scrutiny in performance monitoring, an index with relevant service data and BVPIs cross-referenced would be extremely helpful.

Recommendation 2

That the team provides a cross-referenced index to aid navigation and interrogation of data.

The BVPP was comprehensive. Whilst necessary, this made it a little unwieldy for general use. It was apparent that the first part of the document carried the new information. This was seen to be the part of most immediate interest to councillors and residents. The Committee felt that an Executive Summary could be compiled for general circulation carrying reference to the complete document and information on how to obtain it. As it would be available on the council's website, with links to all the documents in the annexe, a summary would be extremely useful, practical and cost effective.

Recommendation 3

That a six sided, fold out, summary is prepared for general release and that it contain details of how to obtain the full version either in hard copy or on the council.

Councillors were aware of the complexity of the document and that the summary should aim for simplicity and clarity. Scrutiny would like to offer help with this by providing the input of two councillors.

Recommendation 4

That Councillors D Perkins and L Marriott work with the team to produce the summary and website link.

During the Committee's examination of the BVPP it became apparent that consideration of statistics alone gave rise to questions of meaning. The data without analysis can be misleading, or could lead to misinterpretation. Some of the Benefits data indicated improvement, but comparison results were shown as a fall in achievement. Councillors were unable to determine whether achievement was worse,

or better, without analysis. Raw data and comparison results without explanation was confusing.

Recommendation 5

That some thought is given to ensuring statistics in the BVPP are supported by explanation and analysis if possible.

The committee was aware that comparators are set by the Government but Councillors were anxious to ensure we compare equal data. We need to confirm data collection is truly compatible to ensure we make fair comparisons.

Recommendation 6

That we conduct adequate research with comparator authorities to ensure we collect our data and comparison figures in the same way and over the same period.

Councillors were aware that our Local Strategic Partnership partners, and other agencies, were also collecting data and we need to ensure we compare and share information. We are measured on some of our partners' activity so we need to confirm our information agrees.

Recommendation 7

That we develop active engagement with our partners (NCC, Police Authority, Health and LSP etc) so that we all have accurate information for developing improvements.

Councillors noted the title is Best Value Performance Plan. 'Plan' would indicate that the document provides information that will take the council somewhere. We feel that the comprehensive data showing where we currently are should be accompanied by either an action plan or a set of new targets for the following year. i.e. As a result of reaching these targets (or failing to) we are setting new targets with plans for achieving them.

The Committee was able to view examples of BVPPs from Maidstone and South Tyneside, both of which included such targets.

Recommendation 8

That the ongoing work as a result of collating and analysing performance figures is reflected in the BVPP by including an action plan or set of new targets for achievements.

Councillors recommended consideration and implementation of these recommendations for improvement of the BVPP, and wanted to

emphasise that they did not in any way detract from the excellent work in producing the BVPP 2005/6.

The committee had no hesitation in recommending the Best Value Performance Plan 05/06 for approval.

Councillors were advised to forward any further comments on the document to either the Chair or Ella Yeshin.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the Committee's comments and recommendations as detailed above be incorporated into the Chair's report for presentation to the Executive at its meeting on 18 July.

(2) That Ella Yeshin provides details whether 'by April 2007 we will have increased visitor spend by at least 2% per annum; the current spend is approximately £236 million per year,' was real or gross spend, as requested."

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN (BVPP)
WORKING GROUP

10 May 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor B Hoare (Chair)
Councillor M Hill
Councillor A Roy

Thomas Hall Corporate Manager
Dale Phillipson Corporate Manager
Tracy Tiff

1 Election of Chair

It was moved by Councillor Roy and seconded by Councillor Hill that Councillor B Hoare be elected Chair of the Best Value Performance Plan Working Group.

2 Introductions and Protocol for the meeting

This Group is a Scrutiny Working Group rather than a Task and Finish Group and is undertaking a Scrutiny activity rather than carrying out a review.

The Chair suggested the minutes of this meeting be produced in short, action point format.

3 Current positions

The timetable for the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) was circulated: -

- First draft to the Improvement Board 24 May
- Second draft to all Councillors for comment w/c 29 May
- Overview and Scrutiny Committee 14 June
- Final draft to the Improvement Board 15 June
- Cabinet 26 June
- Full Council 26 June
- Final document to be produced 30 June

The timetable was restrained due to the corporate priorities not as yet being set.

The reason for setting up this Working Group was explained – Councillors had been frustrated for the last two years regarding the BVPP process, especially

last year's plan that had been presented to Full Council for approval but 19 sections had required further information. Councillors needed to have involvement and knowledge of the BVPP process. There is a need for clarity of what Councillors and staff can expect from the BVPP process and how Overview and Scrutiny can be involved. This short Scrutiny activity would look at the BVPP process to ensure the integrity of the process, which should include Councillor involvement. The Working Group would carry out a short piece of work that might recommend further work to be undertaken. If further, wider work was carried out; it would benefit the involvement of non-Executive Councillors.

The Working Group discussed the Corporate Plan and the BVPP and heard that: -

- Corporate Plans are individual to Councils regarding the level of detail included, size etc.
- The BVPP is a drier, denser document. The BVPP must contain information on approximately 200 Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs), the previous year's audited performance and compare three years targets. Examples of best practice have been obtained for next year's Plan.
- It is a statutory requirement to produce an annual BVPP but it is not a statutory requirement for Local Authorities to produce a Corporate Plan. However, it is seen as best practice.
- Ideally, next year's process would begin with the Corporate Plan being completed first. There would be a lengthy consultation process involving the community, stakeholders, partners and Councillors. At the end of this process the BVPP would be produced.
- Best value is becoming less relevant but legislation has not changed, but the method in which Councils are assessed has changed. Best Value requires Councils to review its services every three years. NBC is not carrying out best value reviews but under the guidance of the Government Monitoring Board (GMB) is undertaking service reviews (similar criteria to best value reviews)

4 Scoping Exercise

The Working Group would look at: -

- The timetable for the BVPP for the previous two years.
- The BVPP process for last year.
- An improved BVPP process for next year.
- Examples of best practice
- Raising the awareness of the BVPP and Councillors' knowledge in best value performance
- How the service reviews link with best value reviews (the performance management framework sets out this information and could be distributed to Councillors)

The draft scope of the Working Group's activity is attached as Appendix A to the minutes.

The Group undertook to carry out the following pieces of work and would report back to the next meeting: -

Action: BVPP process for future years Cllr Hoare/Dale Phillips on
Best Value Guides Cllr Hill
Witness Evidence (such as Dale Robertson, Performance
Manager, Kathy Sudden, Trade Union Secretary)
Cllr Roy

5 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 24 May commencing at 12noon in Room 8 at Cliftonville House.

The meeting concluded at 5.40pm

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN (BVPP)
WORKING GROUP

24 May 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor B Hoare (Chair)
Councillor M Hill
Councillor A Roy

Thomas Hall Corporate Manager
Dale Phillipson Corporate Manager
Tracy Tiff

1 APOLOGIES

None.

2 MINUTES

Subject to the following amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2006 were approved: -

The timetable was **constrained** due to the corporate priorities not as yet being set.

3 ACTIVITY SCOPE

The activity scope was approved as amended by the BVPP Working Group. Copy attached to the minutes.

4 REPORT BACK FROM WITNESS EVIDENCE

Councillor Roy advised that she had met recently with D Robertson, Performance Manager, and a meeting was arranged for Friday 26 May with A Smith, Unison Secretary. Information from the meeting with D Robertson was circulated.

The main points from the meeting with D Robertson were:

- Dramatic improvement in performance activity
- Data collection now takes place regularly via the repository
- Performance Indicators and general performance is discussed at management meetings
- Currently, the main sticking points with the process are: -
 - Corporate Plan process
 - Need to bottom out what are and what are not priorities

- Need for an annual consultation process
- Need for summaries of the consultation of what people are telling the Council
- Need to collate information on consultation, audit and political manifestos
- Need for an agreed methodology in defining plans on the basis of the data/evidence and allocated responsibility
- The Improvement Board receives performance information on a monthly basis

The BVPP Working Group commented: -

- All Councillors should receive performance information. The recommendations of the final report could include that all Councillors be sent a monthly email containing a link to the performance information.
- That an email be sent to Councillor Palethorpe, Chair of the Constitutional Working Party, the Solicitor to the Council and the Meetings Officer that “ *it has been ascertained that the main sticking points at the moment with the production of the BVPP are the Corporate Plan process and the need to bottom out what are and what are not priorities.*”

The Working Group also ascertained the need for an agreed methodology in defining plans on the basis:

*Service performance and Audit information
Information from Public Consultation
Political priorities*

Currently there seemed to be no clarity that there was political accountability of the process-taking place (hopefully taking place well) or trigger mechanism and managerial responsibility of the process taking place at all. This was seen to be particularly salient in light of the operational input of this be spread across seemingly four managerial areas of the Council:

*Corporate planning
Performance
Citizen engagement
Financial control*

A request would be made that the above be included onto the agenda for the next Constitutional Working Party.”

- There is a need for corporate priorities to be set sooner in the process, for example medium term business planning, so that the BVPP process can commence earlier.

- There is a need for a longer term Corporate Plan to inform the BVPP which needs to take into account views from the consultation process, audit and the Political manifestos.
- There is a need for a vehicle to ask Cabinet to put a weighting on the Authority's corporate priorities.
- Ownership of the agreed methodology in defining plans could be delegated to the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive.

ACTIONS: (1) That the recommendations of the final report include that all Councillors be sent a monthly email containing a link to the performance information.

(2) That an email be sent to Councillor Palethorpe, Chair of the Constitutional Working Group, copy to the Solicitor to the Council and the Meetings Officer, as detailed above.

(3) That details of the interview with A Smith, Unison Secretary, be given to the next meeting.

5 BEST VALUE GUIDES

Councillor Hill advised that he had looked at the Annual Plan for Kent County Council and the Performance Plan for Winchester City Council. Both had major differences in format from that used by Northampton Borough Council. Copies of Councillor Hill's findings were circulated.

Councillor Hill had obtained a copy of *the Strategic Vision – The University of Northampton 2005-2010* and it was requested that copies be obtained for the BVPP Working Group.

The main points from Councillor Hill's research were: -

- Winchester City Council includes its concept of 'the Golden Thread', a concept also used by Northamptonshire County Council, to explain how plans and strategies dovetail each other.
- Winchester did not use the traffic light system for assessing success or failure but uses a two-aspect happy/sad face analysis. The happy face means that the Council has exceeded its target or is in the top quartile, a sad face that it is not.
- Northampton Borough Council's BVPP is considerably longer than that of the other two authorities.
- The Northampton plan, by comparison with the other two, is poorly written and less well presented. A more outward looking document is needed.
- There could be a case for NBC producing a short document on its achievements and vision, similar to that produced by the University of Northampton.

The BVPP Working Group commented: -

- It would be beneficial to produce both an internal BVPP, an easier to comprehend, user-friendly version for the general public and a general summary document. In addition a summary page of headlines summarising the key objectives should be produced.
- There is a need for all 47 Councillors to use the BVPP as part of their engagement as a Councillor. Councillors need to be educated on the value of the BVPP. A question and answer sheet "What is the BVPP" could be produced for Councillors to complete when the BVPP is approved at Full Council on 26 June 2006.

ACTIONS: (1) That copies of *the Strategic Vision – The University of Northampton 2005-2010* be obtained for the BVPP Working Group.

(2) That the recommendations of the final report include the production of both an internal BVPP, an easier to comprehend, user-friendly version for the general public and a general summary document. In addition a summary page of headlines summarising the key objectives should be produced.

(3) That a draft questionnaire and answer sheet 'What is the BVPP' be produced for the next meeting which would be further developed for submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 14 June 2006.

6 BVPP PROCESS FOR FUTURE YEARS

D Phillipson, Corporate Manager, advised that: -

- First draft of this year's Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) had been produced based on examples of good practice.
- The draft was more descriptive than previous years.
- The process was further ahead this year than last; 85% of required targets had been met. Actions were in place to chase the remainder.
- Each BVPP contains three years of targets; two years have already been obtained for this year's BVPP.
- The Council will be in a better position in respect of its BVPP process next year. This year it is constrained to a tight timetable mainly due to the priority areas not as yet set.
- The Council is obliged to report on its Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) in its BVPP, reporting of LPIs is discretionary.
- Advice needs to be sought from the auditors whether local performance indicators (LPIs) should be included in the BVPP.
- The Audit Commission looks at Local Authorities' BVPIs and does not give credit for good LPIs.

- As part of the Council's performance management process, quarterly performance reviews (QPRs) are carried out. Three years of targets are shown in QPRs.
- There is a strong medium term financial strategy in place which is informed by: -
 - Local Area Agreement (LAA)
 - Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)
 - Crime and Disorder
 - Performance Management Framework
 - Council's budgets

The BVPP Working Group commented: -

- Advantageous to start the BVPP process early in January. The targets for the previous two years could be considered to ascertain if they were the right targets for the third year.
- Target setting for the third year should be carried out before the outturn, so that everything is not carried out in the period directly after the outturn.
- LPIs can often show the Council in a stronger position and can balance against poor performance.
- This Working Group needs to look at how useful last year's BVPP was, whether it informed people, and what improvements could be suggested. A comparison of last year's BVPP with this year's would also be made.
- The Working Group should be issued with a hard copy of the first draft of this year's BVPP.

ACTION: That D Phillipson, Corporate Manager, circulate paper copies of the first draft of this year's BVPP to the Working Group.

7 Date of next meetings

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Tuesday 30 May commencing at 3pm in the Holding Room at the Guildhall.

The final meeting would be held on Wednesday 14 June 2006 commencing at 12noon in the Holding Room at the Guildhall. The Working Group would finalise its report for submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting later that evening.

The meeting concluded at 1.30pm

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN (BVPP)
WORKING GROUP

30 May 2006

PRESENT:

Councillor B Hoare (Chair)
Councillor M Hill
Councillor A Roy

Dale Phillipson Corporate Manager
Simone Wade Operations Manager (Policy, Recovery and Governance)

Tracy Tiff

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Thomas Hall, Corporate Manager.

2 MINUTES

The meeting held on 24 May 2006 were approved.

3 REPORT BACK FROM WITNESS EVIDENCE

Councillor Roy advised that she had met recently with D Labrum, GMB, and A Smith, Secretary of Unison.

The main point from the meeting with the Union representatives was that Union involvement in this year's BVPP process had not been ideal. There is a need for Unions to be consulted on the medium term financial strategy, corporate priorities and then the draft BVPP.

ACTION: That the recommendations of the final report include that there is a need for Unions to be consulted on the medium term financial strategy, corporate priorities and then the draft BVPP.

4 BEST VALUE GUIDES

Councillor Hill advised that he had produced some draft questions for inclusion in a question and answer sheet '*What is the Best Value Performance Plan*' for circulation to all Councillors prior to Full Council on 26 June 2006. Copies of Councillor Hill's questions were circulated.

D Phillipson, Corporate Manager, would provide answers for inclusion on the question and answer sheet and email to the Group by 2 June 2006. He

undertook to liaise with M McLean, Chief Executive, regarding the order of the agenda of Full Council of 26 June 2006

The Working Group decided that the best method to circulate the question and answer sheet was that it should be appended to the covering report to the BVPP 2006/07, to Full Council on 26 June 2006 and would be circulated to the three Political Groups on 19 June 2006.

- ACTIONS:**
- (1) That D Phillipson, Corporate Manager, liaise with M McLean, Chief Executive, regarding the order of the agenda of Full Council of 26 June 2006.**
 - (2) That the question and answer sheet will be appended to the covering report to the BVPP 2006/07, to Full Council on 26 June 2006 and will be circulated to the three Political Groups on 19 June 2006.**

6 BVPP PROCESS FOR FUTURE YEARS

The Working Group discussed the BVPP process, commenting that: -

- The Council will be in a better position in respect of its BVPP process next year.
- This year it is constrained to a tight timetable mainly due to the corporate priority areas not as yet being set.
- The BVPP process should be added to the Corporate Plan timetable.
- There is a need to communicate the BVPP and Corporate Plan processes effectively with Councillors, stakeholders and citizens.
- There is a need for Political ownership of the data contained in the BVPP.
- There is a need for a prescribed format for the production of the BVPP.

S Wade, Operations Manager (Policy, Recovery & Governance) gave the Working Group a brief summary on the Corporate Plan process to date. The draft Corporate Plan 2006/2007 had been circulated to all Councillors.

The Working Group heard that: -

- The Corporate Plan process needs to start earlier each year.
- Corporate priorities inform the Council's service plans but the service plans put the best case forward why they should feature in the Council's corporate priorities.
- The performance management system ensures that all Council services deliver on their priorities which are monitored by monthly and quarterly performance reviews and employees appraisals.
- The budget and the Council's Service Plans would be looked at, at the start of the Corporate Plan process for next year, during November 2006. The budget and service planning was an integral part of the Corporate Plan process.

- The medium term financial planning translates corporate priorities for Council services to deliver.
- Labelling in the Council's strategies, plans and documents was inconsistent.

The Working Group suggested recommendations for inclusion in its final report, which would be categorised into four groups: -

Recommendations

The following series of recommendations are grouped in specific categories:

Current Best Value Performance Plan (2006/07)

- That all Councillors should be sent a monthly email containing a link to the performance information.
- That the question and answer sheet "What is the BVPP", should be appended to the covering report to the BVPP 2006/07, to Full Council on 26 June 2006.
- That the question and answer sheet "What is the BVPP" will be circulated to the three Political Groups on 19 June 2006.

Future Best Value Performance Plans

- That the Corporate priorities should be set sooner in the process so that the BVPP process can commence earlier.
- That there is a need for a longer term Corporate Plan to inform the BVPP which needs to take into account views from the consultation process, audit and the Political manifestos.
- That Cabinet is requested to put a weighting on the Authority's corporate priorities.
- That the BVPP process should commence in January each year.
- That an internal BVPP, an easier to comprehend, user-friendly version for the general public and a general summary document should be produced.
- That a Northampton Borough Council Press Officer should produce the user-friendly version of the BVPP.
- That a précis page of headlines summarising the key objectives should be produced.
- That there should be Union involvement in next year's BVPP review activity.
- That future BVPPs and Corporate Plans should reference specific engagement of Councillors, defining Committees such as Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny.
- That consistent labelling should be used in all Council strategies, plans and documents.
- That the communication of the medium term financial plan to the public should be reviewed.

- That the BVPP should be published on the Council's website within 21 days of it being approved by Full Council.

Review Activity

- That the targets for the previous two years BVPPs should be considered to ascertain if they are the correct targets for the third year. Target setting for the third year should be carried out before the outturn.
- That it is proposed that the Working Group reviews progress in six months (December 2006/January 2007).
- That it is proposed that the Working Group reviews progress of the improvement and performance information on the Council's website within six months (December 2006/January 2007)

Future Work

- That all Councillors should be educated on the value of the BVPP so that they can use the BVPP as part of their engagement as a Councillor. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be asked to determine whether the Councillor training on the BVPP be signposted to the Councillor Development Programme Project Board or to an Overview and Scrutiny Working Group.
- That two short training sessions on the BVPP should be held each year at the start of the BVPP cycle prior to a Full Council meeting: -
 - Understanding the BVPP Framework
 - Political dimension into the BVPP
- That BVPP training should be incorporated into the induction process for new Councillors.

ACTION: That the recommendations as detailed above be incorporated into the draft report which would be finalised at the Working Group's meeting on 14 June 2006.

7 Date of next meetings

The final meeting would be held on Wednesday 14 June 2006 commencing at 12noon in the Holding Room at the Guildhall. A buffet lunch would be provided. The Working Group would finalise its report for submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting later that evening.

The meeting concluded at 4.45 pm

Notes from a meeting with Dale Robertson, Corporate Performance Manager

Dale reported:

Dramatic improvement in performance activity

Data collection takes place regularly via repository

PIs and general performance are discussed at management meetings:-

- Operational Team weekly
- Corporate Managers 14 days
- SCMT monthly
- CX and CD 14 days
- 1:2:1's monthly

Improvement Board receive data on a monthly basis and this is sent to Political Assistants and departments throughout council.

Departments are required to display performance information and discuss at team meetings and 1 to 1's.

The main sticking points at the moment are:

- Corporate Planning Process- timing impacts on preparation/ production of BVPP as need to directly reflect contents of CP
- Lack of defined objectives and targets within Corporate Plan
- Need to bottom out what are and what are not priorities

Need for an annual and ongoing consultation process

Need for: (for Corporate planning process- based on issues from past year):-

- Summaries of (remove) at the consultation of what people are telling us
- Collate information to inform corporate planning
 - Consultation
 - Audit recommendations for improvement
 - Performance Information
 - Political Manifestos

Need for an agreed methodology in defining corporate planning process/ plans on the basis of the data/evidence

Allocated responsibility -Signpost to constitutional working group

Guidance states –BVPP NOT a public facing document but keep clarity and be concise the ancillary documents to be made available in all council public buildings

ACTIONS:

Role to link into Overview & Scrutiny with performance data

Development of local performance indicators:-

- addition to the scoping document re performance
- training for key officers in the performance team on O&S
- addition to the report pro-forma to flag opportunities for defining new local indicators

Can O&S be more involved in challenging target setting in BVPP?

Is it robust?

Is it challenging?

Is it stretching?

(this action takes place in February 2007)

Start in October 2006

Concerns about the consultation

Annual Survey

Benefit Survey

Planning Survey

Tenants Survey

Autumn 2006-Early 2007 data returned

TASK & FINISH GROUP

BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN

I have looked at the Annual Plan for Kent County Council and the Performance Plan for Winchester City Council, accepting that the former, being for a county council, is not an exact comparator. Both have major differences in format from that used in Northampton.

Perhaps the first question that needs to be asked is what is the audience for the Northampton BVPP. While it may be an acceptable tool for Council officers it is suggested that it is not "user friendly" for the population at large who may wish to glean information.

Looking at the other plans the first impression gained was that Northampton's plan is considerably longer than that of the other two authorities.

Winchester's report has 97 pages as opposed to Northampton's 67, with nearly 100 more in an appendix. Kent manages with 83 pages in the main document with appendices accounting for a further 41, this despite having far wider responsibilities than a borough council.

It is possible that the reason for the greater length of the Northampton report is that additional information is required as part of the recovery process. If that is the case future plans can be more concise.

There are major flaws in the way the Northampton tells its story. Much reliance is placed (pages 20 to 43) on the use of comparison tables with similar authorities, yet the information is not well presented.

Taking tables 4 and 7 as an example this could be more easily be presented in two sentences of text *"The number of crimes per 1,000 population committed in a public place rose from 13.9 in 2003/4 to 15.2 in 2004/5. Of the five similar towns examined only Bedford had a lower figure"*. The same information is presented in three lines of text rather than a half-page of not very clear tables.

In its shorter document Winchester includes seven pages of headline financial figures. No such information is included in the Northampton document.

Winchester also includes its concept of "The Golden Thread", a concept also used by Northamptonshire County Council, to explain how plans and strategies dovetail into each other.

Another interesting aspect of the Winchester report is that they do not use the red/amber/green traffic light system to assess success or failure, a system which can be subjective. One recalls a "green" light being given for an improvement of a service from 1% to 2%, totally ignoring that the target was 15%.

The Winchester plan uses a two-aspect happy/sad face analysis. The happy face means that the council has exceeded its 2004/5 target or is in the top quartile, a sad face that it is not. This is an objective analysis.

Kent presents its strategic objectives under four main themes with targets for the next four years. Within these four themes are 83 targets, and there is a short explanation of each. In addition there is a section on past performance and achievements in each area.

A personal assessment is that both plans (and Winchester in particular) are better presented and more user-friendly than the Northampton plan.

If the Northampton document is meant for public consumption - and from their style it looks as though the other councils make their plans easier to comprehend than Northampton does - one questions the value of including the BV indicators and explanatory text, in some cases running to more than a page.

The Northampton plan is, by comparison with the other two, poorly written, for example "we did not adopted" (page 39) and "we have no achieved our target" (page 47), and less well presented.

There could be a case for the Borough producing a short booklet on its achievements and vision, on the lines of that produced by the University of Northampton.

Michael Hill

The BVPP – Frequently Asked Questions

What is a BVPP?

Best Value Performance Plan. It is a statutory plan, required under the Local Government Act 1999. All local authorities are required to produce an annual performance report such as this, although there are increased freedoms for councils rated as 'excellent' or 'good.'

What areas does the BVPP cover?

It has to address specific areas laid down by the Government – these include: describing our corporate priorities; arrangements for improving our weaker areas; details on our performance on best value performance indicators (BVPIs) during the last year; our targets for BVPIs for the next three years and a statement on contracts. The ODPM (now Department for Communities and Local Government) produces guidance on the production of the BVPP – this is available from Dale Phillipson, Corporate Manager – Performance and Improvement.

When should a BVPP be produced?

The BVPP has to be published by 30 June each year. Because it has to include the end of year results for all our BVPIs (the outturn data), this part can only be completed during the period April to May. However, other elements of the report can be started earlier.

How does the BVPP link with other plans we produce?

The BVPP is one of our three strategic plans – the others being the *Corporate Plan* and our *Recovery Plan*. The Corporate Plan should set out the Council's priorities and objectives for a three to five year period and is usually pitched at a high, strategic level. A Recovery Plan is required because we were rated as a 'poor' Council in 2004. The Recovery Plan should specifically address a range of actions to improve our weaker services. Neither of these plans need to evaluate the previous year's performance as the BVPP does, nor do they have set out targets for all BVPIs. Although there is a different emphasis on

each of the different plans, they should all reflect the priorities of the Council and be consistent in addressing our improvement needs.

Why has there been so little time to consider the BVPP in the past?

As a Council rated as 'poor', our short-term priorities have been to focus on preventing service failure and improving the performance of the weakest services. This has resulted in us not having a 'typical' corporate planning cycle. However, we will be changing this and moving to a new planning cycle this year – this will improve our consultation processes for all our strategic plans.

Who sets the targets in the BVPP?

The targets are set out by officers in the service areas. There is a host of guidance on how to set useful targets, but in summary the targets should represent continuous improvement in service provision. They should aim to achieve the levels of performance attained by the highest performing councils – 'top quartile performance'. This year we collected around 112 BVPIs set by the Government across all the Council's services, in addition to a range of local indicators set by the council.

Who evaluates the BVPP?

External audit is responsible for auditing our BVPP. The aim is to achieve an 'unqualified' BVPP, which means that the data set out in our plan is reliable and accurate, and that the report was published within the required format and timescale. Last year the BVPP was qualified because it was late.

How does Government use the BVPP?

As the BVPP sets out an evaluation of performance for the past year, and targets for improvement for the next three years, each Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) and service inspection will routinely consider our BVPP.

Do Councillors – including Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny – have ownership and oversight of the BVPP?

Yes. The report is circulated in draft form to Improvement Board and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The report will be circulated to all Councillors on the 15 June this year. Finally, the report is presented to Full Council for approval – on 26 June this year.

Does the BVPP have any effect on future Forward Plans?

Not necessarily. The Forward Plan is required to set out key decisions the Council is needed to make. The BVPP provides targets for all services, but this does not always require key decisions.

How can the BVPP help councillors in their work?

The plan provides performance results for each service area, showing how our services compare with other council's services. Councillors are able to use this information as one source of evidence about the council's performance. However, Councillors are able to receive more frequent reports on our performance – for example, we produce monthly reports, broken into service areas and showing how services are performing in relation to their targets.

This appendix sets out more detailed suggested actions to achieve the overall recommendations in section 5.

Current Best Value Performance Plan (2006/07)

- That all Councillors should be sent a monthly email containing a link to the performance information.
- That the question and answer sheet “What is the BVPP”, should be appended to the covering report to the BVPP 2006/07, to Full Council on 26 June 2006.
- That the question and answer sheet “What is the BVPP” will be circulated to the three Political Groups on 19 June 2006.

Future Best Value Performance Plans

- That the Corporate priorities should be set sooner in the process so that the BVPP process can commence earlier.
- That there is a need for a longer term Corporate Plan to inform the BVPP which needs to take into account views from the consultation process, audit and the Political manifestos.
- That Cabinet is requested to put a weighting on the Authority’s corporate priorities.
- That the BVPP process should commence in January each year.
- That an internal BVPP, an easier to comprehend, user-friendly version for the general public and a general summary document should be produced.
- That a Northampton Borough Council Press Officer should produce the user-friendly version of the BVPP.
- That a précis page of headlines summarising the key objectives should be produced.
- That there should be Union involvement in next year’s BVPP review activity.
- That future BVPPs and Corporate Plans should reference specific engagement of Councillors, defining Committees such as Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny.
- That consistent labelling should be used in all Council strategies, plans and documents.
- That the communication of the medium term financial plan to the public should be reviewed.
- That the BVPP should be published on the Council’s website within 21 days of it being approved by Full Council.

Review Activity

- That the targets for the previous two years BVPPs should be considered to ascertain if they are the correct targets for the third year. Target setting for the third year should be carried out before the outturn.
- That it is proposed that the Working Group reviews progress in six months (December 2006/January 2007).
- That it is proposed that the Working Group reviews progress of the improvement and performance information on the Council’s website within six months (December 2006/January 2007)