OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9TH OCTOBER 2006

NARROWING THE GAP – SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

1.0   Introduction

1.1   At its meeting on 9th October 2006, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed its terms of reference for an inquiry into Narrowing the Gap. Members also invited Cllr Mark Harris, Executive Member for Narrowing the Gap, to the meeting, to discuss the inquiry terms of reference with him.

1.2   Members received initial evidence on narrowing the gap issues from Cllr Harris and Sue Wynne, Regeneration Service. The evidence focused on two areas: the central government PSA floor targets, and small area data drawn from the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004.

2.0   Evidence and discussions

Discussion with Executive Member

2.1   Councillor Harris supported the Committee's work in scrutinising narrowing the gap issues and the aim of the inquiry. Cllr Harris explained that there is a Narrowing the Gap group which he runs weekly, aimed at dealing with narrowing the gap issues and using the information available to plan and deliver services effectively to narrow the gap between the most deprived areas of the city and more well off areas of the city.

2.2   Members next discussed the terms of reference for the Committee's inquiry into Narrowing the Gap. Members felt that it was important to integrate narrowing the gap issues into other plans for the city, e.g. Making Leeds Better.

2.3   The Committee agreed that it was important to consider how all citizens in Leeds could draw on the resources of the whole city. The council should consider a range of means to enable and encourage people to draw on these resources and encourage physical and social mobility. Members next discussed methods of getting through to communities which needed help, and agreed with Cllr Harris that face to face contact was a very good way of reaching out to communities. Members agreed that this could best be done through working with local people who had already used the resources of the city to their advantage, and were therefore able to highlight them to others in their communities via face to face contact.

2.4   The Committee discussed the partnership working arrangements in place and the joint aims of the council and its partners. Some work of partners seemed not to reflect the priorities agreed between the partners and the council.

Members wished to ensure that budgets were directed to the agreed priorities as far as possible. Cllr Harris explained to members that partnership and co-ordination is an area of work for the Narrowing the Gap group – the group wanted to find out what projects each organisation was doing and how the work was co-ordinated. An example of this was work on fuel poverty: the council runs a continuous fuel poverty campaign to make residents aware of the issues, but departments made few referrals to the Fuel Poverty group which can provide financial and physical assistance to those households suffering from fuel poverty.

2.5   Members discussed the collection and use of data and made the following points:
- Data must be complete and up to date
- Data should measure significant outcomes
- Tensions exist in the way data is collected by different partners, e.g. many partners collect data on individuals, but the council mostly collects data on areas. How can the two be reconciled?
- The need to be more effective in the use of information.

2.6   Cllr Harris suggested that micro level data could be a useful way to measure the success of measures taken to narrow the gap. The work to achieve macro level government floor targets would be taken care of by departments, and show high level trends, but micro level data would show more clearly the difference that projects actually make to individuals and families.

2.7   Members considered how to ensure that micro targets are in line with what communities actually want and agreed that private sector organisations could do micro level projects, with outputs set by the council. Cllr Harris explained that the Narrowing the Gap group has four themes it is working on:
- Engaging the private sector
- Worklessness and increasing income
- Leading by example
- Community self help and reliance.
New microschemes to narrow the gap must involve all four of these themes. Members also acknowledged that while we cannot impose projects on local communities, it is important for the council to provide the services it feels are necessary. Members suggested that information, choice, empowerment and responsibility were important concepts to consider in introducing new projects.

2.8   Cllr Harris informed the Committee that he had written to members to find out about very small pockets of deprivation in their wards which were not picked up by other measures. This would allow the council to narrow the gap in all areas of the city.

2.9   Members were pleased to receive an invitation from Cllr Harris for a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to sit on the weekly Narrowing the Gap group, during the length of the Committee's inquiry and will give the invitation due consideration.

Evidence from officers

2.10 Members learned that the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was published by the Department for Communities and Local Government (then ODPM) in January 2001. The aim of the Strategy is that no one would be seriously disadvantaged by where they live within 10 – 20 years. The Strategy focuses on six key areas:

- Health
- Education
- Crime
- Worklessness
- Liveability
- Housing.

Central government floor targets are the basis for measuring how this strategy has been implemented and its aims met. They are 'macro level' targets. These targets are used to assess the performance of the city's strategic partnership -the Leeds Initiative, and are directly linked to funding received from the government.

2.11 Members learned that the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 (IMD 2004) is a measure of multiple deprivation at the small area level. It is based on seven dimensions or domains of deprivation which can be recognised and measured separately:

- Income deprivation
- Employment deprivation
- Health deprivation and disability
- Education, skills and training deprivation
- Barriers to housing and services
- Living environment deprivation
- Crime.

2.12 Each dimension of deprivation includes a variety of indicators. Members noted that each dimension was constructed from a number of data sets e.g. education includes measurements of education, training and skills attainment. |however, members commented on the need to measure access to further and higher education and adult education and commented on the limited value of the measures if these were not included. It was also noted that there was limited value in viewing individual SOAs in isolation as they need to be viewed and understood in the context of the surrounding neighbourhoods.

2.13 Members noted that the advantage of this model is that small areas of deprivation can be picked up. Data can be combined to produce the Index of Multiple Deprivation, as described above, but can also be measured for individual domains to highlight which issues are particularly important for each neighbourhood. A particularly high score indicating a high level of deprivation

on a particular domain, e.g. very high crime levels, contributes to the overall ranking of an area in the IMD.

2.14 Members enquired about how up to date the data was, noting that the Index of Multiple Deprivation was published in 2004. The committee learned that the IMD is published every four years, but that local information is used to update data in between, and most information in available annually, if not more often.

2.15 The IMD 2004 uses Super Output Areas (SOAs) to analyse statistics at the small area level. Members noted that the SOA boundaries are set down centrally based on aggregated census output. Members questioned whether the characteristics of neighbourhoods follow a particular pattern as you move further from the city centre and noted that although it is hard to generalise, inner city issues tend to be around cleanliness and safety.

2.16 Members learned that data from a variety of sources is used to plan services aimed at narrowing the gap. The data sources include the individual dimension of deprivation information, the IMD 2004, plus local data from partners (such as crime information from the police), and up to date data from within the council, (e.g. benefits take-up). Objective measures along with statistical profiles of localities can be used to highlight the need for interventions to address particular issues (across the city or within specific areas or groups). Service managers use this information to identify the need for action and develop baselines that underpin plans such as the District Partnership Action Plans and Neighbourhood Improvement Plans.

2.17 Members noted that performance against the public service agreement floor targets and area profiles are used to support funding applications to Government departments and agencies, for example, the former Single Regeneration Budget programme and the current Objective 2 programme. Performance against floor targets is also used to determine local funding allocations within programmes such as the NRF and to ensure that funding is used effectively in the areas of greatest need.

2.18 Members learned that floor targets are helpful, but local measures can also be very useful in highlighting the issues which are important to Leeds as a whole, and particular areas within the city. This is a key issue within the inquiry. An example of this is the government's floor target on housing decency measures the number of council homes which meet the decency standard, but a more relevant local target is that of affordability: there are only two postcode areas in Leeds where an average joint income means that a home is affordable. Members agreed that local targets and information are helpful for assessing where the gap is being closed and where further work needs to be directed.

2.19 Members acknowledged that the results of some interventions and projects would not be visible immediately and agreed that it was important to take a longitudinal view to assess whether projects are successful in the long term. This also ensures that the council and its partners address the issue of some areas falling into deprivation, while others receive attention and funding and flourish.

2.20 The committee acknowledged the need to focus on families and individuals and that the Leeds local Area Agreement does this. One particular piece of work involved taking a holistic approach to increasing educational attainment by low achieving year 9 pupils. Members agreed that it could be helpful to conduct visits to see the work going on to narrow the gap in a few locations.

3.0 Summary and conclusions

3.1 Members received information on government floor targets aimed at tackling social disadvantage, and small area data based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 domains.

3.2 The floor target information, IMD domain information and other local data is used by the council to identify areas where the gap need to be narrowed and plan and deliver projects to tackle particular issues and narrow the gap.

3.3 Members acknowledged that the results of some interventions and projects would not be visible immediately and agreed that it was important to take a longitudinal view to assess whether projects are successful in the long term. This also ensures that the council and its partners address the issue of some areas falling into deprivation, while others receive attention and funding and flourish. It is important to ensure the quality of the data used in planning services and interventions and take the perceptions of the community into account. The collection and analysis of longitudinal data will allow a long term view of the changes to areas and show whether the gap between the most deprived and least deprived has narrowed. This data will also help us to assess which interventions have been successful and identify where new issues have arisen which could extenuate poverty and impede progress in narrowing the gap.