

CABINET

7 OCTOBER 2013

Present: Mayor (Chair)
Councillors D Scudder, K Crout, I Sharpe and M Watkin

Also present: Councillors Bell, Connal, Khan, Martins and Meerabux

Officers: Managing Director
Shared Director of Finance
Legal and Democratic Section Head
Head of Community and Customer Services
Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services
Housing Section Head
Client Manager - Waste and Recycling
Housing Strategy Officer
Democratic Services Manager

17 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence

18 **DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST (IF ANY)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

19 **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8th July 2013 were submitted and signed.

20 **CONDUCT OF MEETING**

Cabinet agreed some changes to the agenda order. Councillor Bell spoke on behalf of the Labour Group at this meeting.

21 **INVESTORS IN PEOPLE**

Cabinet received a report on the outcome of Watford's Investors in People re-accreditation in 2013, highlighting identified areas of strength and setting out areas of focus for the future.

The Investors in People (IIP) assessment was conducted during the week commencing 8th July. The assessor was Robert Thomson who also conducted Watford's previous assessments in 2006 and 2010. Robert's experience at Watford had enabled him to see progress over a seven year period.

Since 2009, Investors in People had offered accreditation at a number of levels: the Standard, which Watford achieved in 2006 and 2010, and three higher levels – Bronze, Silver and Gold. These levels were designed to provide a framework for further organisational improvement.

For 2013, Watford decided to be assessed against the Bronze level of accreditation. This entailed providing evidence against 65 criteria rather than 29 and it also required Watford to choose a specific theme to be assessed against. In view of the business context, Watford's chosen theme was Managing Change.

Councillor Watkin introduced the report commenting that this was a good news story for the Council. He referred specifically to the particular areas of strength outlined in paragraph 3.6.1 of the cover report. The assessor's comments that there would have been the opportunity to accredit Watford Borough Council at a higher level were also very encouraging.

Councillor Bell asked why the Council had not gone for a silver accreditation and whether this was due to staff concerns at the time about the transfer to Veolia.

The Mayor responded that the Council had been quite modest in what it thought it could achieve. The Managing Director added that making a submission for IIP was very taxing and a lot of evidence was required. When the capacity to carry out the work was evaluated it was considered that aiming for bronze would be achievable

In response to a question from Councillor Bell regarding apprenticeships, the Managing Director advised that Leadership Team had agreed that a scheme should be set up. A report would come back to Cabinet in due course. The Council currently offered work experience opportunities but did not have a formal apprenticeship scheme. The Mayor added that apprenticeship schemes were part of the Veolia contract.

The Mayor conveyed her congratulations to everyone on the achievement.

RESOLVED

that the report be noted

22

APPROVAL TO COMMISSION AECOM TO UNDERTAKE THE LEVEL 2 SFRA

The Level 2 SFRA for Watford Borough Council provided a complete assessment of present and future flood risk, bringing together flood risk identification and its assessment from all available sources. This would provide planners with a reference guide in partnership with the NPPF for allocating areas of development which were both appropriate for the identified flood risk area and sustainable for future generations. The proposed development locations would be assessed and wider study area outputs would be used to assess windfall sites in that area as they came forward.

Aecom had been working closely with the Council on the Watford Health Campus site. The Level 2 SFRA proposed project programme and study cost benefited from the synergies provided by Aecom's involvement in the ongoing Watford Health Campus project.

As this work was required for the Local Plan Part 2 and had synergies with the Health Campus work, it was deemed appropriate that, rather than undertaking a full procurement process, the Council appointed Aecom. This was accommodated under the Council's contract procedure rules as an exception and had been approved by the Managing Director. It was now being reported to Cabinet to note.

RESOLVED

that Cabinet notes that delegated authority has been granted for the contract for the Level 2 SFRA be undertaken by Aecom.

23 **SCRAP METAL DEALERS**

This item had been withdrawn and would be considered by Licensing Committee on 22nd October 2103.

24 **MANAGEMENT OF THE DISABLED PARKING TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT**

At its meeting on 21 November 2012, Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Task Group to investigate Councillor Martins' scrutiny proposal regarding 'Disabled' marked parking bays.

The final report, incorporating the Task Group's recommendations, was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 27 June 2013. Cabinet received a copy of the report and was asked to review and comment on each of the recommendations for referral back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Martins introduced the report and outlined the background to the review. He commented that the level of responses to the survey indicated that there was an issue. The reason the level of complaints had been low was that these were mainly referred to the Parking Shop and not passed on. There were two problem areas; disabled parking in CPZ schemes and areas where there was no CPZ, with the main problems occurring in CPZ areas. The Panel had agreed to keep a watching brief on the situation and carry out another survey in one year's time.

In response to a question from the Mayor about re-claiming disabled bays, for example when someone died, Councillor Martins advised that whilst there was no specific brief, the situation was kept under review by officers.

Councillor Sharpe commented that one option would be to go for a more formal system of designated bays regulated by traffic orders but agreed that on balance

it was probably best to keep the situation under review. He endorsed the work done by the Task Group which he described as a useful piece of work that had also dispelled a number of misunderstandings about the system.

Councillor Martins said there was also a need to look at the criteria for issuing badges. People with severe mobility problems required parking very close to their homes whereas others were able to walk further.

Councillor Sharpe added that there were a number of ways of addressing these problems but it was necessary to ensure that whatever solution was put in place did not have a negative impact elsewhere.

Councillor Bell commented on the difficulties of assessing individual needs and enforcement. He agreed that it was important to keep a watch on situations where bays may no longer be required.

The Mayor concluded the discussion by stressing the need for complaints received by the Parking Shop to be passed on. She also endorsed the view that those with a genuine need must be protected and that there may be a need for greater enforcement further down the line.

RESOLVED

that Cabinet agrees the following recommendations as proposed by the Task Group:

Recommendation 1

That information be sent to those residents who have a Disabled Parking Bay explaining the rules which allowed for these bays to be established outside residents' homes.

Recommendation 2

That information be sent to residents with a Disabled Parking Bay explaining who could and who could not use the bays.

Recommendation 3

That information be sent to all ward councillors detailing where Disabled Parking Bays have been established within their wards.

Recommendation 4

That an article be written in 'About Watford' informing residents that the survey has been conducted and advising on actions residents could take in the event of encountering problems.

Recommendation 5

That all Councillors keep a data log of information on all parking problems received from residents regarding their 'Disabled' marked parking bays. Councillors will then pass this information on a quarterly basis to the Senior Admin Officer in the Planning section.

Recommendation 6

That information arising from the survey be forwarded to Disability Watford.

25

TO WRITE OFF IRRECOVERABLE DEBTS

The Director of Finance had the power to approve the write off of irrecoverable debts up to an approved limit of £3,001 for council tax, business rate and sundry debt.

Where an irrecoverable debt requiring write off was in excess of the approved limit and the debt could still legally be recovered the approval of Cabinet was required.

Revenues and Benefits Services had a policy and procedure document for writing off debts (for all funds) as approved by Council on the 13 June 2011. All write offs were implemented in accordance with this document. Only cases where all avenues of recovery were exhausted were recommended for write off.

Cabinet received a report on the write off of business rates which was supported by required audit trails and supporting documentation. Provision for bad debts had already been made.

Details of the two individual cases had been circulated separately to Cabinet Members and Group Leaders. This information was confidential under the terms of paragraph 7 Part 1 Schedule 12 a of the Local Government Act 1972.

Councillor Watkin introduced the report. He advised that officers would continue to pursue the second of the two cases. Unfortunately there was no prospect of recovery with the first. He added that the number of un-recovered debts were kept to a minimum due to the good work done by the recovery team.

The Finance Director outlined the recovery process. She advised that two sets of bailiffs were used; if the first failed to recover the debts it was passed on to the second. She said that even in cases where there appeared to be no hope of recovery, if an address subsequently became known they would be pursued. It was also possible to claim some debts through the estate of a deceased person and officers were looking at the whole issue of probate.

She explained that the regulations had changed with regard to the overpayment of housing benefit and it was now possible to apply for an attachment of earnings if the person was employed, without going to court.

She added that a full scale review of the Revenues and Benefits Service was to undertaken.

Councillor Bell referred to the £1m deficit and also the fact that there were now two vacancies for senior posts in the Revenues & Benefits, including the position of Head of Service.

The Finance Director responded that they were aiming to fill the posts on an interim basis to see the Service through to annual billing. Initial interviews were to take place the following week and she was very encouraged by the calibre of the candidates. It was important to stabilise the service and then assess what future needs would be.

The Mayor commented on the demands on the Revenues & Benefits Service and the need to build and enhance. In response to Councillor Bell's point about the £1m deficit, she reminded the councillor that this type of overpayment was not unusual and could be claimed back.

RESOLVED

that the writing off of irrecoverable monies owed to the council in accordance with the Financial Procedure Rules of the council be approved.

26

APPROVAL OF THE REVISED HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

Each local authority had a statutory duty to produce a Homelessness Review and Strategy for its local authority area at least once every five years. Watford Borough Council's current homelessness review and strategy covered the period 2008-2013 and was due to expire on 31 December 2013.

A new Homelessness Review and Strategy for 2013-2018 had been produced; circulated for internal and external consultation and been presented to the Housing Policy Advisory Group (HPAG).

Cabinet was asked to note the contents of the Homelessness Review, Strategy and Action Plan and approve these documents for publication. It was also asked to delegate authority to the Portfolio Holder for Housing to approve amendments to the Review, Strategy and Action Plan on an annual basis.

Councillor Crout introduced the report. He drew Members' attention to the achievements from the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan 2008 – 2013 outlined in the report, specifically the reference to joint working. He also spoke about the consultation exercise, details of which were contained in the report, including the work done through the Housing Policy Advisory Group.

The Housing Section Head explained that this "suite" of documents included the Review, Strategy and Action Plan. She added that the key themes of the previous strategy were still relevant and the same principles had been applied to this version. In the current climate it was difficult to plan too far ahead, hence the one year plan to be reviewed at the end of the year.

Officers had also tried to take a pragmatic approach to what could realistically be achieved and delivered and what would have the highest impact. She re-assured Members, however, that other work, the “day job”, which was not necessarily included in the plan was still being carried out. She added that they were looking to partners to lead on some of the points in the action plan.

She advised that a lot of hard work had been done by the Housing Strategy Officer in carrying out the review and producing the strategy.

The Mayor said that a lot of work had also been done by HPAG. She commented that it was a very thorough piece of work.

Councillor Sharpe said that, whilst it was important to carry out statistical analysis, the human aspect of homelessness could not be overlooked. It was good to have clear priorities and to look at early intervention rather than last minute reaction. There was no easy solution. He commended the approach of an annual review and congratulated officers and HPAG on what they had achieved.

Councillor Bell expressed his thanks to the housing team and commented on the difficulties they had faced in terms of national changes to the welfare system. He noted that officers attempted, as far as possible, to place Watford people in temporary accommodation within Watford. He also noted that, whilst the report referred specifically to single homeless men, it had to be borne in mind that women were also affected.

Councillor Watkin said that there were a number of rumours and misunderstandings around the issue of homelessness including the impact of European migration, most of whom actually went to London and a suggestion that people from London Boroughs were relocating to Watford.

The Mayor added that managing change was important and prioritising could be difficult. Ultimately the Planning Policy Advisory Group and the Housing Policy Advisory Group would join together to create synergy between the housing and planning policies. She was concerned about the balance of the town and whether it was becoming a magnet for certain groups of people. She said it was important to convey the right messages especially to young people. There were challenging times ahead and housing was the number one issue in the town.

She thanked officers and HPAG for their thoroughness in producing this work.

RESOLVED

1. that Cabinet notes the contents of the Homelessness Review, Strategy and Action Plan and approves these documents for publication.
2. that Cabinet delegates authority to the Portfolio Holder for Housing to approve amendments to the Review, Strategy and Action Plan on an annual basis

TO AGREE THAT A CHARGE CAN BE MADE TO PREMISES FOR THE COLLECTION, STORAGE AND RETURN OF ABANDONED SHOPPING TROLLEYS.

The Mayor had agreed that this report could be taken as a late item. The reason for urgency was that the Council needed to implement the charge at the earliest opportunity following the consultation process outlined in the report.

Through usual Street Cleansing operations shopping trolleys which had been abandoned by their users were regularly found across the Borough. In order to preserve the cleanliness of Watford these trolleys were collected by the relevant Street Cleansing team.

Schedule 4 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 entitled Local Authorities to make a charge to the owners of those trolleys for the collection and return of abandoned shopping trolleys. In order to be able to exercise the powers granted under schedule 4, the Council had to first resolve to apply the schedule to its area under section 99 of the Act.

As the Council's street cleansing service was now operated on its behalf by Veolia this report was also seeking Cabinet's agreement for Veolia to operate the powers under schedule 4 including collecting the applicable charges (detailed in section 3.6 of the report) from the relevant trolley owner on the Council's behalf.

RESOLVED

1. that Schedule 4 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 will apply to the Borough of Watford and notes that Schedule 4 will be effective in the Borough on 8 January 2014.
2. that Veolia Environmental Services Ltd implement and operate the provisions of Schedule 4 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 on behalf of Watford Borough Council.

Mayor

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 7.45 pm