

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 NOVEMBER 2013

Present: Councillor K Collett (Chair)
Councillor A Khan (Vice-Chair)
Councillors J Aron, N Bell, S Greenslade, K Hastrick, S Johnson
and A Lovejoy

Officers: Shared Director of Finance
Head of Revenues and Benefits
Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services
Commissioning Manager
Partnerships and Performance Section Head
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

39 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Martins.

Apologies had also been received from Councillor Dhindsa, Chair of Budget Panel and Councillor Counter, Chair of the Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel.

40 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

Councillor Hastrick informed the Scrutiny Committee that with reference to minute number 49, she was on Watford Community Housing Trust's Board. During the meeting, minute reference 43, she advised that she was on the Board of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

41 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2013 were submitted and signed.

42 CALL-IN

No Executive decisions had been called in.

43 OUTSTANDING ACTIONS AND QUESTIONS

The Scrutiny Committee received updates on questions and actions raised at previous meetings.

WP 8 – Provision of drug treatment in the Borough, all-Member briefing

Councillor Khan, Chair of the Community Safety Partnership Task Group, informed the Scrutiny Committee that the briefing had taken place the previous evening. It had been a very good session with excellent speakers. A breakdown of services provided in Watford had been explained to those present. He said that it showed there was a good opportunity for partnership working. Councillor Aron stated that she was aware that Spectrum approached local GP surgeries to work in partnership with them.

The Chair commented that Spectrum had been asked whether they could provide an information sheet. Councillor Bell asked that the information was circulated to Members.

PR 7 – Update on Watford Muslim Community Project

Councillor Bell asked why Mr Yaqoob from the Watford Muslim Community Project had not been invited to the meeting.

The Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services informed the Scrutiny Committee that the organisation no longer existed. Officers had contacted Mr Yaqoob after the report in the Watford Observer, as it contained a number of discrepancies from the information originally given. No response had been received. She advised Members that if they were aware of people having difficulty accessing their required services, Members should inform officers who would be able to indicate the appropriate support agency. She added that within the latest update from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), residents from Pakistan were within the top five nationalities served by the organisation. She believed the organisation had sufficient resources available within it to respond to residents' enquiries.

In response to a further question from Councillor Bell, the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services advised that the Muslim Community Project had provided a premium service that catered for a specific part of the community. The CAB, which provided services for the whole community, had increased its resources and additional rooms were available. The number of 'turnaways' had reduced by 50%. There was no evidence to indicate that there was a significant problem whereby people were unable to access services at the CAB.

Councillor Khan commented that there had been an increase in his own casework from West Watford residents. He was aware that there had been a rush of people who had wanted help in order to meet the changes in citizenship rules at the end of October. He understood that some people had approached an organisation in Vicarage Road who had charged £300 for advice and support. It was possible to pay £50 to access a County Council-run immigration checking service. He was able to report that the Muslim Community Project used to be able to give this type of advice to people. The County Council had provided an excellent service at its Hatfield Office. It had increased its capacity in order to

meet the need. He advised Members that the Muslim Community Project provided advice to all communities and not only the Muslim community.

The Commissioning Manager stated that the CAB had recognised that additional staff would be needed in order to meet the increased demand, particularly due to the welfare reforms. The organisation was confident it had the resources in place to meet the increased demands on it. Advisors had access to translation services as they were required.

Councillor Khan added that the community was becoming more diverse. The immigration service provided by the County Council in Hatfield should have been advertised by the Borough Council. It was a matter of sharing information.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Watkin, informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Multi Cultural Community Centre had adapted its space in the centre and part of it might be suitable for an outreach project.

Councillor Hastrick advised that the CAB would be working in partnership with the YMCA. This would enable its service to be accessible by a wider audience.

Councillor Aron noted the reference to Councillors in the CAB's report attached as Appendix 2 to the update. She said that it was important that Members supported the organisation.

The Chair noted that the Scrutiny Committee agreed that it was unfair that residents were being charged extortionate fees. She said that Members had a duty to tell people about the alternative services available. She suggested that the information could be advertised in 'About Watford'. The Chair thanked the officers for the update. She stated that the resolution from the original scrutiny committee was to review the impact on the four organisations who would not receive any funding or had a substantial cut.

Following a question from Councillor Hastrick, the Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services stated that any scrutiny of the organisations currently commissioned to provide services could be carried out by Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reminded the Scrutiny Committee that the Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel was required to provide an update to the over-arching committee. If Overview and Scrutiny Committee had any concerns then the Chair could be made aware of those concerns.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed that the information about the County Council's immigration advice service would be circulated to Members through the Members' Bulletin and an article in 'About Watford' in order to reach the wider community.

The Chair thanked the officers for the information.

RESOLVED –

1. that the updates be noted.
2. that an article be included in the Members' Bulletin and 'About Watford' setting out details of the County Council's immigration service.

44

REVENUES AND BENEFITS UPDATE

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Shared Director of Finance including the latest update on the performance of the benefits service. The Shared Director of Finance advised that the report had originally been provided to Budget Panel in October, but had been updated for this meeting.

In response to a question about staff morale, the Portfolio Holder for Shared Services, Councillor Watkin, advised that the previous day he had visited the team. He had felt there was a sense of building the team and there had been positive responses from those present.

Councillor Bell stated he had attended the Shared Services Joint Committee on 18 November where the Interim Head of Service had described the service as "fragile".

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits again acknowledged that the service did not have full resilience. The aim was for staff to be able to do the complete job and not just sections of it. Once staff were able to carry out the full role they would be able to cover for members of the team who were away from the office. There was training to be carried out. Communication between teams was improving. They discussed problems together. He advised that his intention was to put the building blocks in place to make the service sustainable.

Following further comments from Councillor Bell, the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that using off-site contractors was commonly used by local authorities during difficult periods. It enabled staff to do their day to day work and Managers were able to think ahead and consider how to use their teams to their full advantage.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that he was unable to comment on the situation prior to starting in the service in October. He explained about local authority errors. He said that local authority errors were an inevitable consequence from a complex system, but the service's error rate had been too high. The error rate had gone down within the last two weeks.

It was noted that in October the service had reached the target of 15 days for processing change in circumstance and had also achieved the target rate for processing new claims.

Councillor Khan referred to the overpayments, which were still outstanding from the previous three years.

The Shared Director of Finance explained that all overpayments were passed to the Income Team and were classed as debtors to the Council. The overpayment could either be recovered through ongoing benefit payments or other recovery methods, which included attachment of earnings. Unless the overpayment was written off, it was expected the debt would be recovered over time.

Councillor Khan asked whether it was possible to identify the number of individuals who were required to repay benefit overpayments due to local authority error. He also enquired whether it was possible to discover the impact on people who had been overpaid benefits.

The Shared Director of Finance explained that the Council did not monitor overpayments in that way and did not identify the differing types when monitoring the recovery of overpayments. The overpayment classification was only relevant when the subsidy claim was submitted. Once the recovery process had started the type of error was no longer relevant. If someone had difficulty repaying the overpayment, or any other payment that was due to the Council, they needed to contact the Council to make a payment arrangement. Officers should also be able to direct people to external organisations for financial advice.

The Portfolio Holder commented that an overpayment occurred as soon as a change in a person's benefit or income happened. It would be classed as a local authority error because of timing rather than what would be understood as an error.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits further explained the benefits' procedure. It was often the case that the error had not arisen due to the service making mistakes. The matter of classification was a difficult subject as the overpayments could be due to a number of reasons, including fraud, local authority error or claimant error. The Council only recognised the overpayment as a debt, and the recovery process was not concerned with how it had arisen.

Councillor Aron congratulated the service for the improvements. The performance data was better than earlier in the year. She asked the Shared Director of Finance and Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits to inform the staff that the Councillors appreciated their work.

Councillor Bell acknowledged that the staff should be paid tribute for their work. He asked if officers could explain why Watford had the highest local authority error in the county.

The Shared Director of Finance advised that this had been explained in a number of reports to Councillors. The previously reported issues with the ATLAS work would have impacted on the level of errors.

The Chair thanked the officers for the information and responding to Members' questions. It was agreed that an update would be presented to the Scrutiny Committee in March.

Councillor Khan suggested that an article should be produced for the Members' Bulletin highlighting the support and advice available to the public if they had financial difficulties.

RESOLVED –

1. that the report be noted.
2. that a further update be presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2014.
3. that an article should be produced for the Members' Bulletin highlighting the support and advice available to the public if they had financial difficulties.

45

UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND MEASURES - END OF QUARTER 2 (JULY-SEPTEMBER) 2013/14

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head setting out the Council's performance indicators and measures up to the end of quarter 2 2013/14.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head commented that the report was smaller than in previous months due to a number of indicators being transferred to Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel. She suggested that Members might wish to have an in depth look at some of the indicators. It might also be possible to look at other information collected and consider whether the Scrutiny Committee wanted to receive more indicators. She highlighted some of the under performing indicators.

CCS7 – Number of private sector units secured for use under Homelet

In response to a question from Councillor Greenslade, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head explained that the Housing Team was finding it hard to access private accommodation as the private rental sector was booming. Landlords were able to pick who they wanted to let their property to. The Team was working hard to secure private properties, however the accommodation was not always the type wanted by people as many preferred social housing.

HR1 – Sickness absence (working days lost)

Councillor Bell commented that Three Rivers District Council had the best sickness record in the county.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that Watford Borough Council had a strict sickness reporting procedure. In response to a question from Councillor Khan, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised that Human Resources were carrying out work to look at the reasons people were away from work.

CCS9 – CSC service levels – 80% calls answered in 20 seconds

Councillor Bell enquired whether the new voice activated system had made a difference to the service.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head said that she was not aware of many complaints. The response speed had increased.

Following comments about accuracy, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that if Members experienced any problems they should report them to the Customer Service Section Head. She explained that it was possible to review calls to the Town Hall and hear the exact information requested by the caller. The system could be adjusted to avoid the same problem re-occurring in the future.

Councillor Johnson asked if officers could find out whether the average speed of response was recorded.

CS12 – Complaints resolved at stage one

Councillor Johnson referred to the number of complaints resolved at stage one of the process.

It was suggested that it might be useful for the Scrutiny Committee to understand the complaints procedure.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed to review some of the performance data in more depth.

RESOLVED –

1. that the performance of the council's performance measures for 2013/14 at the end of quarter 2 be noted.
2. that the Scrutiny Committee's comments be noted and additional information be prepared for future meetings.

46

EXECUTIVE DECISION PROGRESS REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received the latest edition of the Executive Decision Progress Report 2013/14. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that two items had been deleted from the list as the matters had been delayed for the foreseeable future.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

47

HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Chair asked the Committee and Scrutiny Officer to contact Councillor Martins and request a short update for Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as he was not present at this meeting.

48

MANAGEMENT OF DISABLED PARKING BAYS - CABINET RESPONSE AND UPDATE

The Scrutiny Committee received a report setting out the Task Group's original recommendations, Cabinet's response and the latest update from officers. Members noted that all recommendations had been implemented.

RESOLVED –

that the review update be noted.

49

WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST - RESPONSE FROM WATFORD COMMUNITY HOUSING TRUST

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer including the initial response from the Chief Executive of the Watford Community Housing Trust. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that the Chief Executive would be attending the January meeting to provide a formal response and answer Members' questions. It was noted that the report would be presented to the Council's Cabinet on 2 December 2013.

Councillor Khan, who had chaired the Task Group, said that this group had worked very well together. He noted the Chief Executive's comments but in his view there were still key problems. There were still significant delays in answering telephone calls.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed to prepare some questions that would be put to the Chief Executive when she visited Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January.

RESOLVED –

1. that Watford Community Housing Trust's comments be noted.
2. that Overview and Scrutiny Committee prepare questions for Watford Community Housing Trust's Chief Executive's visit to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January.

50 **BUDGET PANEL**

Councillor Dhindsa, the Chair of Budget Panel, had provided a written update of the Scrutiny Panel's meeting on Tuesday 26 November 2013.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the discussion that had taken place about the parking permit charges for 2014/15. Members requested that the comparative data about the cost of permits, previously presented to Budget Panel, be circulated to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was noted that the minutes were available on the Council's website and had been circulated separately to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

51 **OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

Councillor Counter, the Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel, had provided a written update of the Scrutiny Panel's meeting on Tuesday 19 September 2013.

Members said that they were concerned whether the Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel was able to manage the workload. They questioned whether there were sufficient meetings scheduled. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that if the Panel felt that additional meetings were required the Chair could approach Democratic Services and ask for an additional meeting. There was also concern that the Panel comprised insufficient Members to carry out its work. The Scrutiny Committee was advised that any changes to the Scrutiny Panel could be discussed by the Constitution Working Party. The first step would be to inform the Head of Democracy and Governance of the Scrutiny Committee's concerns.

It was noted that the minutes were available on the Council's website and had been circulated separately to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

52 **COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP**

Councillor Khan, the Chair of the Community Safety Partnership Task Group, referred members to the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 30 September 2013.

It was noted that the minutes were available on the Council's website and had been circulated separately to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

53 **DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

- Thursday 19 December 2013 (For call-in only)
- Wednesday 22 January 2014
- Thursday 6 February 2014 (For call-in only)

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.55 pm

Chair