

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 MARCH 2014

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

Also present: Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Chair of Budget Panel (for
minute numbers 65 to 67 and 74))

Officers: Shared Director of Finance
Head of Revenues and Benefits
Head of Community and Customer Services
Housing Section Head
Partnerships and Performance Section Head
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

65 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There was a change of membership for this meeting: Councillor L Scudder replaced Councillor Greenslade.

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

66 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

During the discussions in minute number 69, Councillor Hastrick informed the Scrutiny Committee she was on the Boards of Watford Community Housing Trust and the Citizens' Advice Bureau, which had been referred to by the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits.

67 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2014 were submitted and signed.

68 OUTSTANDING ACTIONS AND QUESTIONS

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

OA 7 – Scrutiny of mental health services

The Chair asked the Committee and Scrutiny Officer to check whether the County Council was reviewing mental health services for young people. She was concerned as there had been a number of recent press reports about young people.

PR 14 Watford Community Housing Trust (Freephone)

Councillor Johnson noted the response but commented that it was not on the Housing Trust's home page of its website. The only freephone number available was for the repairs service.

Councillor Khan added that the freephone number had not been included in the draft correspondence he had seen regarding the new rent charges.

The Chair stated that the Housing Trust's Chief Executive would be contacted about the accessibility of the freephone number.

RESOLVED –

1. that the Committee and Scrutiny Officer checks the Health Scrutiny Committee's work programme for work pertaining to mental health services for young people.
2. that the Watford Community Housing Trust's Chief Executive be contacted regarding the publication of the freephone number.
3. that the updates be noted.

69

REVENUES AND BENEFITS UPDATE

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits which provided an update on the current service levels and the improvements that had been made during Quarter 3.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits informed the Scrutiny Committee that the new claims initiative had started in the Customer Service Centre, which had helped the Benefits service to achieve its performance goal. He added that of the 93 claims outstanding, 78 were waiting for customers to supply further information. The housing benefit computer systems had had to be closed for a few days whilst the Council Tax bills were processed. There had been 27 new claims applications submitted during that time and they had all been processed by 5 March.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that he had met with representatives from Watford Community Housing Trust and Thrive Homes to discuss the service provided by his team. He had wanted to dispel any myths about the service and its poor performance record. He had confirmed that the

service had not had a backlog since December. He had asked both Trusts to provide him with their top 10 cases with problems related to benefits. He had noted that none of the cases were related to the performance of his team. He had asked the Trusts to be more specific when they put the question to their tenants about whether they had claimed housing benefit as opposed to just asking if they had claimed benefits. He had asked both organisations for their next top 10 cases and had not yet received the information.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits informed Members that he had also met with representatives from the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) to dispel any myths about the benefits service. The CAB had been unable to provide him with any specific examples highlighting the perceived problem. He felt that the representatives had left the meeting surprised about the improved performance. He had suggested that if claimants complained to them about delays they should enquire when the application had been submitted. In addition he had asked them to encourage people to visit the Council office to discuss any problems with an application.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits reported that new benefit letter templates had been received from Academy and that future letters would be set out in Plain English and would be attached to the formal letter which contained the legal and technical information. Staff had put forward ideas for improvements to the service and there was a positive attitude in the team. He asked Councillors to contact the service if they became aware of any benefit related issues.

Councillor Johnson said that residents perceived that the service was not performing well. He asked how the service would contact Watford residents to show how the service had improved.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits responded that the residents were spreading the message about the improvements. Claimants who came into the CSC were surprised at the speed their applications were being processed. In addition the service would be working to improve the information on the Council's website and ensure that it was robust. He was confident that the processes which had been put in place worked and he would like to rollout the changes to the change in circumstance applications. He informed Members that when the service was waiting for additional information from claimants, the usual practice had been to send reminder letters after the statutory 30-day response period. From the beginning of the next financial year (1 April 2014) the service would be sending a letter after 14 days reminding the claimant of the required information. This provided ongoing communication with the claimant.

Following a question from Councillor Bell, the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed that the pilot at Watford's Customer Service Centre was for new claims. The next stage would be to look at developing it for other types of claims. He would be discussing the development with the Customer Service Section Head. Currently the pilot had involved one of the Benefit Assessors and three trained officers from the Customer Service Centre.

In response to a question from Councillor Bell about the service improvements outlined in the report, the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits confirmed that he had introduced the changes to the service. He advised that previously, officers had been concentrating on clearing the backlog of cases. He had deconstructed and then reconstructed the processes. He felt that if those processes which were wrong were fixed then the service would improve. He informed members that he had discussed the location of officers with the CAB. He considered that if the CAB wished to have one of their advisors located in the Customer Service Centre then they should be accommodated there. This would enable their clients to have direct contact with the Benefits service.

Councillor Bell asked for further information about the staff performance management system. The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that previously the error rate had been unacceptable. The Quality Team provided feedback to the staff. There had been no coaching or mentoring provided to staff. The main focus was to ensure that applications were processed correctly. He was more confident of the service provided by the team but recognised that the improvements were not complete.

Following a question about the housing trusts, the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that both housing trusts had been given access to the benefits system to enable them to check their tenants' accounts. This access had not been used by either trust. One reason for the lack of use was that the trusts' officers had not been given the required training. Training had been carried out and their officers were now able to access the information. A module for the CAB was also available and it had been discovered that the module had not been implemented. Once this module was set up the CAB would also be able to access their clients' data as required.

Councillor Martins welcomed the improvements that had been made to the processes for new claims. He said that due to the processing problems, housing trust tenants had accrued rent arrears. He asked about the mechanisms that had been put in place to resolve these issues. He also commented that there was an impact on the service from external events. He asked whether officers had any views on the trends of applications. He understood that the number of claims had increased but asked whether officers could clarify the extent of that increase.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that the service's caseload was still increasing. It was recognised that when a country came out of a recession it would usually take about 18 months to see any impact in Revenues and Benefits. Ten years ago the service's caseload mainly consisted of people who were unemployed. Currently many of the cases involved people in part-time work and these cases tended to be more complex.

In response to the comments about tenants' rent arrears, the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that he had taken the decision that the older cases needed to be cleared. The backlog had been cleared and the service was up to date. It was possible to run weekly reports identifying those cases where there have been some financial changes. This process had not been carried out

for more than four years. These processes meant that the arrears should reduce. In addition the service needed additional help from the housing trusts. When eviction cases were being submitted to court, the trusts needed to contact his team as quickly as possible to enable the service to provide the relevant information to the trusts. It would ensure the trusts had the information for the court hearing. It had been noted that there were 68 cases that had been affected by the 'bedroom tax' and had not yet claimed Discretionary Housing Payments. The tenants needed to be given the application forms to enable them to submit an application, which the benefits service could backdate to April 2013. The relevant forms had been provided to the housing trusts but the benefits team had not yet received any applications. The benefits service worked with the local food bank and carried out data matching to ensure people had submitted benefit applications.

The Chair said that it was refreshing to see the work that had been carried out by the service. She commended the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits for the tremendous work he had done. She commented that she had been shocked by the housing trusts' lack of knowledge in relation to asking the right questions in order for the processes to run more smoothly.

In response to a comment from Councillor Aron, the Director of Finance advised that meetings were arranged with the trusts and she met regularly with the Chief Executive of Thrive Homes. The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits also confirmed that he had arranged meetings every six weeks and was working with them to resolve the issues.

Councillor Johnson asked whether there had been a change to the management and style of the benefits service. The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits responded that initially he had found it difficult to defend the service, but he could now robustly defend it. The improvements would be recognised externally; customers already acknowledged the improvements.

The Head of Community and Customer Services said that he wished to credit the work of the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits and his team.

Councillor Hastrick stated that she was on the Boards of Watford Community Housing Trust and the CAB. She said that she would arrange a meeting with the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits to discuss the matter further.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits reported that one concern the CAB had raised was staff performance on the telephone. He had not yet put any actions in place to resolve this matter as he wanted to resolve the processing problems which in turn should reduce the number of telephone calls. He added that consideration needed to be given to how clients contacted the service.

Councillor Khan said that when he had been a member of the Shared Services Joint Committee he had criticised the benefits service. The backlog had had an impact on those claimants who were in arrears. He asked whether officers were able to provide any statistics.

The Director of Finance confirmed that the service had information about overpayments. The current position showed overpayments of £317,000, which was less than the previous year. The current year's arrears were high but this was due to the problems in the service earlier in the year. Since the new processes had been put in place, this should ensure that any increases were limited in the current year and that they should fall in the following years. The overpayments equated to 0.85% of the total benefit payments. Due to the service having had a backlog, the overpayments figure would have continued to increase. Now that the service was up to date the overpayments should reduce.

Councillor Khan enquired whether any impact assessment had been carried out on those people who had been affected.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits explained to the Scrutiny Committee that Local Authority errors also included cases which would be classified as claimant error. There were three levels of recovery, the highest being fraud investigations. Clients were encouraged to contact officers to enable them to discuss their individual case. There were some people who appealed against repaying the overpayment. There had been a backlog of appeals which included some that were five years old. This backlog had been cleared and the service was reviewing current appeals. He reminded Members that the Council had a duty to collect overpayments. Each case was reviewed and in some cases where the claimant had clearly not known there was an error the service had taken a pragmatic approach. The improvements to the service should ensure that the long overpayment periods should cease.

Councillor Khan asked whether the Council should be more proactive and issue the Discretionary Housing Payment forms to tenants rather than relying on the housing trusts.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that the housing service was informed about those claimants who were identified as being affected by the changes to the local housing allowances. He added that the introduction of an online Discretionary Housing Payment form was being considered. It had been noted that some people wanted to downsize as a result of the recent changes. He had discovered that the housing trust would not allow people to downsize if they had rent arrears. He did not understand this practice and would discuss this further when he met the trusts.

Councillor Johnson referred to the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits' earlier comments about the poor telephone performance of his staff. He was aware that a resident had contacted the Local Government Ombudsman. He asked whether the Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits was happy about his earlier comments.

The Interim Head of Revenues and Benefits stated that the information on the benefits system had not always been up to date. Staff had not been trained properly in how to carry out interviews with claimants. It was necessary to be able to deal with customers correctly. This would then stop complaints. The

Ombudsman had been sent a response which had explained what would be done to improve standards. This was now being rectified.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending and responding to Members' comments.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

70

HOMELESSNESS

The Scrutiny Committee received a presentation from the Housing Section Head which explained the Council's legal duties in respect of homelessness and how it was managed in Watford. The Housing Section Head responded to Members' questions.

The Chair commented that Housing Benefit was paid direct to the tenant rather than the landlord. In some cases landlords were not receiving their rent from the tenants and sought eviction notices. She asked whether more families were being affected.

The Housing Section Head confirmed that in some cases there could be a risk to rental income where it was paid directly to tenants. When the service was made aware of cases it would liaise with Housing Benefits to help the landlord and tenant to find a resolution.

In response to a question about the Schools Project, the Housing Section Head confirmed it was welcomed by schools and colleges. Herts Young Homeless had developed a conflict resolution course which would be rolled out to schools.

Following a question about the location of bed and breakfast units, the Housing Section Head advised that the Council would always try to find accommodation in Watford, but there were occasions when someone might have to go to Hemel Hempstead or Borehamwood for a few nights. She assured Members that the service did everything possible to try to prevent homelessness.

The Chair asked if officers could provide more information about Home Let. The Housing Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that the scheme had started in July 2013. A recognisable logo was used. An e-bulletin was regularly sent to landlords. The Landlords Forum had been improved and made more professional. It was now led by the National Landlords Association. The Council could provide increased incentives when it was under pressure to provide a certain type of accommodation. Officers visited residents a few weeks after the start of their tenancy to ensure that they were settling into the accommodation. She added that many private landlords would prefer to find their own tenants rather than working with the Housing Service. She confirmed that in some cases alternative arrangements could be made rather than paying the Housing Benefit direct to the tenant. The team worked closely with the benefit service.

RESOLVED –

that the presentation be noted.

71

UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND MEASURES - END OF QUARTER 3 (OCTOBER - DECEMBER) 2013/14

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head which provided an update on the Council's performance indicators at the end of Quarter 3.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head highlighted some of the performance trends. She advised that the Corporate Plan, which was due to be considered at the next Council meeting, incorporated a number of key performance areas, including benchmarking trend analysis. The information would be incorporated in the reports to scrutiny.

CCS2 – Improved street and environmental cleanliness

In response to a question from Councillor Bell, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head explained that discussions were taking place with Veolia about the definition of fly tipping. The company had been given time to develop its procedures and that the performance would be reported at the end of year.

CCS9 – CSC service levels and CCS11 – Calls resolved at first point of contact

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised that there had been issues in relation to telephone calls to the benefit service. The service dealt with complex matters. The Customer Service Centre was working with the benefit service to improve these performance measures.

CCS12 – Complaints resolved at stage 1 and CCS13 % of stage 1 complaints resolved within 10 days

Following comments from Councillor Martins, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed Members that this also related to historical information from Revenues and Benefits. Complaints and Freedom of Information requests had not been prioritised by the service. She added that Leadership Team carefully monitored these performance measures. She stated that she would provide Members with information about the 15 unresolved complaints.

RESOLVED –

1. that the report be noted.

2. that the Scrutiny Committee be provided with details of the 15 unresolved complaints.

72 **EXECUTIVE DECISION PROGRESS REPORT**

The Scrutiny Committee received the latest edition of the Executive Decision Progress Report 2013/14.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

73 **HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Councillor Martins, the Council's appointed representative to the County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee, informed members of the recent work carried out. The Scrutiny Committee had received presentations from each of the Health Trusts including their budgets. In February the Scrutiny Committee had met on two occasions to review the plans to address the recommendations in the Francis Report.

Councillor Martins stated that he forwarded any health related information to the Committee and Scrutiny Officer who then forwarded it to all Councillors.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

74 **BUDGET PANEL**

Councillor Dhindsa, the Chair of Budget Panel, informed the Scrutiny Committee of the work carried out by the Panel at its last meeting on 26 February 2014.

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2014 were available on the Council's website.

75 **OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that Councillor Counter, the Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel, had sent her apologies for this meeting. The Chair asked that Councillor Counter be asked to forward a written update as soon as possible.

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2014 were available on the Council's website.

RESOLVED –

that the Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel be asked to forward an update to the Scrutiny Committee.

76

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 18 February 2014.

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 February 2014 were available on the Council's website.

77

PROPERTY TASK GROUP UPDATE

Councillor Bell, the Chair of the Property Task Group, informed the Scrutiny Committee about the Task Group's first meeting. He advised that the Head of Regeneration and Development and the Programme Manager had given a presentation about the Property Team. It was noted that the Task Group would be involved in the Property Review which was currently taking place.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

78

WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Committee's latest work programme had been circulated with the agenda. Members were asked to inform the Chair or the Committee and Scrutiny Officer if they had any topics they wanted to be considered in the new Municipal Year.

The Chair reported that she has been contacted by Paul Regan from Healthwatch Hertfordshire, who had offered to visit the Council and explain about the role of the independent non-profit organisation. It was agreed that Mr Regan would be invited to provide a presentation before the first Overview and Scrutiny Committee of the new Municipal Year, Wednesday 25 June 2014.

RESOLVED –

1. that the report be noted.
2. that the representative from Healthwatch Hertfordshire be invited to provide a presentation on 25 June 2014.

79

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

- Thursday 27 March 2014 (For call-in only)

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 9.00 pm