

OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

23 SEPTEMBER 2014

Present: Councillor P Taylor (Chair)
Councillor K Hastrick (Vice-Chair)
Councillors R Martins, J Dhindsa (For minute numbers 12 to 14)
and A Joynes

Also present: Councillor Matthew Bedford (Three Rivers District Council)
(For minute numbers 9 to 13)

Officers: Shared Director of Finance
Head of Revenues and Benefits
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (JK)

9 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/ COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There were two changes of membership for this meeting: Councillor Collett replaced Councillor Counter and Councillor Aron replaced Councillor Greenslade.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Watkin, had sent his apologies.

10 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST

There were no disclosures of interest.

11 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 July 2014 were submitted and signed.

12 UPDATE ON ACTIONS

The Panel received an update on actions which had arisen from previous meetings.

Councillor Collett referred to the awarding of green flags. She asked whether ward councillors were usually invited to the launch event.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to speak to the Client Manager (Parks and Streets)

Councillor Martins asked why PR9, satisfaction levels at the Palace Theatre, were being added to the performance report as it was not an outsourced service.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

The Chair advised that the indicator showing levels of fly-tipping was a matter for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer added that as this was an issue of environmental crime, it was measured by the internal Environmental Health team.

Councillor Joynes referred to a situation in her ward where a fly tip at a Watford Community Housing Trust property had not been removed for a number of weeks. She felt that the responsibility for removal of these fly tips was not clear. The Panel asked for details of whether Veolia had to collect fly tips within a certain time. Councillor Martins also referred to similar issues on the Radlett Road Estate and requested more details about WCHT's regime. The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer advised that she would obtain further information.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

Councillor Dhindsa underlined the importance of fly tips being collected quickly. Councillor Collett explained how Overview and Scrutiny were monitoring this area.

Councillor Dhindsa referred to SLM10 and noted that the women-only swimming sessions were very busy. The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer advised that she would ask the Commissioning Manager for more details.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

The Panel discussed the length of time it took for Veolia to collect green sacks containing litter. They expressed their concern that it sometimes took several days and the rubbish attracted vermin. They asked for these concerns to be reported to the Client Team.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

Councillor Dhindsa referred to an issue of an overgrown hedge which was on private property but which blocked a public alleyway. He asked who was responsible for addressing this.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

Councillor Collett outlined the litter problems on the Sherwood Estate. It was not clear whether WCHT or Veolia were responsible for the alleyways. She felt that too few staff were assigned to this area.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer to report the concerns

RESOLVED – that the actions update be noted and the completed actions be signed off.

13

REVENUES AND BENEFITS REPORT

The Panel received a report of the Head of Revenues and Benefits updating Members on any outstanding issues in the service.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits introduced the report and invited questions.

Following a question from Councillor Joynes about the impact of Watford Community Housing Trust (WCHT) staff not being trained in undertaking benefit checks. The Head of Revenues and Benefits responded that there had been no negative impact, but equally there had been no additional benefit. They had worked with Thrive Homes and hoped to work with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB.)

The Chair noted that the letters which Revenues and Benefits sent out had been overhauled and asked how feedback had been received. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that fewer queries had been received by the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and the letters now had a title so staff could quickly ascertain the contents when speaking to customers over the phone. It was hoped they could be continually improved. He asked the councillors to encourage the residents to come into the Council if they did not understand the letters.

The Chair asked about the cost of the external consultants who were assisting with the entitlement letters. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that three days' consultancy was required which cost £1000 per day. Consultants were required due to the complexity of programming the software.

Councillor Collett asked about the impact of the IT system and in particular the recent virus, she questioned whether the Council would be reimbursed for the delays caused. The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained the problems had been inherited with their software due to a historical lack of maintenance. These had been addressed. It was explained that further problems had been experienced due to a brand-new virus which no anti-virus software could have addressed. The Director of Finance explained that the Council had worked with McAfee to address the problem. The Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that there had been a serious impact as five days had been lost. He commended the staff who had been very resilient and had worked late to catch up. There was still a backlog as a result and temporary resources were being called in to assist.

Councillor Dhindsa asked for an update on benefit overpayments. The Head of Revenues and Benefits informed the Panel that the level of overpayments since April was 75 percent less than the previous year. He explained that there would always be overpayments due to the nature of paying benefits. The government target was 0.54% local authority error and Watford was currently achieving

0.52% which was the lowest ever. He aimed to minimise this further however the virus would have had an effect. There had been an issue with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) software licenses and councils nationally were arguing that overpayments caused by this should not result in penalties. The level would be affected from October when HMRC would provide real-time information about tax credits to councils. Only local authority error resulted in the Council being penalised. The backlog of appeals had also been cleared.

Following a question from Councillor Hastrick, the Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that the team ran a report which looked at significant dates, such as a child turning 16. Revenues and Benefits were now working ahead of time and suspending claims while information was outstanding. The number of claims which were suspended after the event was negligible.

Councillor Martins commended the work done by Revenues and Benefits staff. He asked how delays which affected housing were being minimised. In response, the Head of Revenues and Benefits outlined how he worked with WCHT and Thrive homes where the cases with the highest level of rent arrears were discussed. The vast majority of the cases of rent arrears did not have an outstanding benefits claim. Working with private landlords was more problematic and were dependent on how the landlord worked with the Council. Residents were encouraged to speak to the Council if they were in arrears.

In response to a question from Councillor Aron, the Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that he met the Housing Section Head regularly and would be promoting the self-service system to the HARI Partnership in the near future when the system was working.

It was agreed that a session would be arranged for councillors on the Council tax collection and recovery.

ACTION – Head of Revenues and Benefits

The Head of Revenues and Benefits described how Council tax and business rates were being recovered. Staff were telephoning people to address non-payment. If it was possible to avoid using bailiffs, this avoided additional charges being added to the debt.

Councillor Joynes asked for information about how much the bailiffs charged. The Head of Revenues and Benefits said that he would send this information to her.

ACTION – Head of Revenues and Benefits

The Chair asked when the issues in this service would be completely resolved. The Head of Revenues and Benefits responded that it was impossible to say as there were many variables; the aim was to continue to meet the performance indicators.

The Panel agreed to look at Revenues and Benefits again in July 2015.

RESOLVED –

that the report and the Panel's comments be noted.

that the service be invited to the Panel again in July 2015.

14

PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Panel received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head providing the quarterly performance indicators for quarter 1 2014-15.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head had sent her apologies and responses to the Panel's queries would be circulated.

Members discussed the possibility of visiting the Depot and agreed that this would be helpful.

ACTION - Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

The Chair referred to 3.2.3 of the report and emphasised that Members were keen that the work was quality assured by Watford Borough Council staff rather than Veolia staff.

ACTION – Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

The Panel raised the following issues:

There was concern regarding the complaints about cleanliness at the leisure centres. Members asked for details of the maintenance and cleaning regime at Woodside leisure centre.

The Panel asked for the number of complaints about different aspects of the leisure centres and the Colosseum to be included in the performance report.

Councillor Hastrick wished to have more details about why classes were cancelled at the leisure centres as this was an area of complaint.

For LC5 and LC10, Councillor Dhindsa was interested in how the percentage of the membership reflected the percentage of Watford's population as a whole.

The Panel were concerned that the proportion of the membership aged 55+ was quite low. They were interested in any data about why the levels were so low. They suggested that cost, transport, and the offer available may be factors. Councillor Aron suggested that a survey may be useful which councillors could promote. The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer said that she understood a user survey had recently taken place, and there may be data available.

Councillor Dhindsa was interested in the effect that competition from other gyms had had on membership levels at the leisure centres. He asked for more information.

Councillor Martins referred to the number of dark days at the Colosseum. He suggested that it would be better if community groups were able to make use of the venue on those days. The Panel asked for more details of the charging structure and any discounts for community groups.

ACTION - Partnerships and Performance Section Head

Following a question from Councillor Collett, the Director of Finance gave an update on the Council's ICT service. She advised that there were two improvement programmes currently underway, these were account recovery to improve issues not addressed during the transition period and the IT modernisation programme. Funding had been agreed by Council to upgrade the server estate and the desktop estate as well as provision for ongoing maintenance. Officers were meeting with senior representatives from Capita to discuss the issues and to find ways to resolve them. Officers were identifying where Capita's performance had resulted in increased costs for the Council.

It was noted that the Council would be moving to Windows 7; the reason for this was that the business applications used by the Council needed to be compatible with the Operating System.

The Panel noted that a significant number of calls had breached the service level agreement. The Director of Finance advised that officers had been working with Capita to gain accurate information about the service. There had been issues with the Helpdesk response times and the resolution numbers.

Councillors discussed various aspects of the ICT service and the Chair summarised that the areas that Members were interested in for the next meeting about ICT were: staffing, the service level agreement and the penalties and service for councillors.

The Panel reviewed the indicators for Revenues and Benefits. The Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer explained that a number of indicators relating to revenues were reported to Budget Panel. Officers would discuss how these indicators were reported for the next performance report.

It was noted that the indicator RB2 had been affected by the problems at the DWP.

ACTION – Partnerships and Performance Section Head

RESOLVED –

1. that the Panel notes the performance of the identified outsourced service indicators at the end of quarter 1.

2. that the Panel's requests for additional information be noted.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.35 pm