

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 NOVEMBER 2015

Present: Councillor K Collett (Chair)
Councillor J Dhindsa (Vice-Chair)
Councillors K Hastrick, A Joynes, A Khan, A Rindl, L Topping,
D Walford and T Williams

Also present: Councillor S Williams, Chair of the Community Safety
Partnership Task Group

Officers: Head of Community and Customer Services
Customer Service Section Head
Partnerships and Performance Section Head
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

41 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There was a change of membership for this meeting: Councillor T Williams replaced Councillor Crout.

42 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interests.

43 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2015 were submitted and signed.

44 CALL-IN

No Executive decisions had been called in.

45 CORPORATE COMPLAINTS AND COMMENTS

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Customer Service Section Head which provided an overview of the Council's management and performance when responding to complaints and comments.

The Customer Service Section Head gave a presentation covering the corporate complaints procedure; an analysis of the complaints and a comparison of the number of complaints received in 2014/15 and 2015/16. She also highlighted other matters including complaints through social media and the ongoing issues with the eform.

The Customer Service Section Head advised that an amendment needed to be made to some figures within the report. In paragraph 3.16, there had been a total of 18 complaints and not 16 as printed. In the table in paragraph 3.18, Regeneration and Development had received five complaints, not three and the total was 18 complaints not 16. It was noted that of the five complaints about Corporate Strategy and Client Services four were from the same complainant and about the same issue.

The Customer Service Section Head said that the Council used complaints to address issues raised by customers. They enabled officers to consider the points raised, rectify any issues and review policies where necessary. They were not viewed as a bad thing, but as an opportunity to improve the service the Council provided to its customers.

Complaints procedure

Councillor Joynes noted the timescales set out in the complaints procedure, but questioned whether the Council should respond quicker than the current 10 working days response deadline or a specific date should be provided.

The Customer Service Section Head advised that there had been no complaints about the current time limit. The acknowledgement letter, sent within three working days of receipt of the complaint, confirmed that a formal response would be sent within 10 working days.

The Head of Community and Customer Services added that the Council usually acknowledged the complaint before the three day acknowledgement deadline had passed. The timescale gave officers time to respond in case the Customer Liaison Officer (CLO) was not in the office on the day the complaint was received.

Following a question from Councillor T Williams, about a definition of a complaint, the Customer Service Section Head responded that there was a fine line. The staff guide, available on the Intranet, included a section 'What is a complaint?', providing examples. It was agreed that the staff guide would be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee for information.

Councillor Joynes asked whether complaints made on social media were included in the statistics.

The Customer Service Section Head explained that the feedback on the Council's social media accounts were monitored but most of the comments were 'chatter' about generic matters or the responsibility of the County Council. Officers did review the comments and considered whether they needed to be classed as formal complaints. The most serious complaints were taken offline and then logged as a formal complaint and the complainant was contacted direct.

The Customer Service Section Head explained the further stages of the complaints procedure. She advised that if a complainant wished to escalate

their complain to stage two, they had to put it in writing. She confirmed that notification by email was acceptable.

Following a question from Councillor Rindl, the Customer Service Section Head explained that of the six complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman, five had been advised to contact the Council and use its complaints procedure, as this action had not been completed. The sixth case was under review.

In response to questions about outsourced services and those shared with Three Rivers District Council, the Customer Service Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that any complaints should be made direct to the provider of the service. The companies then provided information about complaints to the Council's Client Managers. She confirmed that each company may have different procedures to the Council's two stage process. She advised that complaints about benefits were handled by the relevant authority, therefore a Watford benefit case would be progressed through the Watford complaints procedure and a Three Rivers case would be progressed through that authority's procedure.

Due to Members' concerns about the potentially different complaints procedures for outsourced services, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer suggested that, if Members felt that this area needed further investigation, it should be referred to Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel. The Scrutiny Panel could then raise this matter with the service providers. It was agreed that the Committee and Scrutiny Officer would refer the matter to the Chair of Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel, Councillor Crout.

Following a question from Councillor Topping about customer satisfaction with responses, the Customer Service Section Head advised that three-quarters of complainants did not progress to the second stage.

The Chair asked officers whether there was any work or actions the Members could do to help the service's work.

The Customer Service Section Head responded that Members were welcome to visit the Customer Service Centre and see it in operation.

The Chair and Councillor Rindl both said that they had visited the Customer Service Centre and had found it very interesting. It had highlighted some of the varied problems residents wanted to discuss with officers.

The Chair thanked the Customer Service Section Head and Head of Community and Customer Services for attending the meeting and responding to Members' questions.

RESOLVED –

that the report and presentation be noted.

OUTSTANDING ACTIONS AND QUESTIONS

The Scrutiny Committee received a list of outstanding Actions and Questions. Members noted the updates. An update on the housing questions was circulated at the meeting.

PI 49: CS 4 Number of Households in temporary accommodation

Councillor Topping asked whether the people placed in temporary accommodation were from Watford.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised that when a person approached the Council stating they were homeless, the Council had a statutory duty to assist them. The Interim Housing Section Head would be contacted for further information and the response would be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee.

Members noted the table which set out local authority usage of temporary accommodation. Councillor Dhindsa asked if officers could advise how Watford compared to similar size authorities.

The Chair commented that she was not surprised people wanted to live in Watford as it was close to London and had good transport and road links.

Councillor Joynes suggested that Stevenage might use less temporary accommodation as it had its own housing stock. She added that she believed that many applicants may be women fleeing domestic violence and asked whether these women would be placed in refuges or other types of accommodation.

Councillor Khan noted that the number of applicants accommodated in Dacorum had decreased by 49% over a similar period; whereas in Watford it had increased by 84%. He asked whether there were any lessons officers could learn from Dacorum.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head commented that the proximity to London, private sector rental availability/ ending of tenancies and demand all had an impact. In Dacorum there may be less demand than in Watford.

Councillor S Williams suggested that one reason Watford might be higher in the table could be due to the number of private tenants evicted, as they may have been outbid by people moving out of London and wanting to live in Watford where rents were slightly cheaper and possibly more affordable to them.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND MEASURES (IN-HOUSE SERVICES) - QUARTER 2: (JULY - SEPTEMBER) 2015/16

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head which provided the Quarter 2 2015/16 results for the performance measures for in-house services.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised the Scrutiny Committee that it would be difficult to provide trend data for a 10-year period. If the Scrutiny Committee required more information about any of the results, it might be possible to do a benchmarking exercise similar to the one provided by the Interim Housing Section Head.

CS7 – Number of people sleeping rough on a single night

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that this information would be collected shortly. Although the indicator referred to the count on one specific night, New Hope monitored the situation throughout the year.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised that New Hope did ask people where they were from. Comments had been made that people came to Watford as there was a good support network, but this reason had not been tested. She assured Members that New Hope did speak to the rough sleepers and where possible tried to encourage them to return to their home town.

CS2 – Improved street and environmental cleanliness (levels of fly tipping)

Councillor Joynes said that she was concerned about fly tipping in her ward especially where it was on private land. She understood that the Council was unable to take any action.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she had recently had to report about some fly tipped material in a service roads in North Watford. If there was a risk of vermin infestation it would be cleared by Veolia. However, the matter was more complicated when fly tipping occurred on private land.

CS12 – Average waiting times in the Customer Service Centre (CSC) for Revenues and Benefits enquiries

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head updated the Scrutiny Committee on the results for this indicator. She advised that indicator took into account how long people were waiting in the CSC. However sometimes people may be waiting for papers to be processed and checked before they left.

RESOLVED –

that the performance of the council's performance measures for those areas where the council directly delivers the service / area of work at the end of Quarter 2 2015/16 and Overview and Scrutiny Committee's comments be noted.

48 **EXECUTIVE DECISION PROGRESS REPORT**

The Scrutiny Committee received the latest edition of the Executive Decision Progress Report 2015/16.

Councillor Khan asked whether the decision to be taken by a Portfolio Holder in respect of Leggatts Campus could be called in.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer responded that there was no indication that it needed to be taken in accordance with the Special Urgency Procedure Rule. She advised that once the decision had been taken the Democratic Services Manager would inform all Members of the decision and details of the call-in deadline.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

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

Councillor Kareen Hastrick, the Council's appointed representative to the Health Scrutiny Committee, informed Members that the Scrutiny Committee had met on 12 November and the next one would take place on 11 December. The Scrutiny Committee continued to monitor West Herts Hospitals NHS Trust's progress against its action plan following the Care Quality Commission's report.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

50 **BUDGET PANEL**

Councillor Khan, Chair of Budget Panel, provided an update of the discussion on entrepreneurship which took place at the last meeting. There had been a good discussion on various options.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

51 **OUTSOURCED SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer read out an update from Councillor Crout, Chair of the Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel. He had advised that the last meeting had included a visit to the Colosseum and a question and answer session with the operator. In January the Scrutiny Panel would be visiting Watford Leisure Centre Woodside. If Members wished to attend the meeting he asked them to contact the committee and scrutiny team.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

52 **COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP**

Councillor S Williams, Chair of the Community Safety Partnership Task Group, reported that the Task Group had asked that an additional meeting was included in the timetable. In January the Fire Service or a representative from the Town Centre door supervisor's would be invited to give their views and experiences of the Christmas period. Members were also considering the programme for the March meeting.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

53 **MANAGEMENT OF CONSERVATION AREAS TASK GROUP**

Councillors Topping and Collett, members of the Task Group provided an update on the new Task Group. It had been noted that the Task Group's report would be presented to Cabinet in March 2016.

RESOLVED –

that the update be noted.

54 **DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

- Wednesday 16 December 2015 (For call-in only)
- Thursday 21 January 2016
- Thursday 4 February 2016 (For call-in only)

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.10 pm