

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 JUNE 2011

Present: Councillor M Watkin (Chair)
Councillor S Rackett (Vice-Chair)
Councillors N Bell, K Hastrick, P Jeffree, S Johnson, R Martins
and K McLeod

Also present: Councillor Malcolm Meerabux

Officers: Head of Revenues and Benefits
Partnerships and Performance Section Head
Democratic Services Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

1 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee following the changes agreed by Council. He informed the meeting that he considered there were three main areas for the Scrutiny Committee –

- Co-ordinate and manage the Task Groups
- Performance review
- Call-in, when the Scrutiny Committee would be chaired by the Vice-Chair

The Chair suggested that initially until the new scheme of working had bedded down and demands on officer time could be assessed there should be no more than two Task Groups set up at any time. This would exclude the Community Safety Task Group.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Greenslade.

3 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest.

4 CALL-IN

No Executive decisions had been called in.

PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head setting out the outturn performance of the Council's key performance indicators for 2010/11.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head explained the background to presenting performance reports to scrutiny. The report included the 13 key performance indicators that had been agreed by Council and which Call-In and Performance Scrutiny Committee had been monitoring throughout 2010/11. With the new scrutiny arrangements in place, the Chair had suggested additional performance information be included in reports to Overview and Scrutiny in order to provide a fuller picture of council performance. This would not include finance performance information as this was already reported to Budget Panel. The Council complied with all the requirements of the national performance framework but the coalition government was keen to reduce the 'burden' on local authorities in terms of the amount of performance information it required them to collect and report. This had meant the deletion of the set of national indicators and greater freedom for Watford Borough Council to decide what performance information it felt was important and supported decision-making.

One Member suggested that further information needed to be included in the report which explained what would happen once the performance information was known.

The Vice-Chair explained the format the Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee had followed when the performance report was reviewed.

One Member referred to the information supplied to the Shared Services Joint Committee and considered the details presented to this meeting to be too 'light'. He suggested that there should be some comparison to Three Rivers District Council and the necessity to look behind the figures. The Chair commented that Members would not appreciate detailed reports on all the performance indicators. Where the Partnerships and Performance Section Head could see areas of concern then this level of additional information added to the report would be appreciated.

Prior to the meeting the Chair and Vice-Chair had forwarded a number of questions to the Partnerships and Performance Section Head. The Partnerships and Performance Section Head responded to each of the questions and the responses. The additional information has been attached as an appendix to the minutes.

Reviewing the performance of ES10 and ES9 on recycling, a Member asked for details of the impact the closure of Wiggshall Recycling Centre had on the fly tipping and waste figures. The Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised that she would arrange for feedback from Environmental Services and circulate this data.

The Chair also asked whether it was possible to find out if there had been a noticeable increase in fly tipping and the geographical locations of such incidents following the closure of the recycling centre.

Following a Member's question, the Partnerships and Performance Section Head said that she would ask whether communal recycling facilities in flats were incorporated into the residual household waste statistics and the extent of communal recycling within the borough. The Chair asked her to enquire whether the new green bins with locked lids and narrow slits, being used in flats, had had a negative impact on the level of green recycling.

With regard to the performance of dry recycling, the Chair asked the Section Head to investigate whether the differential Town Centre recycling bins had had a positive effect and had proved worthwhile.

The officer advised she would obtain this information for Members.

With regard to the information about CS5, the number of households living in temporary accommodation, a Member suggested that details about the length of time in the temporary accommodation would be useful.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head explained that, as from April 2011, the statistics would include those in bed and breakfast accommodation and length of stay.

With regard to the planning statistics PL1 to PL3, the Chair suggested that it would be useful if the number of applications received were included in the information.

The Chair asked for a written response from the Head of Human Resources regarding the poor performance of indicator HR1, sickness absence.

The Chair invited the Head of Revenues and Benefits to speak about the developments in his service.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits informed the Scrutiny Committee of the steps which had been put in place to address the performance problems. The progress of the service was monitored both by the Leadership Team and the Three Rivers and Watford Shared Services Joint Committee. He outlined the difficulties which had led to the increased backlog of applications. He explained how the statistics were calculated and how applicants had to be allowed 28 days to supply additional supporting evidence. He added that the Audit Committee would be receiving a report at its next meeting regarding the Revenues and Benefits Service.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits reported that the Shared Services Joint Committee had permitted a short-term solution to be put in place. The service had been authorised to spend up to £25,000 on administrative support from SERCO. The company would only be used as and when it was required. The company would currently work to reduce the backlog and then only be used

when needed. A further report had to be presented to the next Shared Services Joint Committee. Everything would be implemented by the end of December. The aim would be to process applications within three days if the client had provided all the necessary information. A Member asked that this be included as a measure in the performance report.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that all Members of the Council should have received a copy of the relevant report by email. It was agreed that a paper copy would also be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair said that he was concerned about the accuracy of assessments. He asked whether this was monitored on an ongoing basis or only when audited.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits responded that accuracy was measured on a daily basis by a dedicated team. The accuracy of information and the length of time taken to complete assessments affected the subsidy the Council received. The penalties were set on a tiered basis.

The Chair questioned whether this was included in the performance report to which the Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that it was not. It was only included as part of the subsidy return to the Department for Works and Pensions. The Chair suggested that this data might be included in the future.

Members were concerned that the delays in assessments affected the most vulnerable residents in the community.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits explained that the service worked with the Housing Associations. If an officer became aware of arrears or identified there was cause for concern, they would ensure the application was fast-tracked. If a private tenant fell into rent arrears and officers were made aware, it was possible to make direct payments to the landlord.

With regard to the inclusion of ICT statistics, the Chair said that it was important to record the 'downtime'. Members agreed that service availability data was crucial.

Members also requested that usage figures for SLM Ltd be included in future performance reports.

A Member advised that the Shared Services performance statistics were available online.

RESOLVED –

that the Scrutiny Committee comments be noted and actioned.

ACTION: Partnerships and Performance Section Head and Committee and Scrutiny Officer

VOLUNTARY SECTOR TASK GROUP - CABINET RESPONSE

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services which incorporated Cabinet's response to the Voluntary Sector Task Group report.

The Chair noted where the comments stated changes would be made to the next Funding Plan and that the Scrutiny Committee could seek further clarification once the review had been completed.

A Member referred to 2.6 of the Task Group's recommendations and the nominal £1,000 for each of the 12 Neighbourhood Forums.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that when this suggestion had arisen during the Mayor's discussion with the Task Group, the Head of Legal and Property Services clarified how this would be arranged. Members had been advised that £1,000 would not be added to each Neighbourhood Forum budget but that they would be able to submit an application from the Mayor's Community Fund for up to that amount. The Mayor had clarified this further at Cabinet as shown in the response. The officer advised that she was unsure whether an application would require more than one signature, as was the case for applications from the Neighbourhood Forum budget.

Councillor Johnson, who had chaired the Voluntary Sector Task Group, said that the Mayor had stated at the Task Group meeting that it was £1,000 for each ward. She had obviously thought about this further and had made this compromise.

The Chair suggested that further clarification was sought on the application process and how many Councillors would need to submit an application.

The Chair stated that recommendation 2.7, referring to property leases, was an important subject, which should be considered by a Task Group.

A Member said that when he attended Cabinet the Property Section Head had said that the work was already being carried out.

RESOLVED –

1. that further clarification be sought regarding Members' application for funding from the Mayor's Community Fund,
2. that further consideration be given to a review of property leases during the work programme discussions.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Legal and Democratic Section Head setting out the names of those Members who had expressed an interest in taking part in the Community Safety partnership Task Group.

The Scrutiny Committee considered the number of Members who should be included in the Task Group. It was agreed that seven Members would be acceptable. It was acknowledged that the Task Group did not need to be proportionally representative of the make-up of the Council.

Councillor Johnson, Leader of the Conservative Group, noted that two of his group had put their names forward. He agreed that Councillor Mortimer's name could be removed from the list.

The Chair stated that the Task Group would need to elect a Chair at its first meeting.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she would contact the Community Safety Manager and inform her that the new Task Group had been established. She suggested that the first meeting should be an introduction to the role of the Community Safety Partnership, particularly as there were several new Members on the Task Group. Further subjects for review could then be developed. She added that she was aware the previous Community Safety Task Group had wanted a Police statistician to speak to the Task Group about crime statistics.

A Member said that there was other work which also needed to be continued from the previous year.

RESOLVED –

that the Community Safety Partnership Task Group comprises the following Members –

Councillor Karen Collett
 Councillor Asif Khan
 Councillor Ann Lovejoy
 Councillor Helen Lynch
 Councillor Rabi Martins
 Councillor Kelly McLeod
 Councillor Malcolm Meerabux

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

BUDGET PANEL UPDATE

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services setting out the items which had been considered by Budget Panel at its meeting on 22 June 2011.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that Councillor Tony Poole had been elected as the Vice-Chair.

Councillor Johnson asked that his objection be noted as the role of Vice-Chair should have been held by an Opposition Councillor. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that there had been two nominations, Councillor Poole and Councillor Meerabux, and a vote had taken place.

RESOLVED –

that the report be noted.

9

FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services including the latest edition of the Forward Plan and changes since the edition published in May.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed Members that the Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference required it to review the Executive's Forward Plan. The report would be a regular item and it would enable Members to monitor when it was proposed decisions would be taken; whether they were continually being deferred to a later date or deleted without any decision being taken. Members may then decide whether they wanted to seek reasons for postponements or deletions.

A Member asked for further clarification regarding the decision-maker for those items which had been deleted from the Plan. It was agreed that the changes would be incorporated for the next meeting.

RESOLVED –

that the report be adapted as requested for future meetings.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

10

WORK PROGRAMME AND TASK GROUPS

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Legal and Democratic Section Head including the new scrutiny proposal form and details of five suggestions that had been submitted for review.

The Scrutiny Committee considered each of the suggested scrutiny topics and where available, the Head of Service's comments.

Recruitment of ex-offenders and disadvantaged youths

The Chair noted the Head of Human Resources' response.

The Vice-Chair suggested and it was agreed that the subject could be referred to the Community Safety Partnership Task Group to look into this from a general aspect and not just related to the Council.

Hospital Parking and its high charges

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that she was still awaiting confirmation of the response from the Managing Director.

The Vice-Chair suggested that the review could incorporate other modes of transport and alternative modes of transport for staff. He did not think the scope should be too wide or too narrow.

A Member commented that this was a national issue and that the charges were not out of kilter with other hospitals.

Another Member said that the review could be carried out as a partnership scrutiny as visitors to the hospital were not only from the Watford area.

A Member said that the review should be carried out without delay by Watford Councillors. The review should consider whether the parking arrangements took care of people's needs.

The Scrutiny Committee then discussed the membership of the Task Group and the scope. The Chair advised that he would work with the Vice-Chair on the scope, which would then be circulated to all Scrutiny Committee members. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer would email all Councillors and ask them if they wished to participate in the review. The scope and membership would be formally agreed at the next meeting.

A Member asked how many Task Groups it would be possible to have in operation at any one time. The Democratic Services Manager replied that it was suggested that there should be no more than two Task Groups. This would not include that Community Safety Partnership Task group.

The Chair suggested and it was agreed by the Scrutiny Committee that the second Task Group should be about property leases. He would work with the Vice-Chair on the scope and this would also be agreed at the next meeting.

Bin Collection Service in narrow streets

One Member felt that the review was too narrow. He was concerned about bins being left on the street throughout the day which was a security issue and affected all areas. He did not believe that residents were not aware of the special assistance scheme.

The Vice-Chair suggested that a representative from Environmental Services could go to the Railway Terrace Residents' Association's meeting to discuss this matter. The Scrutiny Committee could then consider whether to establish a Task

Group once the Gladstone Road trial scheme had been completed and the Residents' Association had talked to officers.

The Chair suggested that if Members were aware of any particular 'hot spots' Members could provide the information. It was important to establish the facts prior to deciding whether to review the current system. Further information would be provided at the next meeting.

Parking in narrow terraced streets by large commercial vehicles

The Head of Planning's comments were noted and it was decided not to take this suggestion any further.

Use of Cassiobury Park

The Head of Community Service's response was noted and it was agreed that this subject would be re-considered at a later date.

A Member said that he had been invited to the Cassiobury Park Steering Group. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she would contact officers and provide Members with information about the role of the Steering Group.

RESOLVED –

1. that a Task Group be established to review "Hospital parking and its high charges" and the scope to be presented at the next meeting.
2. that a Task Group be established to review property leases and a scope to be presented at the next meeting.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

11 DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Tuesday 26 July 2011
- Wednesday 10 August 2011 (For call-in only)
- Wednesday 21 September 2011

Chairman

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 9.10 pm