

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 SEPTEMBER 2011

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

Also present: Councillor Andy Wylie, Portfolio Holder Finance and Shared Services

Officers: Partnerships and Performance Section Head
Committee and Scrutiny Officer

23 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Greenslade, Martins and McLeod.

24 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest.

25 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2011 were submitted and signed.

26 OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

The Scrutiny Committee received an update incorporating the outstanding actions and questions raised at previous meetings. Responses were included within the document or circulated at the meeting.

PI11 – Watford Leisure Centre Central

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Community Services Section Head and the Portfolio Holder had met the petitioner to discuss the problems highlighted at the Council meeting on 20 July 2011. The following actions had been taken –

- A Key Worker had been attached to the swimming session, Sean Mitchell the General Manager
- Swimming lessons had finished and all facilities were now available to the swimmers
- Numbers in pool – SLM had reported that bathing loads (100) had not been exceeded. On two occasions there had been 75 people present. The average attendance was 45.

- Congestion at the till had been eased by the introduction of a faster booking in procedure.
- Staff vigilance had been stepped up regarding men in the changing area during the women-only session.
- Four lifeguards would be undertaking equalities training.

The Chair was pleased that the petitioner's comments had been taken seriously. The Vice-Chair asked that all Councillors were informed of the response.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

PI12 – Funding bids approval by the Homes and Communities Agency

The Scrutiny Committee noted the Housing Section Head's response set out in the update. The Chair asked for a further update at the November meeting.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer / Housing Section Head

VS2 – Mayor's Community Fund

The Vice-Chair advised that his local community had identified a problem with the procedures for the Mayor's Community Fund. He said that he would inform Members of the outcome.

ACTION: Vice Chair at the next meeting.

AHR5 – Procedures for monitoring private sector housing

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer circulated the responses to the questions submitted following the previous meeting and attached as Appendix A to these minutes.

FP1 – Section 106 Funding

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer provided the Scrutiny Committee with a copy of the Capital Programme 2010/11-2014/15 which included details of the Section 106 funded schemes and the funding availability for new schemes. She informed Members that a report regarding the use of Section 106 monies was to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on Monday 26 September. A copy of the report would be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

The Chair noted the available balance set out in the Capital Programme.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that approximately 18 months ago officers had checked the due dates on the outstanding monies. It had been noted that the Council would not have to hand any of the monies back to developers. Some of the funding had been earmarked for projects, for example stations on the Croyley Rail Link route. He suggested that at the

current spending rate the amount would be depleted in two years. The Council needed to review which schemes it wanted to fund. The Cabinet report was part of the budget process.

The Chair noted that it was within the Executive's remit where the capital funding was spent. He asked what consultation had taken place.

The Portfolio Holder responded that there were two factors which influenced where the Section 106 monies were spent. The first was if it had been specified within the original agreement. The second was to work within the corporate priorities relating to play and open space. The outcome of the play review had influenced suggested schemes. He encouraged Members to contact officers if they wished to put forward a scheme for funding from the Section 106 monies.

A Member said that it was important that Councillors could see what was being spent. He noted that the Asset management Group had put forward schemes which Cabinet would then consider.

The Vice-Chair suggested that an additional column needed to be included which set out the date the funding expired.

The Portfolio Holder referred to the Section 106 report presented to Hertfordshire Highways Watford Joint Member Panel. This format included the amount still available for individual schemes. He suggested the Scrutiny Committee could request this information.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

PSL1 – Property Policy Review Scope

The Chair informed the Scrutiny Committee that he had contacted the Managing Director advising the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would like to look at a specific element of the current Property Review, namely the voluntary sector leases. Members wanted to ensure the policy was sensibly applied. The original suggestion put forward at a previous meeting would be put on hold whilst the Property Services' review was being carried out. He had advised the Managing Director that the Scrutiny Committee was keen to be involved in the review. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer would seek an update from the Managing Director on this offer.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

27

2011/12 QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head setting out the first quarter update on the Council's key performance indicators and other performance measures.

Environmental Services

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed Members that she had incorporated as many of the requests from the previous meeting as she could. There was still some outstanding data from Revenues and Benefits. She referred Members to indicator ES9, dry recyclables, which was down in trend since last year. She explained that this was in part due to fewer people buying newspapers and glass was lighter than in the past. The overall recycling indicator, ES3, was helped by the increase in green waste.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that measurement of the street and environmental cleanliness was a complex indicator that required officers to survey given areas of the Borough and assess them to an agreed and consistent standard.

A copy of the criteria used to assess street cleanliness was circulated. It provided photographs of the different levels of cleanliness used for assessment.

The Vice-Chair noted the wards which had been used for the performance measures and advised that Callowland had a great deal of problems with flyposting.

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that a Town Enforcement Officer had been appointed on a year's contract, which started in August. Through the year the impact would be assessed. Initially the officer would concentrate his work in the Town Centre and parks. Once these areas had improved it was intended to extend the service to other parts of the Borough. The officer issued fixed penalty notices. There was a zero tolerance approach with regard to litter, unless there were specific circumstances, such as vulnerable adults or minors. If a fine were not paid the Council would consider prosecution, but this was only used as a last resort and following a number of reminders being issued.

The Chair commented that one of the main causes of litter was fast food packaging. The various fast food premises collected the litter during mid to late evening. Some of these premises were open until 3.00 a.m. Residents should be encouraged to collect evidence to challenge these premises.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed to review the progress of this post and the work which had been achieved in six months time.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

Community Services

CS9 – New cases on Rent Deposit Scheme

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head advised the Scrutiny Committee that officers were struggling to get private landlords involved with the Rent Deposit Scheme.

The Portfolio Holder added that people unable to purchase the smaller properties on the market went into the rental sector. This had an impact on the properties which might be available through the scheme.

CS10 – Households in bed and breakfast accommodation

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head referred Members to this indicator and advised that bed and breakfast was an expensive accommodation solution.

CS12 – CS15 Leisure Centre usage

The Partnerships and Performance Section Head informed the Scrutiny Committee that she had been unable to obtain information about total usage of the centres, for example the climbing wall and sports fields.

The Chair noted the significant decrease in the swims recorded at both sites. This suggested a significant drop in revenue.

The Scrutiny Committee asked that the latest performance statistics were circulated as soon as they were available.

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

Human Resources

HR1 – Sickness absence

The Portfolio Holder stated that the performance measure had gradually been decreasing over time. He said it would be difficult to try to match Three Rivers' level. He explained that the customer facing services at Three Rivers was less pressured than at Watford. Those services which were part of Shared Services had realised that Watford was a different place to do business in comparison to Three Rivers. In Watford an external provider was used to record sickness. Officers had to explain to the advisor the reason for being off sick. This separated Managers from having to take the initial calls. He added that the statistic was closer to the Three Rivers performance measure.

Revenues and Benefits

The Portfolio Holder provided the Scrutiny Committee with a number of more recent statistics. He advised that at the end of August there were 277 new claims outstanding. 144 were waiting for further information from the client and 133 were being processed. The majority of these cases had been submitted within two months. 120 were under one month old; 123 were between one and two months old and 34 were over two months. He explained that in one particular case it had been necessary to make 42 separate adjustments to the claim. The overall outstanding figure was down from 480 as at 2 May. With

regard to outstanding Three Rivers cases, at the end of August there were 125 outstanding and in May the figure had been 267.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee of the staffing structure within the Benefits Team. Currently this was being augmented by the staff from SERCO. The output from SERCO had not been at the level originally promised and the Head of Revenues and Benefits had asked them to improve this level.

The Portfolio Holder stated that the Three Rivers and Watford Shared Services Joint Committee was monitoring the service's performance. The Joint Committee had made it clear that the backlog should be cleared by the end of December. In addition to outsourcing to SERCO, officers had been offered overtime. The office accepted no calls on Wednesdays, which it was hoped would be stopped in December. This stopped the service being continually asked about the progress of a claim. The Customer Service Centres took messages and Benefits officers contacted the caller the following day. It was proposed to train the Customer Service Centres to be able to accept certain information at Watford and Three Rivers. They would accept changes in circumstances, for example details of change of name.

Finally the Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that at the end of August the average time taken to process benefit claims was 40 days. It was hoped the staff would reach the target by the end of quarter three.

A Member thanked the Portfolio Holder for the information. He asked whether the service would continue to use SERCO. He also enquired why there was only one visiting officer.

The Portfolio Holder responded that there was one designated visiting officer. With regard to SERCO he explained that the workload was increasing. The company had been contracted to carry out the work at a fixed price. It was easier to employ SERCO than agency staff.

The Vice-Chair said that the information had been very helpful. He asked whether it would be possible for Members to have the monthly figures made available to them.

The Portfolio Holder informed Members that the information was available on the Shared Services Intranet. All performance data for Shared Services were available.

The Vice-Chair asked about the capacity of the Customer Service Centre to be able to undertake some of the benefit workload.

The Vice-Chair explained that customers initially made contact with Customer Service staff. The Head of Revenues and Benefits had discussed the proposal with the relevant managers.

The Chair asked whether the Portfolio Holder considered the targets to be realistic.

The Portfolio Holder replied that with a normal workload the target should be achievable. Currently the workload was not normal. He informed Members that there were fast track procedures for those people who were in desperate need.

ICT

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that work was progressing towards partially outsourcing the service. A report would be presented to Shared Services and the consultant would be producing a range of options.

A Member referred to his Council laptop and said that if he wanted to carry out any updates on software he had to bring the machine into the ICT admin who then typed a password before it could be actioned.

The Portfolio Holder agreed that the ICT systems needed to move into the 21st century. He said that he found remote working more reliable.

The Chair thanked the officer for her report.

RESOLVED –

that the Scrutiny Committee's comments be noted.

28

COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the first Task Group meeting had been arranged for Monday 17 October 2011. The Chair of the Community Safety Partnership, Cate Hall Executive Director Services would be attending. The Community Safety Manager would also be inviting other members of the partnership. The meeting would begin with an introduction to the partnership and all Councillors would be invited to attend.

29

HOSPITAL PARKING CHARGES TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Task Group's first meeting had been held on Wednesday 31 August 2011. Councillor Karen Collett was elected Chair of the Task Group. Members discussed the background information they had been given. They then considered the next stage of the review. It was agreed that a representative from the Hospital Trust would be invited to the meeting to respond to questions. Members agreed a number of questions they wished to have answered regarding the parking arrangements at the hospital. These questions were then forwarded in advance of the second meeting to allow the representative time to gather the information required. Members decided that a further meeting would be arranged to meet users of the Hospital's car parks. The next meeting would take place on Wednesday 5 October 2011.

30

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 July. The September edition was circulated at the meeting.

RESOLVED –

that the additions and amendments to the Forward Plan be noted.

31

WORK PROGRAMME AND TASK GROUPS

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services including the updated work programme. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer circulated further supporting information. This included details of all previous scrutiny reviews and a new scrutiny proposal from Councillor Derek Scudder.

The Chair informed the Scrutiny Committee that there were two new scrutiny suggestions to be considered. The first was the proposal from Councillor Scudder, which asked for a review of the recycling scheme and comparisons with other authorities to see if it would be possible to increase Watford's recycling rate. The second suggestion was from the Managing Director about the future delivery of council services and the options available.

Members discussed the proposals and agreed that they needed further information on each subject. They asked for recycling statistics for the local authorities included in the 'CIPFA family authorities' and the national average for overall residential waste. Once this information had been supplied the Scrutiny Committee would consider whether to undertake this review and set up a new Task Group.

The Chair suggested that the Managing Director could be invited to the next meeting to discuss his suggestion. The proposal would be acknowledged and that further clarification was required before a final decision was made. The Chair felt that this was a huge topic.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer referred the Scrutiny Committee to the list of previous reviews. This highlighted when the reports had been completed and whether there were still outstanding recommendations to be reviewed.

The Chair asked all Members of the Scrutiny Committee to review the list and inform the Committee and Scrutiny Officer of any topic it was felt was important and where recommendations needed to be reconsidered.

ACTION: Committee and Scrutiny Officer and Overview and Scrutiny Committee

32

DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Wednesday 12 October 2011 (For call-in only)
- Thursday 24 November 2011
- Thursday 22 December 2011 (For call-in only)

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.45 pm