

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2 FEBRUARY 2012

Present: Councillor M Watkin (Chair)
Councillor S Rackett (Vice-Chair)
Councillors N Bell (For minute numbers 52 – 55), K Collett,
S Greenslade (For minute numbers 51 – 63), R Martins and
K McLeod

Also present: Councillor Andy Wylie (Portfolio Holder for Finance and
Shared Services) and Councillor Malcolm Meerabux

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Officer

50 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There was a change of membership for the Committee: Councillor Collett replaced Councillor Jeffree.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hastrick.

Councillor Johnson was absent without apologies.

51 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest.

52 MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 24 November and 22 December 2011 were submitted and signed.

The Vice-Chair brought the Scrutiny Committee's attention to the second resolution at the meeting held on 22 December 2011. It was agreed that this would be added to the Scrutiny Committee's work programme for further follow up work in approximately six months time.

53 OUTSTANDING ACTIONS AND QUESTIONS

The Scrutiny Committee received an update incorporating the outstanding actions and questions raised at previous meetings. Responses were included within the document. The Committee and Scrutiny Officer had circulated additional responses prior to the meeting.

Members considered the responses to each of the outstanding actions and questions. They agreed which actions had been completed.

WP 9 – latest position of the Benefits Service

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder responsible for Shared Services to update the Scrutiny Committee on the progress of the Benefits Service.

The Portfolio Holder stated that the Head of Revenues and Benefits had been quizzed by Members at the Shared Services Joint Committee regarding SERCO's workload and throughput. The company had managed to work on the change of circumstance cases. It was felt that the level of 2,000 documents awaiting processing as a 'trigger point' when SERCO would be required to provide short-term support was too high. It was considered that the 'trigger point' should be between 1,000 and 1,500 documents depending on the complexity of the cases. SERCO were able to process the change of circumstances quickly. The Head of Revenues and Benefits felt that the situation was under control.

The Portfolio Holder reported that:

- the number of outstanding cases at the end of January was 228; 112 were live. 99 of those cases had appeared within the last three weeks; only 13 were older than three weeks.
- Eight of the outstanding cases had been received in September; nine in October; 25 in November; 69 in December and 118 in January.
- Of the live cases, 2 had been received in September; 2 in October; 2 in November; 7 in December and 99 in January.

The service was processing cases nearly straight away once all the information had been received. Members wanted the service improved further to ensure cases were processed within a week of receipt. The ultimate target would be that cases were processed in three days.

Following a Member's questions, the Portfolio Holder explained that the documents were not physically sent to SERCO. The documents were scanned on to the computer and the contractor accessed the information through a portal. Residents' queries were handled by the Council and not SERCO. He added that each time the Government made changes to the benefits system clients contacted the Council. It was important to ensure that the right intervention levels for SERCO were in place. It had been necessary to ensure that the Benefits Team were able to manage their workload.

Following a question about queries received at the Customer Service Centre, the Portfolio Holder explained that, as part of the Improvement Programme, it had been decided that the benefit staff would not take change of circumstance forms from clients. Straightforward cases could be handed into the Customer Service Centres at both authorities. Currently this was more successful in Three Rivers than in Watford. He added that the types of cases for the two authorities were very different. In addition Customer Service Centre staff at Three Rivers District Council had been carrying out this role longer than the Watford staff.

The Vice-Chair sought assurance that those clients with more complicated cases could speak to a member of staff from the Benefits Service.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that this facility was still available. In certain cases officers visited people at home. Sometimes this might be as there was one document missing and it was quicker to collect it in person than rely on the postal service.

Following a question from the Vice-Chair about budget implications, the Portfolio Holder responded that there were no additional implications in the current year, other than those already agreed by the Shared Services Joint Committee. There were concerns about the potential workload in the next financial year and the possible impact of the Universal Credit on the service.

Following a Member's question about the number of staff used by SERCO for the work, the Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that there were 30 employees in the Benefits section. SERCO allocated between four and six people per day to the work. The Head of Revenues and Benefits monitored the number of cases the contractor handled.

Following a further question, the Portfolio Holder advised that the company would be used when the intervention level had been reached. This was currently the cheaper option until the Universal Credit had been introduced and the impact on the service was known. There were some Councillors from Three Rivers District Council who questioned whether the service should be outsourced. The situation in the service had materially improved since December. The number of new cases had reduced and the number of outstanding documents had been more than halved. Managers were seeing a reduced pressure on the staff.

The Chair asked whether the SERCO staff were better than the Shared Services' staff at addressing queries or whether it was just that there were more of them carrying out the work.

The Portfolio Holder replied that the staff at SERCO could concentrate on addressing the cases and were not distracted by queries from clients.

A Member said that he noted the Portfolio Holder's comments. He said that the service had been a concern for Members and the Scrutiny Committee should continue to monitor it. The Scrutiny Committee should also monitor the Revenues and Benefits Health check which had been reported to the Shared Services Joint Committee.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for the information. He said that it had also been useful to see the action plan which had been presented to the Shared Services Joint Committee. He felt that at the present time an investigation into the service was not necessary, however, he asked the Portfolio Holder to keep the Scrutiny Committee apprised of the situation.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed that no further action was required at present.

The Vice-Chair agreed that the Scrutiny should continue to monitor the service and be aware of the future situation, in particular the impact of the Universal Credit. He suggested that at some point Members might wish to review the past and future provision of the service.

The Portfolio Holder reported that there was still very little known about the Universal Credit. The Head of Revenues and Benefits would be attending a conference which would be looking at this matter. The Head of Revenues and Benefits could possibly attend the Scrutiny Committee in the summer and provide an update for Members. The Scrutiny Committee could then decide whether to set up a Task Group.

The Vice-Chair suggested that it would be preferable to review the situation in the Autumn.

The Chair noted the comment that councillors from Three Rivers District Council had suggested outsourcing the service. He asked how long SERCO's contract had remaining.

The Portfolio Holder stated that if the Benefits service was outsourced there would still be the Revenues service in-house. That Team would probably move back into the Finance department. Another option would be to put the service under one local authority and carry the work out for the other authority under the 'lead authority' model. This was his preferred option as governance arrangements were easier. Shared Services was very complex.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for the update.

It was agreed that unless circumstances changed markedly for the worse a further review of the service would be carried out in Autumn 2012.

Affordable Housing Review actions

The Scrutiny Committee noted the update for this review.

A Member said that she thought one of the concerns was the type of homes being created compared to the number of dwellings. There was a need for family homes in the Borough.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that a social housing need survey was carried out. This had shown that the most pressing need was for one or two-bed properties. The problem for families was the availability of three-bed houses, as they did not become available very often. For developers to be able to build three-bed houses they needed to find large development sites.

The Vice-Chair referred to the new Housing Policy Advisory Group which was chaired by the Mayor. Any issues could be raised with that group.

A Member commented that he had been informed by the Head of Community Services that there was a demand for one-bed properties. Watford Community

Housing Trust, however, said that there was a need for family homes. People lived in flats as they were the only accommodation available. Families left the town to find accommodation. He added that personally he wanted to see more family homes being built.

The Portfolio Holder explained that the turnover for flats and houses was different. The Housing Policy Advisory Group would look at the housing need and the availability issue. There was little space available in the Borough to develop three-bed houses.

A Member commented that she was aware that the Housing Trust had a large number of single people in three-bed properties. It was difficult to move these people into smaller properties.

The Chair suggested that if Members had any concerns or comments, these should be referred to the Housing Policy Advisory Group.

Work Programme and Task Groups

WP 7 – South West Herts Cycling Strategy Review – The Chair advised that he needed to follow up on this action. Once the information had been received it would be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee.

WP 8 – Review of the provision of drug treatment in the Borough – It was agreed that the deadline for this action would be amended to read July 2012.

RESOLVED –

1. that the Benefits Service be reviewed in Autumn 2012.
2. that the outstanding actions and questions list be updated as agreed.

54 **CALL-IN**

No executive decisions had been called in.

55 **HOSPITAL PARKING CHARGES TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT**

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services including the Hospital Parking Charges Task Group's final draft report.

Councillor Collett, the Chair of the Task Group, was invited to present the report.

Councillor Collett explained that the key factor for the Task Group had been customer care. They had been concerned about the stress caused to visitors and patients regarding parking at the Hospital. She outlined the Task Group's recommendations.

Councillor Collett informed the Scrutiny Committee that the directors from the Hospital had attended a meeting and responded to Members' questions. They had been very receptive.

Members discussed the publicity of the recommendations. It was suggested that the Chair of the Task Group might wish to meet the Directors to formally present the Task Group's report.

The Chair agreed but suggested that he should also be involved as Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Another option would be to send a letter with the report.

The Portfolio Holder suggested that the report should also be circulated to the Head of Planning.

It was agreed that a letter from the Chairs of the Task Group and Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be sent with a copy of the report. The directors could be requested to respond to the recommendations.

Following further discussion it was agreed that the comment regarding staff parking would be removed from the final version of the report.

Councillor Collett said that she wished to thank the Associate Director of Infrastructure and the Associate Director of Strategic Development for their support and attending the meeting. She also thanked the representative from the Patient Advice and Liaison Service for responding in writing to the Task Group's questions. Councillor Collett added that she wished to thank Rosy Wassell, the Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer, and Sandra Hancock, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer, for their support throughout the process.

RESOLVED –

1. that the Hospital Parking Charges Task Group's recommendations be endorsed.
2. that the Hospital Parking Charges Task Group's report be forwarded to the West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust for consideration and a letter to accompany it from the Chairs of the Task Group and Overview and Scrutiny Committee advising they are willing to meet to discuss the recommendations further.
3. that the Task Group's report to be forwarded to the following people –

Representative from PALS
Managing Director
Mayor Dorothy Thornhill
Head of Planning

56

WASTE AND RECYCLING REVIEW - TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Waste and Recycling Task Group had been set up and comprised Councillors Aron, Greenslade, Hastrick and Crout, who had been elected Chair.

To date the Task Group had met on three occasions in January. It had received evidence from the Council's Waste and Recycling Section Head, the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership Development Manager and Councillor Derek Scudder, the Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services. The Task Group had also received comparative data on recycling rates for other Hertfordshire authorities and from the Police Family Group, which represented a comparable group of authorities. The Task Group was currently waiting for information from Three Rivers District Council regarding the recycling rates for South Oxhey.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that a business case for the provision of waste services was currently being prepared. The Task Group felt that it would be difficult to produce informed recommendations without seeing the business case. The Task Group had decided to currently adjourn any further meetings until the business case was finalised. The Task Group Chair had met the Mayor and Portfolio Holder to discuss the best way to proceed in light of the report.

RESOLVED –

that Overview and Scrutiny Committee notes the suggestion that the review be adjourned until the business case has been finalised.

57

THE WAY AHEAD FOR COUNCIL SERVICES - TASK GROUP UPDATE

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Task Group had held its first meeting on 10 January. Members had agreed the final scope and the work programme. Further meetings had been arranged and would review the following topics –

- Watford's experience of Shared Services and contracts
- Evidence from other authorities of service redesign
- Discussion of different service delivery methods
- Review of the Portfolio Holder Policy Statement

It was hoped that a draft report would be presented to the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee, but this was under review.

58

COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP - UPDATE

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Community Safety Partnership Task Group had met on two occasions since the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

At the meeting in December Inspector Dent from Hertfordshire Constabulary had given a presentation about crime statistics.

At the January meeting the Council's Anti-social Behaviour Co-ordinator and Community Safety Manager had attended the meeting and provided an overview of the anti-social behaviour strategy.

The next meeting was due to take place in March and officers would be inviting the Police to discuss neighbourhood priority setting and asking whether Chief Inspector Nick Caveney would be able to attend to discuss his priorities for the town.

59

FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services setting out the changes to the Forward Plan since the previous meeting.

The Chair noted the item in the Forward Plan regarding the Council's equalities objectives.

The Vice-Chair advised that equalities had previously been scrutinised. He asked that Cabinet's attention was drawn to scrutiny's comments regarding equalities.

The Chair also noted the adoption of the framework and five-year action plan for allotments across the Borough had been deferred to the Cabinet meeting in March.

RESOLVED –

1. that the additions and amendments to the Forward Plan be noted.
2. that Cabinet be made aware of scrutiny's comments regarding equalities.

60

PREVIOUS REVIEW UPDATE: SERVICES FOR THE DECEASED

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services. The Appendix to the report included the original recommendations from the Services for the Deceased Task Group, Cabinet's response and the follow up by Policy Development Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair stated that the Task Group had recommended that the Council should aim to make cemeteries self-financing. He had noted that in the budget recently agreed by Council there had been no increase in fees.

The Vice-Chair commented that in 2012/13 Budget Panel had agreed to review fees and charges. The Panel could be mindful of the Task Group's recommendations.

The Portfolio Holder added that there had been a 50% reduction this year in the cost of children's burials. He also referred to the officer's comment about the development of the woodland area in North Watford Cemetery. There had been no reference to the woods being ancient woodland and whether this would have an impact on its use.

The Scrutiny Committee felt that the responses were not complete and that the Chair would contact the service for a more complete response.

RESOLVED –

1. that the latest update be noted.
2. that the Chair contacts Community Services and requests further information.

61

PREVIOUS REVIEW UPDATE: FUTURE OF THE COLOSSEUM

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services. The Appendix to the report included the original recommendations from the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet's responses, the review of Cabinet's responses by the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee and the latest update provided by the Executive Director Resources.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed that the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee's original recommendations had been taken on board by the administration and that there was no need for any further review.

RESOLVED –

that Policy Development Scrutiny Committee's recommendations have been met and the review is complete.

62

WORK PROGRAMME AND ANNUAL REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Head of Legal and Property Services including the updated work programme and an extract of the 2010/11 Annual Report.

The Chair considered that a meeting between him, the Vice-Chair and the Committee and Scrutiny Officer could be arranged to discuss and prepare the Scrutiny Committee's section for the Annual Report.

RESOLVED –

1. that the latest version of the work programme be noted.
2. that the Chair, Vice-Chair and Committee and Scrutiny Officer meet to discuss the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's contribution to the 2011/12 Annual Report.

DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Wednesday 7 March 2012

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer informed the Scrutiny Committee that the meeting scheduled for Wednesday 29 March had been cancelled. This meeting had been programmed to consider any decisions called in from the Cabinet meeting on Monday 12 March; however, this meeting had been moved to Tuesday 20 March. If any executive decisions were called in the Committee and Scrutiny Officer would arrange a new date for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.45 pm