

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

19 SEPTEMBER 2012

Present: Councillor K Collett (Chair)
Councillor A Khan (Vice-Chair)
Councillors J Aron, N Bell, S Greenslade (for minute numbers 26 to 30), K Hastrick, M Hofman, R Martins and S Rackett

Also present: Councillor Mark Watkin (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services) (for minute numbers 26 to 30)

Officers: Committee and Scrutiny Officer
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer (RW)

26 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Apologies for absence were received from the Partnerships and Performance Section Head as she had to attend another meeting.

27 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest.

28 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2012 were submitted and signed.

29 MINUTES - BUDGET PANEL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP TASK GROUP

The Scrutiny Committee was asked to note the minutes for Community Safety Partnership Task Group, which had met on 11 July 2012. The minutes were available on the Council's website.

Following a question about the number of times the Task Group would be meeting, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that the Council had to hold at least one meeting each year. The Task Group was required to review the Community Safety Partnership's targets for the previous year and the priorities for the forthcoming year. Discussions had been held with the Chair of the Task Group, Councillor Martins, the Community Safety Manager and Democratic Services Officers about the approach for the future. It had been agreed that the first meeting of the Municipal Year would remain as at present and would review the performance of the Partnership's performance for the

previous year and the current priorities. Other meetings would be set up as necessary. Consideration was being given to whether the Task Group would be able to comment on the draft Strategic Assessment, approximately in December.

Councillor Bell noted the reference to the Antisocial Behaviour Action Group (ASBAG) in the minutes and advised that he had attended one of its meetings. He suggested that Councillors might wish to go along to one of the meetings as he felt they would find it interesting.

Councillor Martins commented that it had been agreed that the Task Group would take a more strategic approach. There would be one main subject at a meeting. For example the next meeting would be looking at Domestic Violence and whether the services linked together to support people. A more holistic approach was being taken.

The Chair, Councillor Collett, asked that the Task Group take into account how men could also be victims of domestic violence and what support they received.

RESOLVED –

that the minutes of the Community Safety Partnership Task Group meeting held on 11 July 2012 be noted.

30

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.

Members considered the responses to each of the outstanding actions and questions.

OA 6 – Benefits Service Update

The Chair invited Councillor Watkin, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services, to update the Scrutiny Committee on the Benefits Service.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that there was evidence that the service was resolving the problem with the number of outstanding claims. He reminded Members that there were two relevant performance indicators; changes in circumstances and outstanding claims. The outstanding claims referred to those people waiting to receive any benefits from the Council.

The Portfolio Holder said that when he had been chairing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Members were continually told how many documents were outstanding. When he had been made Portfolio Holder he had asked that the number of outstanding claims was provided instead. He received a weekly report from the service. There had been a thorough review of the performance of all teams in the section. The process was ongoing.

The Portfolio Holder reported that the average time to process a claim was 27 days against the target of 25. The number of outstanding claims at 2 July was 309; this figure had been reduced and it was now standing at 124. The service was beginning to see a change. The situation with regard to change in circumstance applications was not as good. The number of outstanding documents barely changed from one week to the next. The number of documents processed varied dramatically. He advised that SERCO was only paid for the actual work it carried out. A review into the relationship with SERCO was currently under way. He was unsure of the terms and conditions in which the company had been employed. A report was being presented to the Shared Services Joint Committee at its next meeting.

Councillor Aron said that she was concerned about the impact the backlog had on the individuals concerned. She had a case where the residents had moved from Watford to Dacorum; they had made the last payment due but had still received a reminder for non-payment. The situation had since been resolved, but it had been very distressing for the people concerned. She asked whether there was the same problem in this service.

The Portfolio Holder advised that this related to the Revenues section and generally that service's performance was adequate.

The Vice-Chair, Councillor Khan thanked the Portfolio Holder for being open and transparent about the figures. He stated that he was a member of the Shared Services Joint Committee and had been sceptical about the actions being taken. The people caught by the problems with the Benefits Service were vulnerable people. The problem needed to be resolved. He added that he had noticed two signs in the Customer Service Centre (CSC) which caused him some concern. One of these signs indicated that there were delays with benefit claims. The amount it had cost the Councils to employ SERCO could have been spent on employing additional full-time staff.

The Portfolio Holder supported the Councillor's concerns. He was concerned that the Council was dealing with human beings. He was unsure, however, if additional staff would have been the right solution. He informed Members that the demand for benefits had increased by 20%. The number of claimants in Watford was higher than the national average. When the staffing level had been set for Shared Services it had been based on a number of assumptions, which were now understood to be wrong.

Following a question from the Chair, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that SERCO was only involved in change of circumstance applications. With regard to the improved situation, he explained that improvements had been made to the initial contact at the CSC. Officers checked that applicants had the right documents. This meant that the Benefits service suffered far fewer interruptions to their work. Phone calls were handled by the CSC. The productivity of the teams had been reassessed; the processes had been reviewed and there had been an increase in overall productivity.

Following a question from Councillor Bell, the Portfolio Holder reported that, as at 20 August, there were over 3,000 documents outstanding. He had not been advised of the average number of days it was taking to process change of circumstances.

Councillor Bell acknowledged the comments regarding the staff; however the economy had got worse. The Portfolio Holder had stated that Watford had suffered a greater increase in claims and change of circumstances than the national average. He noted that SERCO were not based at the Council and therefore did not see the customers.

The Portfolio Holder replied that SERCO, theoretically, was able to process the documents and not be disturbed by enquiries. The negative side of this however was that the assessors were removed from the impact on residents and their concerns. He endorsed the use of outside support to reduce the backlog.

Councillor Martins felt that SERCO had been engaged but the delivery had not been managed. The company was carrying out the work it had been required to do. This was an emotive issue for Councillors. Residents were being chased for Council Tax payments and rent arrears whilst they were waiting for their applications to be assessed. It was necessary to link the various services together. He asked how many people the 3,000 documents affected.

The Portfolio Holder advised that he did not have that information.

Councillor Martins stated that it was important that information was available. He also asked what was being done to protect the people affected by the backlog where the fault rested with the Council. He felt that the situation was not being taken seriously enough.

The Portfolio Holder responded that when benefit claimants did not hear about their application they came into the CSC to make enquiries. He assured the Scrutiny Committee that the problems with the service were being taken seriously. It affected people's lives.

Councillor Hofman asked whether it was possible to know how many staff were in the Benefits section and whether they had a staff forum. He questioned whether it would be possible to invite benefits officers to a meeting in order for them to be able to explain the difficulties and how the Council could help.

The Portfolio Holder informed the Scrutiny Committee that the Shared Services Joint Committee managed and scrutinised the service. He was happy to report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the general position of the service.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members that it was possible to call-in decisions taken by the Three Rivers and Watford Shared Services Joint Committee. The same call-in rules applied as Executive Key Decisions taken by Watford Borough Council. She explained the complete procedure should a decision be called in from the Joint Committee. She noted that the Vice-Chair

was also a member of the Joint Committee and therefore he would not be able to be party to the call-in or chair Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Vice-Chair said that more scrutiny of the situation was needed. A large sum of money had been spent on SERCO carrying out the work. Originally officers had promised that the work would be complete by last Christmas, but it had not happened. Delays had occurred and the situation needed to be resolved. There had been an increase in the volume of work but a decrease in staffing.

The Portfolio Holder assured him that attention was being given to this matter.

Following a question from Councillor Aron, the Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that there was no reason why information gained in the public part of the meeting could not be discussed at another committee, for example the Shared Services Joint Committee.

The Chair suggested that Members could look at the Shared Services Joint Committee's report and then consider whether they felt any further action was required. She thanked the Portfolio Holder for his contribution to the meeting.

The Vice-Chair asked that it be noted in the minutes that the Scrutiny Committee was concerned about the situation regarding the change in circumstance applications. The problems needed to be resolved as soon as possible.

VS 1 – Support for the Voluntary Sector Task Group recommendations

The Scrutiny Committee noted the response from the Head of Community Services and Head of Legal and Property Services and acknowledged the recommendations would be covered by the new Commissioning Framework.

AHR 1 – Affordable Housing Threshold

Councillor Martins noted the response but said that he was concerned about the recent changes to planning legislation and the impact it might have. He suggested that Members continued to monitor the situation.

PSL 1 – Property Policy review

Councillor Bell advised that he noted the comment in the update. He said that Members needed to be mindful of how the Commissioning Framework would work.

HP 6 – Review of Hospital Parking Charges Task Group's Recommendations

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she had still not received a response from the hospital despite a letter, email and telephone call.

The Chair stated that she had expected some form of response or acknowledgement.

The Vice Chair proposed that the Chair should write to the Directors and copies should be provided to the Hospital Trust's Chief Executive and the Mayor.

Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel

The Scrutiny Committee was informed that the new Scrutiny Panel had held its first meeting the previous evening. Councillor Rackett had been elected Chair.

Councillor Rackett advised that the Panel would be reviewing SLM at its next meeting in November. The Panel had received a long list of contracts and it might be possible at a future meeting to look at all relationships, including SERCO.

RESOLVED –

1. that the outstanding actions and questions' update be noted and amended according to the Scrutiny Committee's comments.
2. that the Scrutiny Committee's concerns regarding the ongoing problems with change of circumstances benefit applications be noted.
3. that the Chair writes to the Hospital Trust seeking a response and that copies be forwarded to the Mayor and the Trust's Chief Executive.

31

UPDATE ON THE COUNCIL'S KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - FIRST QUARTER (APRIL - JUNE) 2012/12

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Partnerships and Performance Section Head setting out the Key Performance Indicators and the first quarter performance measures for 2012/13.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised the Scrutiny Committee that if there were any performance measures not listed which Members would like to see included in the future, they could contact the Partnerships and Performance Section Head and she would investigate the possibility.

Councillor Bell referred to the presentation by the Portfolio Holder earlier in the meeting and how he had spoken about the number of outstanding documents. In this report it referred to the average time taken to process change of circumstance applications. There needed to be consistency.

Councillor Aron commented that in Appendix B, reference RB2 KPI1ii, it was not clear that this indicator only related to benefit applications. There needed to be more clarity in the document.

Councillor Martins asked for further clarification on Cor 3. The target had not been achieved and yet the trend showed an improvement. It was noted that Environmental Services was the Service Lead on this performance measure. Members questioned whether it only related to complaints about that service.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer advised that she would relay the questions to the Partnerships and Performance Section Head. She added that she would circulate a copy of the complaints procedure so that Members were aware of exactly what happened.

The Chair informed the Scrutiny Committee that she had asked the Partnerships and Performance Section Head to find out if it would be possible to get further performance information on sickness statistics.

RESOLVED –

that the Partnerships and Performance Section Head be asked to respond to the Scrutiny Committee's questions.

32

WASTE AND RECYCLING TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Officer including the final report of the Waste and Recycling Task Group.

Councillor Aron, who had chaired the Task Group's last meeting, explained that the Task Group had found it difficult to make any recommendations until the situation regarding the service was known.

The Chair suggested that Members continue to monitor the situation with the service.

RESOLVED –

that the Waste and Recycling Task Group's report be noted.

33

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR COMMISSIONING FRAMEWORK TASK GROUP - FINAL REPORT

The Scrutiny Committee received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Officer including the Voluntary and Community Sector Commissioning Framework Task Group's final report.

The Chair stated that the report had been well written and she wished to thank the Task Group and the officers for their detailed work.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer explained that Community Services would be presenting their report on the Commissioning Framework to Cabinet in October. The Task Group's report would be included as an appendix.

The Vice-Chair asked for clarification on the small grants fund and why it had been decided to set a maximum limit of £2,000.

Councillor Rackett responded that this was intended to be small grants to enable as many small organisations as possible to be able to apply for it.

The Committee and Scrutiny Officer added that the Task Group had been asked for their views about the small grants fund and whether it should be retained. The recommendations in the report were the same as for the current small grants fund.

The Chair noted the comments in the report regarding domestic abuse. She stated that men could also be victims of domestic violence and this was an area often forgotten. She asked that the Community Safety Partnership Task Group included this in their review.

Councillor Martins advised that he would refer this to the Community Safety Manager.

Councillor Aron understood that the Watford Women's Centre was now looking after male victims of domestic violence. Councillor Hofman advised that the Centre was undergoing a 're-brand'.

Councillor Bell said that it was important that when Charter Place was refurbished there was still a centre where vulnerable men and women could access services. If it was not Charter Place these people would need to know where they could go.

RESOLVED –

that the Voluntary and Community Sector Commissioning Framework Task Group's final report be endorsed.

34

DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS

- Wednesday 3 October 2012 (call-in only)
- Thursday 18 October 2012 (call-in only)
- Wednesday 21 November 2012

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.00 pm
and finished at 8.20 pm