

PERFORMANCE, RESOURCES AND ASSETS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

29th May 2008 at 6.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Saleem (Chair); Councillors Burnett, Farooq, Franks, Malik and Pantling.

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor Neale

27 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE (REF: 2)

An apology for absence from the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor Titmuss.

28 MINUTES (REF: 3.1)

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2nd April 2008 be taken as read, approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

29 REFERENCE FROM ENVIRONMENT AND NON-EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ACTIONS ON IMPROVING PERFORMANCE IN DETERMINING PLANNING APPLICATIONS (REF: 7.1)

The Democratic Services Officer presented a report from the Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee who had been requested by this Committee to ascertain how Development Control could improve the timescale of determining major and minor planning applications.

The Head of Planning attended the meeting of Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee on 1st May 2008 and accepted that the handling of planning applications had declined due mainly to staff shortages and sickness absences. Despite numerous recruitment drives the service had failed to fill vacant posts.

To address the problems the Head of Planning had increased the salaries and retention packages of 3 posts in order to become more competitive in the wider market. It was anticipated that the Development Control service would have recovered sufficiently to deliver at least second quartile by the end of the year, and by 2009/10 the services aim was to achieve the top quartile. The Head of Planning had been instructed to submit a progress report to Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee in 6 months time.

A Member stated that Development Control had experienced problems with recruitment for a long time and questioned how the Head of Planning would improve within this area. He requested that this Committee was kept up to date with the progress achieved in Development Control.

It was agreed that once the progress report had been submitted to Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee, the report would be submitted to this Committee with the comments and views of Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee included.

Resolved: (i) That the Action being taken by the Head of Planning in the Development Control section to improve performance in determining planning applications be noted.

(ii) That following the submission of the 6 monthly progress report to Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee the report be submitted to this Committee incorporating the views and comments from Environment and Non Executive Functions Scrutiny Committee.

30 REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE (REF: 9)

The Customer and Corporate Services Director introduced John Harrison Director of Strategic Resources from Peterborough Council who leads the interim management arrangement and the team that had been brought into the Council to transform the Revenues and Benefits service until the end of October 2008 in the first instance.

The Customer and Corporate Services Director reported that the processing times continued to be unacceptable with more telephone calls for the service being abandoned than answered. Only 40% of telephone calls were answered within 30 seconds. Although there had been significant improvement in processing claims over the year, the fourth quarter had seen deterioration and the Council continued to fall short of the national standard. In 2007/08 it had taken on average 50 days to process new claims and 32 days to process changes of circumstances. The amount of Council tax collected by the Council was also well short of target. The Customer and Corporate Services Director explained that he had replied fully to the Department for Work and Pensions on their justified concerns about matters relating to the Housing Benefit Subsidy Claim for 2006/07 by their 6th March deadline. The Minister's determination was still awaited and a significant sanction cannot be ruled out although, informal feedback suggested that the Council's explanation and mitigation would be accepted and a warning issued.

To address the wide ranging and long standing problems right across the service, Peterborough City Council had been commissioned to deliver significantly improved outcomes under an interim management arrangement, provisionally until the end of October 2008. Peterborough City Council was a 4 star authority in this service area with a record of innovation and achievement. Many of the team had worked with other under performing councils such as North East Lincolnshire and Hackney Councils. John Harrison explained the urgency of actions required such as the contract with the external contractors Manley Summers being cancelled as it was not working and was also expensive as it was not properly managed. Agency benefit assessing staff had been employed under our own management who had already delivered better outcomes and over the year would save in the

order of £400,000. He explained the expenditure recurring now over two years was an emergency arrangement to clear large backlogs and therefore was not budgeted.

John Harrison advised that although improvement will not be apparent until the backlog of applications had been cleared it was hoped that the most urgent core of nearly 4,000 more than 50 days old will be completed by the end of June. In fact the performance was expected to get worse before it got better. He explained that Peterborough City Council had been contracted to deliver specific outcomes as detailed below:-

- A Revenue and Benefits service that was fit for purpose and worked within the legal framework for the service.
- An efficient, effective and customer focussed service that provided value for money.
- Staffing levels and costs that reflected best practice when benchmarked against high performing authorities of a similar size and made up with staff that had the proven skills and competencies' in place.
- Improvement in council tax collection levels from 91.7% actual 2007/08 to achieve as a minimum the target of 94.4% set for 2007/08.
- Improvements in benefit processing times for new claims and change of circumstances (the new national indicator 14 to improve to 42 days or better by the end of 2008/09).
- A reduction in the loss of benefit subsidy due to local authority errors £100K in 2008/09 and £600K for future years.
- Robust and effective performance management introduced across the Revenue and Benefit Service.
- External contracts awarded and managed in accordance with the Authority's contract management framework.
- An Electronic Document Management in Business Rates to be considered and implemented if possible.
- Customers, internal and external stakeholders had confidence in the Council's Revenues and Benefits Service – including the Department of Works and Pensions.

John Harrison explained that there had been a meeting with senior officials from the Department for Work and Pensions who will advise the Minister on any action required following the recent report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate which found fault with our processing of many cases in early in 2007. The officials were reassured by our plans and the team we had placed to deliver them and promised help and support rather than direct intervention which had been an option for them. They would monitor the Council's progress through a monthly report.

The Director Customer and Corporate Services stated that Members had been informed of the many difficulties within the service and actions being undertaken to resolve them. Members would be kept informed of

developments achieved throughout the period of change. Members would be in a position to examine the options fully and a proposal would be brought to the Committee by October 2008. However, radical action within the service could not wait and was urgently needed and that required an immediate investment of £730,000 through 2008/09. In time the expenditure would deliver significant savings in the year with additional savings in each subsequent year thereafter. Although the Council aimed to improve customers' expectations and ensured that the service was effective and compliant with legislation and good practice, the inefficiency within the service needed to be addressed as a priority. The task being undertaken to improve the service was considerable and involved many risks both financial and operational.

The Director of Customer and Corporate Services informed Members that staff had been briefed on the changes being undertaken and had worked hard through challenging and personal uncertainty. The Director of Customer and Corporate Services had informed staff that their efforts were appreciated by Members and Senior Officers. He emphasised the importance of supporting staff throughout the process.

A Member enquired if training was available to support staff particularly if their roles changed.

John Harrison explained that training was available and staff were being supported and informed throughout the process.

A Member commented that he shared concern for the magnitude of the problem within the Revenues and Benefits service he supported the action being taken to resolve them.

Members agreed to the proposals made by the Director of Customer and Corporate Services and requested that a special meeting be arranged in early August that updated the Committee on the action plan and options being developed for delivery of the service in the longer term.

Resolved: (i) That the actions being undertaken by the Director Customer and Corporate Services and Peterborough City Council in transforming the Revenues and Benefits Services be noted.

(ii) That a special meeting be arranged in early August to update the Committee on progress in the actions being undertaken and also on the options for the future delivery of the Revenues and Benefits Service.

(iii) That the Director of Customer and Corporate Service be instructed to produce a brief report on the early options considered to improve the Revenues and Benefits Service.

The new Luton Excellence Programme Manager submitted a presentation on Luton Excellence summarised the key points from the report submitted. The Programme Manager highlighted the new approach to Luton Excellence which aimed for a change in culture. She explained that the Council strived for understanding value in the customer's eyes and focussed on removing wasteful activity. The objectives of the Luton Excellence project were:-

- Improve customer service
- Increase/greater efficiency
- Smarter working and improved job satisfaction.

Luton Excellence support team had established 7 posts last year, 5 people had already been recruited with the remaining 2 staff commencing in June 2008.

A Member pointed out that a project such as Luton Excellence should not be worked on in isolation, it was important that Human Resources were involved. The Luton Excellence Programme Manager stated that Human Resources were directly involved with the programme.

Members of the Committee requested that a report be submitted to the September meeting of the Committee. Members also felt it would be beneficial if a workshop was arranged for all members of the Council explaining 'lean thinking'. The Director of Scrutiny suggested that this workshop should be held before the 11th September meeting of the Committee.

Resolved: (i) That the progress made on the Luton Excellence programme and the plans for future work be noted.

(ii) That the Luton Excellence Programme Manager organised a workshop for all Members of the Council introducing them to the 'lean concept' before the 11th September 2008 meeting of this Committee.

(iii) That an update on the Luton Excellence Project be submitted to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 11th September 2008.

(iv) That regular 6 monthly reports be submitted to the Committee on the progress of the Luton Excellence Programme.

32 PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE REPORTING (QUARTER 4 – 2007-2008) (REF: 11)

The Director of Scrutiny apologised to Members that the Performance, report was incomplete with the overall summary and the report from Housing and Community Living not being submitted. This was due to a lack of resources. Officers had prioritised the completion of the Local Area

Agreement report, a major piece of work with a deadline for submission to the Government on 23rd May 2008. The Performance Report (Quarter 4 - 2007/2008) would not be submitted to the Executive until 23rd June 2008. The Director of Scrutiny requested that Members considered this report as work in progress.

The Policy and Performance Manager stated that the report only highlighted the areas that were a cause for concern and these areas were the same that had been identified within the previous quarter.

A Member enquired if there were any performance issues that the Council had improved upon within the last year.

The Director of Scrutiny explained that 18 of the 43 performance indicators identified in 2007/08 were as good as or better than 2006/07, 23 performance indicators were worse than in 2006/07. As explained by the Director of Customer and Corporate Services work was being undertaken to improve the revenues and benefits service.

The Head of Resources and Performance Housing and Community Living reported that the adult social care indicators were the most challenging ones for the department and work was being undertaken to improve the service. The Housing Landlord service were in the process of implementing a new system to improve the collection of rents in Council owned dwellings.

Resolved: (i) That the results in the performance and financial monitoring report be noted.

(ii) That future performance and financial monitoring reports being submitted to this Committee be finalised and complete versions be reported to Performance, Resources and Assets Scrutiny Committee prior to their submission to the Executive.

33 LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT (LAA) 2008-2011 (REF: 12)

The Director of Scrutiny reported that the Government had introduced a new approach to monitoring and measuring the performance of Local Authorities. The focus was on encouraging local authorities to work with their partners in the local strategic partnership - in Luton's case the Luton Forum. The deadline for submission of this document to the Secretary of State for Communities was 23rd May 2008, the Director of Scrutiny had already submitted the report to Annual Council on 20th May 2008.

Performance, Resources and Assets Scrutiny Committee were requested to consider the arrangements for tracking and monitoring performance against the Local Area Agreement. A table listed the 35 improvement indicators, 16 mandatory education indicators and the 14 local indicators that had been selected. Scrutiny Board was considering changing the structure of themes of the scrutiny committees to align them with the themes of the Luton Forum.

Members of the Committee raised the following comments on the tracking and monitoring of the new performance indicators:-

<u>Members Concern on tracking and monitoring the New Performance Indicator</u>	<u>Officers Response</u>
099 – Children in Care reaching level 4 in English at Key Stage 2 - Is the Council setting areas of achievement lower? – suggested target 26% down from 44.4%	Very small numbers of children involved each year. These are also different children each year some had severe difficulties, attainment had been predicted pupil by pupil and aggregated by cohort to arrive at the targets for each year.
039 – Alcohol-harm related hospital admission rates – was the Council setting a challenging enough target?	The health authority had advised the Council on this indicator. The Council was setting a challenging enough target, the targets had been set based on reducing the level of increase from 4% to 2% per annum.
056 – Obesity among primary school age children in year 6 – Was the Council doing anything about improving this indicator? The target was unchanged for 3 years.	The Council and its partners in the Health Service aims were aiming to stop the increase in obesity amongst school age children in year 6.
Are there any indicators that address community cohesion in the Local Area Agreement.	Yes - Indicator 1 - % of people who believe people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area. And Indicator 23 – Perceptions that people in area treat one another with respect and dignity. Community cohesion was a high priority for the Luton Form with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) managing it.
123 – 16+ current smoking rate prevalence - why was the Council not trying reduce smoking?	The Council had to keep the target as it was set and agreed as a reward element target 2 years ago, the smoking prevalence static in Luton was not coming down with the national trend.
Why does the Council not adopt the new target?	Smoking was the single most significant cause of premature death, the Council will be allowed to refresh the indicator early next year.

The Policy and Performance Manager informed the Committee that all of the 198 indicators in the new National Indicator Set will be reported annually and that the target for affordable homes and tackling fuel poverty had not been set.

Resolved: That the report (Ref: 12) be noted.

34 WORK PROGRAMME (REF: 13)

The Director of Scrutiny updated the Committee on the latest version of its work programme. Members requested the following items be added to the work programme.

- That all Members of the Council be invited to a workshop to informally discuss the 'Lean Methodology' with Luton Excellence Support Team.
- That a special meeting of the Committee be arranged around the beginning of August to discuss the actions being undertaken for the future of the Revenues and Benefits service.
- That a progress report on the Luton Excellence Project be reported to the 11th September meeting.
- That a report be submitted to the 11th September meeting on the strategy for receiving capital receipts and exploiting development rather than disposal.
- That a report be submitted to the Committee on 11th September of the business plan for the newly shaped service in Capital and Asset Management.

Resolved: That the Director of Scrutiny be requested to amend the Work Programme in accordance with the Committee's suggestions.

(Note: The meeting ended at 9.40 pm)