

**THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING**  
**OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**HELD ON TUESDAY 18 APRIL 2006**

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)  
Councillors S Bishop, H High,  
Mrs A Naylor, D J Taylor-Gooby and  
C Walker

Also Present: Councillor D Myers – Executive Member  
for E-Government and Scrutiny Liaison

**1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs E Huntington and A J Holmes.

**2 THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 27 March 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

**3 MATTERS ARISING**

(i) **HRA Housing Business Plan  
(Minute No 3(i) refers)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that out of the 9,278 housing stock, 6,900 did not meet the decent homes standards which equated to 74.37%. During 2006/07 a further 184 would become non decent.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

(ii) **Closed Churchyards  
(Minute No 9 refers)**

The Scrutiny Support Manager explained that the report had been referred back to the Environmental Health and Licensing Manager from Management Team for further work to be considered.

The Director of Community Services explained that the Local Government Ombudsman had produced a report regarding policies on closed churchyards. The good practice was currently being looked at to see if any changes in policy and procedure were required.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

**4 THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 4 April 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

**RESOLVED** that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

**5 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

**6 WORK PROGRAMME ISSUES**

**(i) Corporate Development Unit and Customer Services Unit Quarterly Performance Report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided information on the performance of the Corporate Development Unit in the period to the end of March 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that the report showed progress against the team's indicators in appendix 1 and explained what had been delivered in terms of the work programme for 2005/6. Appendix 2 described the work programme proposed for 2006/7. The report also included the performance monitoring report for the unit in relation to Environmental Policy at appendix 3.

The team had been working in its current form for over one year and was now operating as an effective unit. The team had recently been strengthened as David Payne had taken up the duties of Head of Customer Services to further develop the functionality of the Customer Service Centre and enhance the Council's interface with the public. A Project Co-ordinator had also been appointed to develop and help deliver the capacity building programme. The postholder was to take up her duties on 24 April.

The unit had undertaken and delivered a number of key projects as part of the planned workload. Key achievements since January were detailed in the report.

Out of the low performing performance indicators, 10 had shown an improvement and 3 were now in the top quartile.

The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that in accordance with BVPI 3, a customer satisfaction survey would be undertaken during 2006/07 to gauge public satisfaction with the Council Services. This was required to be undertaken every three years.

Members were advised that there had been slippage in the communication of the revised customer services/complaints procedure. The Head of Customer Services was currently looking at procedures to ensure that they were appropriate for the new centre. The digitisation of the land register was almost complete however a number of issues had arisen which could only be rectified through negotiations between officers from the Asset and Property Management Unit and the Land Registry.

Members raised concerns regarding the new telephone system and explained that customers were complaining that they were unable to receive an answer. The Head of Customer Services explained that there were some teething problems with the telephone system. With the old switchboard system, members of the public used to obtain an engaged tone and the Council had been unable to calculate how many phone calls had been lost. When all the switchboard operators were busy, the current system gave a message asking them to hold. He added that he was currently compiling a report regarding recruitment of staff as the Customer Service Centre was understaffed.

The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that the Customer Service Centre was a new office and operated a new way of working for staff and there would be some teething difficulties.

The Head of Customer Services explained that the setting up of the Customer Service Centre was still in the early stages and had another year to go before it was complete. He added that the end product would be better than the old system once the problems were solved.

A Member queried how many of the public had renewed their bus passes. The Revenues Manager explained that there were approximately 12,000 existing bus pass holders and to date 6,200 had been replaced.

Members raised concern regarding the use of voice mail by officers. The Head of Customers Services explained that the use of voice mail had increased and this was currently being looked at organisation wide. The Director of Community Services explained that voice mail should only be used in exceptional circumstances and was being looked at.

The Chair thanked the Principal Corporate Development Officer and the Head of Customer Services for their report.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

7 **POSITION STATEMENT – REVENUES AND BENEFITS**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Financial Management which provided a position statement in respect of the Revenues and Benefits services, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Details of performance from 1 April 2005 – 28 February 2006 were outlined in appendix 1 to the report. The Revenues Manager gave details of the key issues with regard to benefits and in particular performance on benefits claims, sickness levels in both the Revenues and Benefits section, average time for completing changes in circumstances and the amount of benefit paid correctly. Turnaround for new applications for the period was 33 days which was a reduction of 4 days on the year.

Details were also provided in the report of the key issues with regard to revenues including the percentage of Council Tax collected in the year, percentage of business rates collected and the cost of collecting Council Tax per chargeable dwelling. Members were advised of the overall performance of the unit together with details of recorded complaints. Over recent months, turnaround times for new applications had improved and this was outlined in appendix 4. In the case of new applications, the turnaround time was 28 days and the Council was in the second quartile for changes in circumstances at 6.9 days with accuracy of processing being a top quartile performer.

Work continued with the pension service and campaigns which took the form of surgeries were provided in various parishes throughout the district. The Revenues Manager explained that the Unit were taking the opportunity during the current issuing of Concessionary Fares passes to further promote ongoing welfare rights work.

Throughout the year there had been 8 prosecutions in respect of fraud and 16 formal cautions had been issued. Current Council performance in respect of Fraud visits showed that the Council was in the top quartile for this service area.

Details of the Best Value Service Improvement Plan were set out in appendix 2 to the report and achievements and non achievements were detailed in appendix 3. Targets for 2006/7 were also detailed.

The Revenues Manager explained that the take up of direct debit was 17,300 and this was expected to improve again. The Chair commented that it was encouraging to hear that the direct debit was increasing.

The Chair thanked the Revenues Manager for his report.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

## **8 ENVIRONMENTAL OPERATIONS – QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE REPORT**

Consideration was given to the report of the Environmental Services Operations Manager which provided information on the performance of the Environmental Services Operations for the period from December 2005 – March 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Appendix 1 to the report provided details of progress against the service plan for the period December 2005 – March 2006. Details of complaints received in relation to Environmental Operations Services were outlined in appendix 2.

The new agreed arrangements for zonal working and four day week were introduced from 18 April. The refuse crews had agreed to work on Good Friday to allow the Council to move from five to four days without having to consider a catch up day prior to the service change. A new team leader responsible for the refuse operation had been appointed and had commenced their position on 3 April.

The green waste collection service had resumed on 28 February and was operating on a four day week. The first collections had not produced the tonnages expected and this was possibly because of the cold and wet spring weather.

The grass cutting operation was proposed to commence on 6 March, however this had been postponed due to the continued wet weather preventing the machines to operate without causing damage. A spring clean had been undertaken from 16-25 January and details were provided in the report of the outcome of the spring clean.

The graffiti removal machine was operating successfully in the district and the pathfinder area and received regular support from the Probation Service. Durham County Council was also using the service to clean graffiti from the subways in Seaham and Peterlee. The total graffiti removed was detailed in the report.

The gully cleansing operation had now completed the annual maintenance programme of two cleans per gully. Durham County Council had indicated that they may change the frequency from two to one cleans per year. Discussions were ongoing regarding these proposals as they had serious financial, operational and service standard implications. Members were advised that the concerns of the District Council had been echoed by Northumbrian Water. The Environmental Services Operations Manager gave details of the BVPIs on street cleansing and recycling and the performance tables in the report showed the first three quarters of the current year. He reported that additional equipment had been purchased

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namely a new compact sweeper and also back pack vacuum sweepers which should further improve performance in respect of the Environmental Performance Indicators.

A Member explained that there had been an operative picking litter in Shotton and he had had numerous people contacting him to pass on praise to the operative concerned. The Environmental Services Operations Manager explained that the Director of Community Services had sent him a letter praising him for his work. The gentleman had been moved to a different village as he had been receiving threats to himself and his family. The street wardens and police had been involved but the gentleman had to move house to get away from the youths that were causing a nuisance.

A Member referred to the graffiti that had been cleaned from the bridge on the yellow brick road in Seaham and explained that within hours it had been sprayed again. The Environmental Services Operations Manager explained that the anti-graffiti paint needed twenty four hours to dry and a Closure Order was being sought so the bridge could be painted and allowed to dry.

A Member referred to the green waste and asked if there was plans to extend the scheme to other areas. The Director of Community Services explained that the green waste collection had been a service that had been introduced at no extra cost to the Council. The scheme had been extended to a further 600 houses within the Seaham area and would be reviewed thereafter although more resources would be required.

A Member referred to the charging for special collections and explained that there had been numerous complaints regarding the charges. The Environmental Services Operations Manager explained that a report was being prepared for Members on a policy for special collections. The Director of Community Services explained that over 90% of special collections were collected free of charge. Procedures were being clarified so there was a consistent approach.

In response to a question regarding fly tipping, the Director of Community Services explained that recorded incidents of fly tipping had increased but this could be down to more people reporting them. The permit scheme had been introduced in December 2004 and changes to special collections in April 2005, but there had been no effect on the monthly trends. In the vicinity of the civic amenity sites, there was more fly tipping and notices were to be erected in hot spot areas. It was also intended to use surveillance cameras on a regular basis. The District Council had considered the merits of joining the Fly Tipping Partnership that utilised the Environment Agency expertise and a Fly-Tipping Officer had been employed for County Durham.

Concern was raised regarding the possibility of reduction in the cleansing of the gullies to once per year. The Director of Community Services explained that the County Council had intended to introduce the new gully cleansing operation from 1 April 2006 but this had now been postponed.

The Chair thanked the Environmental Services Operations Manager and the Director of Community Services for their report.

**RESOLVED** that the information given, be noted.

**9 CHAIR'S COMMENTS**

The Chair wished the Members that were leaving the committee all of the best for their future.

JC/MA/com ser del/060401  
24 April 2006