

**POLICY SCRUTINY PANEL**

**4<sup>th</sup> July, 2006, at 5.30pm**

**Present:** Councillor Simmons (in the Chair) and Councillors Cowper, Freeman, Gibbon, Hepplewhite, Moderate, Norman, Pitts and Syer.

**Also Present:** Councillors Howarth, Kinghorn, Leake, Lightley, Marsden, Pape, Stoddart and Young.

**Apologies for Absence:** There were no Apologies for Absence

**Bullet Points from the Meeting of 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2006**

The Bullet Points from the Meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2006, were approved as a correct record.

**BULLET POINTS**

**Telephone Communications System (Update Report)**

- The Head of Community Services, the Customer Services Manager and the Assistant Customer Services Manager were in attendance to update Members on the latest performance figures for Telephone Response Times.
- The figures were comprehensive, related to March, April, May and June, 2006, and were circulated at the Meeting.
- Details were also included of any issues which would have affected Response Times eg Bill Postings, Staff Sickness, Staff Training etc.
- Members expressed concern over the percentage of calls answered in relation to calls received, with figures showing the highest percentage of calls answered at 62.73%, in March, 2006, and the lowest percentage of calls answered at 57%, in June, 2006.
- The Head of Community Services indicated that problems were still being experienced with staff sickness and staff retention.
- Members agreed to continue to monitor the situation and requested the Head of Community Services to prepare a further update on Telephone Response Times, for submission to the Policy Scrutiny Panel, in three months time.
- The Customer Services Manager indicated that staff had been consulted regarding possible methods of reducing Response Times and the Head of Community Services confirmed that alternative working methods and issues of staff flexibility were constantly being considered.
- Members also requested the Head of Community Services to suggest future, long term staffing options to facilitate an improvement in the Service. It was agreed that these options be submitted to the Panel with the update report on Response Times, in three months time.
- The Head of Community Services also informed Members that initial Public Consultation regarding the Service had commenced, as had previously been requested by the Panel. The consultation had been carried out via Telephone Feedback in June, 2006.
- The total number of calls surveyed was 75, with 48% of callers prepared to take part. The responses indicated that 69% of callers were satisfied or very satisfied with the length of wait; 94% were satisfied or very satisfied with staff courteousness and 91% were satisfied or very satisfied with information and guidance received. The Head of Community Services indicated that this

Survey was very much an initial exercise and that Consultation would be expanded and improved over time, in line with the previous request of the Panel.

- Members were reminded that the Panel Report and Recommendations relating to the Scrutiny of the Telephone Communications System would be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> July, 2006, and then to Cabinet for consideration.

### **Working with Parish Councils**

- In accordance with the wishes of the Panel, the Director of Legal and Administration Services attended the Meeting to brief Members on work previously carried out in relation to a Draft District/Parish Charter.
- In March 2003, Members had first been appraised of the newly introduced "Quality Parish Council" Scheme and in May of that year a letter had been written to all 15 Parish Council Clerks to assess the level of interest in pursuing Quality Parish Council Status.
- The responses had been mixed with 2 Parishes expressing a definite interest, others expressing a possible interest, whilst some indicated they had no interest. A response was not received from all 15 Parish Clerks.
- In June, 2003, new ODPM Guidance was issued which included model guidance for Parish Council Charters and discussion of the possible devolution of certain powers, from Districts to Parishes.
- In August, 2003, the Director of Legal and Administration Services had drafted a Model Charter, which had been forwarded to Portfolio Holders. It was also circulated to Parish Clerks to assess whether Parish Councils would be interested in pursuing a formal Charter with the District Council. The Model Charter was intended to be between Principle Authorities as well Parish Councils.
- A decision on the Draft Charter was postponed until after the upcoming referendum and in the meantime there was further consultation both with Parish Councils and the LSP Board.
- In December, 2004, the former Secretary to the County Durham Association of Local Councils had urged a common approach to developing working relationships between Councils and in September, 2005, a new Good Practice Guide had been issued. There had been no further progress on the issue since then.
- Members were then informed that District of Easington had just completed a Charter. This was a three-way Charter, signed up to by Easington, its 19 Town and Parish Councils, and Durham County Council and had been witnessed at the formal signing ceremony, by the Prime Minister.
- It was considered by the Panel that a perspective both on joint working and on the potential benefits of a Charter was needed from the County Council and it was agreed that the relevant Officers involved in work on the Easington Charter be approached with a view to attending a future Panel Meeting.
- Members were also informed that Steve Wragg of the County Durham Association of Local Councils had offered to attend the next Panel Meeting to discuss the issue of current levels of support available to Parish Councils.
- The Town Clerk at Peterlee Town Council had also provisionally agreed to attend a future Panel Meeting to discuss with Members the governance and the requirements of a "Quality Council". Members also noted that the Clerk of Horden Parish Council, may be an appropriate future witness, as she was a "Quality Clerk", and the size of Horden Parish Council was perhaps more relevant to discussions involving City of Durham than Peterlee Town Council.

The Meeting Terminated at 6.27 pm