

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE SERVICE DELIVERY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON MONDAY 2 APRIL 2007

Present: Councillor D Raine (Chair)
Councillors S Bishop, J Goodwin,
H High, A J Holmes, W R Peardon
and Mrs B A Sloan

Also Present: Councillor P Ward – Executive Member for Resources

1 AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor D J Taylor-Gooby.

2 THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING held on 12 March 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.

3 THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE held on 20 March 2007, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

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

4 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

There were no members of the public present.

5 WORK PROGRAMME ISSUES

(i) Corporate Development 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 January – March 2007, 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 A and detailed the work programme in Appendix B. During the last three months the unit had undertaken and delivered a number of key projects as part of the planned workload.

Key achievements in the period January to March included performance and improvement, work at the sub-regional and regional level, community engagement, equality and diversity, organisational development, risk assessment and policy work.

Production of the third quarter's Corporate Performance Report was presented to the Audit Committee on 22 February 2007. The performance indicators were showing an improvement across the board.

The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that there had been some intensive work carried out within the Planning section, where performance against Development Control targets had seen improvement

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since the first quarter. Key areas for improvement and action had been identified and progressed. Further work with the Planning Advisory Service was about to commence with a view to improving performance further over the coming months.

With regard to organisational development, the team had now analysed the findings from the staff satisfaction survey carried out in December to consider issues around training. The results and recommendations would shortly be presented to Management Team and the Council would be applying for the new Investors in People award later in the year.

A joint Delivery Team which consisted of Officers from the District Council and East Durham Homes continued to provide help and advice to East Durham Homes.

A Member referred to Appendix B and queried the significance of the different colours. The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that each individual Officer in the unit had a different colour. Where the colour turned to grey indicated that the particular piece of work had been completed and progress made. She added that she would provide an index key in future reports.

With regard to the Best Value Review of Support Services, briefings were to be arranged with staff involved to explain the findings prior to the report being progressed.

The Local Area Agreements (LAA) had a new basket of performance indicators and the County Durham LAA needed to be reviewed in line with this. Officers from the Corporate Development Unit were currently playing a key role in the development of the LAA.

Members were advised that a number of work streams had progressed as part of the review of the district wide Community Engagement Strategy.

A Member referred to the pilot for testing new ways of reporting area based performance, as part of this wider review of community engagement across the district. This work stream involved the pathfinder areas and he queried who had been involved.

The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that pathfinder areas in Horden, Easington Colliery and North Peterlee had been involved in the pilot although the majority of work on community engagement was district wide.

A Member queried how the community was engaged in the pathfinder areas. The Principal Corporate Development Officer explained that the pathfinder had been asked to invite key residents involved with the work that they did. 35 – 40 people attended the workshop held at Horden. The Pathfinder was trying to align the work they did in all three areas to make it more streamlined to ensure that services could be co-ordinated in response to targets.

The Chair thanked the Principal Corporate Development Officer for her report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(ii) **Sickness Monitoring**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Personnel which appraised Members of the current situation with regard to sickness monitoring across the authority, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

Members were informed at previous meetings of the committee that the corporate rate of sickness absence had reduced to 8.7 days per employee in the twelve months to the end of March 2006. In a national context, this performance was very near to top quartile which was now 8.29 days per employee.

The quarterly sickness monitors for 2006/7 showed that the twelve months to the end of February 2007 had produced a figure of 8.7 days per employee. This included the TUPE transfer back to the Council from East Durham Homes of approximately sixty Care Services employees which included one long term sick employee. The local target for 2006/7 was 8.5 days per employee.

An updated league table was detailed at Appendix A and illustrated the number of days lost to sickness per employee and was listed in order from best to worst. Members could see the trend of absence in each work area.

East Durham Homes Limited sickness statistics also showed improvement. The overall sickness rate for 2005/6 was 13.5 days per employee. The current sickness rate for 2006/7 now stood at 12.02 days per employee.

The Council continued to receive feedback from Durham City Council in relation to the operation of a scheme to report sickness through a bank of qualified nurses. The City Council had commissioned a twelve month trial of the service. The initial trial was now complete and whilst early indications were that the sickness rates had improved, financial year end figures looked as if the sickness rate may well remain static. In the circumstances this initiative would not be progressed at the present time other than to keep a watching brief.

The 'relax' sessions which were introduced some twenty four months ago to complement the independent counselling scheme was as popular as ever. The initiative was introduced as a preventative measure to reduce the incidence of absence due to stress and anxiety. To date, 98 employees in total had attended the four sessions. Feedback from the attendees had been excellent.

The Head of Personnel explained that additional training had been provided for managers to enhance their knowledge and personal skills in managing sickness and difficult behaviour. Some thirty managers had attended three sessions aimed at providing them with improved practical skills, confidence and empathy to deal with emotive situations. Again feedback had been excellent.

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The Head of Personnel circulated a copy of Dealing with Sickness Absence - Guidance for Managers which explained how employees reported themselves sick and the monitoring of absenteeism.

A Member queried if employees were dismissed due to ill health. The Head of Personnel explained that ill health retirement required an independent doctor to confirm that the employee was not capable of working again. Sometimes doctors were not prepared to give this ruling and as a result, in some cases employees were dismissed on the grounds of capability through ill health.

A Member queried if employees had access to Trade Union representatives at interviews. The Head of Personnel explained that all employees were entitled to bring a Trade Union representative or a colleague although the first welfare meeting was just a fact finding exercise to gather information on the details of sickness.

A Member referred to the high absenteeism of the Street Wardens and queried if this was mainly through injury or general sickness. The Head of Personnel explained that the reasons for sickness were general and was an area that concerned the Council. This was a new service that had grown and was being examined closely.

The Chair thanked the Head of Personnel for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

(iii) **Energy Conservation Report**

Consideration was given to the report of the Energy Manager which provided information on progress with the District of Easington Fuel Poverty, Energy Conservation and Utility Management Schemes, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member.

The District of Easington's Affordable Warmth Strategy sought to maximise external funding opportunities for energy conservation and fuel poverty schemes. Delivery was via the corporate Warm Homes Campaign to provide warmer healthier homes.

Details were given of schemes which assisted vulnerable households within the district.

(a) **Over 60's Free Home Insulation Scheme**

103 homes had been insulated through the Over 60's Scheme at a cost of £42,500;

(b) **Insulation Programme to Council Dwellings**

Over the period December – March 2007, 102 Council properties had been insulated at a cost of £25,000 from the Capital Programme and £21,000 matched funding. In addition, free energy savings advice, fuel tariff information and low energy light bulbs were offered to tenants aimed at reducing their energy bills;

(c) **Warm Front Scheme**

232 homes had been insulated through the Warm Front Scheme at a total cost of £212,000.

Training events had commenced with Primary Care Trust staff and four Sure Start Centres across the district. The scheme aimed to promote fuel poverty intervention schemes to partner organisations in order to reach vulnerable households. The scheme would be rolled out to community groups during 2007/8 with the aim of developing a district wide referral network.

The Energy Manager explained that the District of Easington had taken back the utility management duties from East Durham Homes for all District of Easington public buildings. A thermo graphics survey had recently been carried out on all public buildings at the Seaside Lane complex and showed the main areas of heat loss was from external walls. The survey revealed most buildings were un-insulated. An Invest to Save funding bid had subsequently been submitted to install cavity wall insulation in these buildings to maximise energy useage.

A Member queried if the Council received 100% reimbursement for the homes that were insulated. The Energy Manager explained that £100,000 was allocated through the Capital Programme Working Group and the Council could obtain 100% matched funding.

A Member commented that he had work completed by the Warm Front Scheme and the contractors had done an excellent job. The Energy Manager explained that customer satisfaction surveys were distributed and the satisfaction of customers was very high.

The Chair queried if reports were received when mistakes were made. The Energy Manager explained that the satisfaction was also recorded in the customer survey and there was occasional damage when working in lofts but was totally rectified. If Members knew of any cases where there had been problems he would like to be informed.

A Member referred to East Durham Community Development Trust and queried if the office in Peterlee was the only office in the district. The Energy Manager explained that he had attended the official launch of the East Durham Community Development Trust and explained that a new office was proposed to be built in the Edenhill area but he was unaware if there were any satellite offices.

A Member queried who was responsible for the combi condenser boilers that were installed in Council houses. The Energy Manager explained that the boilers were under a guarantee for twelve months but the Warm Front Scheme was extended to twenty four months. They then became the property of the home owner.

The Chair thanked the Energy Manager for his report.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

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6 ANY ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that the following item of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

7 POST OFFICE CONSULTATION (AOB)

The Scrutiny Support Manager advised that following the District Council's response to the consultation on the future funding and structure arrangements of the Post Office Network, correspondence had been received from J. Cummings MP.

Members were advised that J. Cummings noted and shared the concerns of the District Council and had signed an early day motion to resist the proposed reduction in the number of Post Offices.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

JC/MA/com ser del/070401
3 April 2007