

Item 8c

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2

Conference Room 1,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
30 November 2004

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor J.E. Higgin (Chairman) and

Councillors B.F. Avery J.P, M.A. Dalton, G.M.R. Howe and
Mrs. E.M. Paylor

Tenant Representative

A. McGreggor

**Invited to
attend:**

Councillor Mrs A.M. Armstrong

In

Attendance: Councillors Mrs. B.A. Clare, Mrs. K. Conroy, V. Crosby, A. Gray,
G.C. Gray, D.M. Hancock, J.G. Huntington, B. Meek, G. Morgan, A. Smith
and Mrs. I. Jackson Smith

Apologies: Councillors J. Burton, Mrs. J. Croft, T.F. Forrest, Mrs. L. Hovvels,
J.K. Piggott, G.W. Scott, T. Ward and J. Wayman J.P

OSC(2)16/04 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members had no declarations of interest to declare.

OSC(2)17/04 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26th October 2004 were confirmed
as a correct record and signed by the Cairman.

**OSC(2)18/04 SEDGEFIELD AND DISTRICT ADVICE AND INFORMATION
SERVICE**

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive Officer
together with a letter from Steve Wakefield, Secretary to the Board of
Trustees and Funding and Development Manager regarding the above
Service. (For copies see file of Minutes).

It was explained that the purpose of the report and the presentation to
be given by S. Wakefield was to assist the Committee to determine
whether the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service
provided value for money and make recommendations to Cabinet
regarding the long-term funding arrangements.

Members noted that Sedgefield and District Advice and Information
Service, which had been established in 1986 in partnership with
Sedgefield District Council, provided free, confidential and impartial
advice and information to residents of Sedgefield Borough.

The Borough Council was represented by five Members, who sat on the Board of Trustees. The Trustees had agreed at the Annual General Meeting held in October that the Service be incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee. This incorporation would provide considerable protection against most liabilities for members of the Trustees Board.

It was explained that in 2004/05 Sedgefield Borough Council funded the Service through a direct grant of £150,000, which represented 41% of the Service's annual income. Of that sum, £63,270 was recharged to the Housing Revenue Account. Additionally, the Council met the cost of accommodation expenses, which totalled £16,980.

Member's attention was drawn to Appendix A of the report, which set out the financial contributions made by Sedgefield Borough and other authorities within the County. It was noted that the Borough Council contributed significantly more than other authorities within the County - £1.91 per head of population. It was, however, pointed out that there was a high demand for advice relating to welfare benefits and debt as half of the Borough's wards were within the most 15% deprived wards in the country.

In 1999/2000, the Service dealt with 6,532 debt enquiries and in 2001/02 the number had increased to 16,034 – a 145% increase. The percentage of enquiries in relation to housing issues had, however, fallen over the past six years, despite a 62% increase in the number of enquiries received over the same period.

The Committee was informed that the Council's Housing Department had expressed concern that there were no Service Level Agreements, no clear records of who was using the Service and no referral system in place and therefore, it was difficult to discern whether the Service provided value for money to that department.

S. Wakefield, Secretary to the Board of Trustees and Funding Development Manager, Karen Stewart, Manager, Newton Aycliffe Bureau and Pauline Chambers, Spennymoor Bureau attended the meeting to give a presentation and answer questions.

It was explained that the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service had been formed to provide a cost-effective method of providing independent advice to all the residents of Sedgefield Borough. In addition to the main bureaux, outreach services had been established in all areas of the Borough i.e. Sedgefield, Trimdon, Fishburn, Ferryhill, Chilton and Shildon to ensure that all residents had access to the service.

Details were given on the number of contacts made and enquiries received between 1994 and 2004 and the sources of funding from 2001/02 to 2004/05. It was noted that in 2004/05, 41% of funding was being provided by Sedgefield Borough Council: 1% - Town and Parish

Councils: 12% - Community Fund: 19% -Sedgefield Primary Care Trust: 15% - Sure Start and 11% - Northern Rock Foundation.

Reference was made to the funding provided by Easington and Wear Valley District Councils to their Advice and Information Services and the total number of contacts, volunteers and core venues funded.

Members were also informed of the profile of CAB clients. It was noted that 41% lived in Band A Council properties, 43% were not seeking work in view of being sick/disabled/retired, 29% of households received income support, 29% of households received sickness or disability benefits, 20% of clients were of pensionable age and 30% of clients described themselves as being disabled. A survey of clients in 2004 showed that 92% rated the service as either "Very Good" or "Good".

Karen Stewart and Pauline Chambers gave details of two case studies.

It was pointed out that if the Council decided to reduce the core funding given to the Service, advice session venues in the towns and villages outside of Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor could be closed and if the reduction was significant, five of the projects currently funded could be in jeopardy.

The Committee noted that the Service Trustees had always acknowledged and appreciated the financial assistance given by Sedgefield Borough Council and would welcome a three year Service Level Agreement, which would formalise the good working relationship that currently existed between the two organisations, and in turn attract new volunteers and projects to the Service. Such an agreement would also provide a degree of sustainability and safeguard the Service in the medium term.

Reference was made to recent collaborative work that had been undertaken with SBC Benefits Section and the Council's E-Government Officer, which it was hoped would form a basis for future joint e-government initiatives to deliver services electronically and to tackle social exclusion.

The Chairman thanked Steve Wakefield, Carol Stewart and Pauline Chambers for their presentation and they left the meeting to allow the Committee to consider its recommendation.

Councillor Mrs. A.M. Armstrong, Lead Member for Supporting People also left the meeting.

Members were of the opinion that the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service should continue to be supported by Sedgefield Borough Council as it provided a valuable service to the residents of the Borough. They reported that they knew of many people who had used the Service and they had not received any negative reports.

RECOMMENDED : That the Council continues to fund the Sedgefield and District Advice and Information Service as it provided value for money and a valuable service to residents of the Borough.

OSC(2)19/04 HOMELESSNESS - PRACTICE, POLICIES AND SERVICE ISSUES

C. Steel, Director of Housing and I. Brown, Housing Strategy Manager attended the meeting to give a presentation in respect of practice, policies and service issues in relation to homelessness.

The presentation covered the following:

- the increase in the level of homelessness applications.
- The reasons for the increase.
- The consequences of the increase for both the Council and the applicants.
- The Council's legal duty to applicants presenting themselves as homeless.
- Action taken by the Council to deliver fair and equitable rehousing services to homeless and non-homeless applicants.

Members were given details of the level of increase in homelessness decisions for the past four years. It was noted that the rate of increase was 6 times greater in the North East than for the rest of England. With regard to Sedgefield Borough, there had been 410 homeless applications in 1999/2000, compared with a projected figure of 876 for 2004/05 – 113.6% increase. The factors contributing to the increase were considered to be as follows:

- Changes introduced by the Homelessness Act 2002 to extend the priority need categories to include homeless 16/17 year olds, care leavers aged 18 – 21, vulnerable prison leavers, vulnerable armed forces leavers and people vulnerable due to violence.
- The Council's success in advertising and promoting its homelessness service.
- The reducing availability of social rented housing due to the impact of 'Right To Buys' on that availability.
- An increase in the number of household formulations
- The significant increase in private sector house prices. The average price of a semi-detached property in Sedgefield Borough had increased from £43,189 in March 2000 to £92,592 in June 2004.

The Committee was then informed of the 5 tests set by the Government to assess whether someone was homeless, the process for dealing with applicants and the right to appeal both on the Council's decision and the suitability of the offer of accommodation.

It was noted that the Council was working with the Supporting People Partnership to review and improve the floating support services available to young people, teenage mums and those with substance misuse problems.

The Council was also reviewing the priority given homeless applicants through its housing allocations policy to ensure that it was fair to all applicants and the temporary accommodation provision.

Members' attention was drawn to the introduction of a six month review of applicants in all areas. It was reported that if a person was no longer homeless, priority needs points would be removed and access would be restricted to the 'General Needs Waiting' list.

Specific reference was made to the fact that the Council could only consider an applicant's last settled accommodation when assessing whether he/she was intentionally homeless. It was also pointed out that the information provided by the applicant was not taken at face value and the Council undertook thorough investigations to check the validity of the information.

Members expressed concern that a number of people were abusing the system. For example, parents were making family members intentionally homeless in order to obtain Council housing quicker.

It was pointed out that the Local Housing Authority could either regard an applicant as intentionally homeless or take legal action to seek the repossession if it had evidence that false information had been provided. It was emphasised that decisions had to be made on the basis of evidence, as the applicants had rights of appeal against adverse decisions.

Members also questioned whether the Council would still be responsible for assisting people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, if the stock transfer went ahead. It was reported the Council would still have a duty to the homeless, however the new landlord would have to work with the Council in providing accommodation. Specific reference was made to guidance issued in the past week by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on the role of Registered Social Landlords in relation to homelessness.

Concern was also expressed regarding the shortage of affordable housing in the Borough and the length of the waiting list for Council housing. Members suggested that Registered Social Landlords needed to build more new houses for rental.

It was explained that the problems faced in the north east of England were similar to those experienced in the south of England approximately 6 to 7 years ago.

CONCLUDED: *That the Committee is satisfied with the Council's policies and procedures for assisting people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness.*

OSC(2)20/04 BENEFITS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN - SERVICE UPDATE

Consideration was given to a report detailing the progress to date on the implementation of the Benefits Services Improvement Plan. (For copy see file of Minutes)

B. Allen, Director of Resources attended the meeting to present the report and answer Members' questions.

Specific reference was made to recent improvements in the Benefits Service.

Members were informed that the Document Management System had gone 'live' in April 2004 and the Department of Work and Pensions had agreed to contribute two thirds of its running costs for 2004/05. It was pointed out that although there had been the inevitable teething problems as staff became familiar with the system, its introduction would reduce the average time taken to process claims.

It was also pointed out that the Department of Work and Pensions had also helped to fund a Benefits Calculator for the Council's website which enabled the public to see if they were entitled to benefit and claimants to check their entitlement.

The Committee's attention was drawn to the table detailed in Paragraph 3.11 that set out details of the current performance of the three Key Performance Indicators assessed under CPA, together with the targets set in the Best Value Performance Plan 2004/05.

With regard to the average time to process new claims, it was noted that current performance was 40 days, although the time taken to process claims received since 1st April 2004 was just under 37 days and falling.

It was also reported that Contact Centre Agents and the Benefits Customer Services Team had been relocated to the new accommodation adjacent to reception and over the next few months both Teams would be integrated so that each could deal with the most Contact Centre queries.

Reference was made to the creation of the post of Revenues Training Officer to provide training to new staff in Revenues and Contact Centre Agents relating to the legislation, procedures and systems as well as refresher training to existing staff.

With regard to the percentage of recoverable overpayments (excluding council tax) recovered in the year, it was reported that the outturn for 2003/04 had been disappointing at 39% and the Performance Improvement Action Team (PIAT), a service provided by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, had asked to assist the Council to improve its performance. The Team had recommended that overpayment of benefit should in future be administered by the Benefits Service, rather than overpaid rent rebates being transferred to the rent account.

With regard to achieving a Charter Mark award for the Benefits Service, it was reported that many improvements had been put in place to meet the criteria. The Senior Benefits Officer (Investigations and Visiting) had also been temporarily seconded to the post of Performance Improvement Officer to put everything in place to enable a successful application to be made in 2005.

Members sought clarification of the figures in relation to fraud investigation included in paragraph 3.4 of the report.

CONCLUDED: That the Committee is satisfied with the progress being made.

OSC(2)21/04 WORK PROGRAMME

Prior to consideration of the item, clarification was given as to which Members could participate in the debate. It was explained that had been sought from the Monitoring Officer prior to the meeting.

Rule 4 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules contained in the Constitution stated that all Councillors who were members of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee could attend a meeting of those Overview and Scrutiny Committees where they were not members and with the consent of the Chairman speak, but not vote at those meetings. This Rule would apply to the whole of the agenda, including the item on the Committee's Work Programme. However, if a Cabinet Member was in attendance at a meeting of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, either by invitation or as an observer, they should be asked to leave during consideration of this item.

Consideration was given to a report of the Chairman setting out the Committee's work programme for review. (For copy see file of Minutes)

It was explained that the report would become a standard item on the agenda of each Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It set out details of ongoing and future reviews and anticipated items for the next six meetings.

Members were updated on the progress of the ongoing reviews.

AGREED:

- 1. That Sedgefield Advice and Information Service be deleted from the list of topics for future review.*
- 2. That the remainder of the Work Programme be approved.*

OSC(2)22/04 DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL HEALTH SCRUTINY SUB COMMITTEE

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meeting of Durham County Council's Health Scrutiny Sub-Committee held on 4th October 2004. (For copy see file of Minutes)

AGREED:

That the report be received.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Gillian Garrigan, Spennymoor 816166, Ext 4240