

Item 9

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1

Conference Room 1,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
14 June 2005

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor A. Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors Mrs. K. Conroy, B. Hall, D.M. Hancock, J.M. Khan,
G. Morgan, Mrs. I. Jackson Smith and K. Thompson

Invited to attend: Councillors Mrs. B. Graham, and D.A. Newell

In

Attendance: Councillors W.M. Blenkinsopp, Mrs. B.A. Clare, Mrs. J. Croft,
Mrs. B. Graham, G.C. Gray, Mrs. J. Gray, J.E. Higgin, D.A. Newell and
Mrs. E.M. Paylor

Apologies: Councillors Mrs. A.M. Fleming, K. Henderson, J.G. Huntington, B. Meek
and J.M. Smith

OSC(1).1/05 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
No declarations of interest were submitted.

OSC(1).2/05 MINUTES
The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29th March 2005 were confirmed as a
correct record and signed by the Chairman.

OSC(1).3/05 FEEDBACK FROM CABINET
The Committee was reminded that at its meeting on 15th February 2005
consideration had been given to a half yearly report on complaints
received by Corporate Complaints staff.

A major source of those complaints related to the housing maintenance
appointments system. There had been occasions when tenants had not
been informed when an appointment could not be kept, leading to
dissatisfied tenants and therefore complaints.

The Committee at that meeting suggested that Cabinet consider
introducing an appointments system whereby when appointments in
relation to housing maintenance could not be kept, the tenant was
informed.

Cabinet considered this issue at its meeting on 31st March 2005 and agreed that the Director of Housing Services be requested to introduce an appointments system whereby when appointments in relation to housing maintenance could not be kept, the tenant be informed.

AGREED: That the information be received.

OSC(1).4/05 THE ROLE OF SCRUTINY IN THE COUNCIL'S CUSTOMER SERVICES MODERNISATION PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to a report of the Director of Resources (for copy see file of Minutes) detailing progress on delivering the Council's Customer Service Modernisation Programme.

It was explained that the Lead Member For Performance Management, Councillor D. A. Newell and Siobhan Walsh, e-Government Manager, were present at the meeting to give a presentation and answer queries on progress on delivery of the programme. The presentation was to cover the role of Overview and Scrutiny in the Modernisation Programme.

The Committee was informed that the Modernisation Programme was not just concerned with technology but related also to people and service delivery. It was concerned with reviewing ways in which services were delivered with a view to achieving service improvements.

The ethos behind the modernisation programme had been driven by the 1998 White Paper on Transforming Services, which dealt with improved proposals for improved democratic services and providing services in a way which was sustainable and underpinned the principles of Best Value. The concept of modernisation had also been formed from the Gurshon Efficiency Review which had been undertaken. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's had also published a list of Service Outcomes, which needed to be underpinned through Customer Services.

It was explained that the Council aimed to address the modernisation agenda through four key objectives relating to the development and delivery of modernised customer services:-

- To develop and deliver a modernised customer services function that provides seamless access to all customer -facing services.
- To enable customer services staff to become multi-skilled professionals supported by technology to achieve the long- term objective of resolving 80% of customer enquiries at the first point of contact.
- To provide an accessible, information and up to date website.
- To develop internet facilities for Council members to engage in electronic democracy functions.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister had identified seventy three Priority Service Outcomes, nineteen of which were voluntary outcomes. In

relation to the programme for achieving the other outcomes it was explained that twenty nine outcomes should be implemented by December 2005 and the remaining twenty five by March 2006.

Within those outcomes, which had been agreed by the Local Government Association, were seven key priority areas, including raising standards; improving quality of life; promoting healthier communities; creating safer, strong communities; transforming the environment; meeting local transport needs and promoting economic vitality.

It was explained that to monitor the progress on outcomes, Position Statements had to be submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on a regular basis. The next one would be due on 16th July 2005. and would be considered by Council on 29th July 2005. The position as at 11th May 2005 was that 41% of the priority service outcomes had been implemented.

Members were informed that a number of systems had been implemented to underpin the priority service outcomes, including:-

Customer Relationship, Management and Enterprise Work flow; Content Management System; Electronic Records and Document Management System; Geographical Information System.

With regard to work on the Customer Relation Management Workflow, this was ongoing and would link to all service departments. The geographical information system was also ongoing. With regard to the Electronic Records and Document Management System, work needed to be undertaken prior to implementation.

It was noted that in respect of the Content Management System, this was to be implemented by December 2005 and dealt with website management, web content information, etc. It was explained that there were issues in relation to engaging service departments in this process. There was a need for various information to be input from service departments prior to implementation. The process needed to be driven by service departments rather than IT driven.

The Committee was informed that the systems had been developed by local authorities for local authorities and was intended eventually to roll out to Town and Parish Councils. It was intended that organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaux would use the website to obtain information and that it could be used as an out of hours internet service with residents being able to conduct business with the Council on line.

In relation to the process of implementation of the system, e champions and editors from departments had been identified. The system would be very customer focused and customer services would be the publishers of the content. The next stage of the process was for content owners to publish their own content to be checked. The final phase of the process was to encourage the philosophy to cross service departments and make

the system sustainable. It was then intended to engage Town and Parish Councils in linking to the website.

Members were informed of the issues and key inhibitors in relation to the process. It was explained that the Support Unit had undertaken an assessment when a number of issues had been identified, including a lack of capacity to deliver the agenda in terms of the number of staff with the necessary IT skills, a lack of understanding of the process and the will to modernise. The agenda, therefore, needed to be communicated more broadly.

A key constraint in development of the programme was however, time. The success of the system relied upon a Corporate Approach which needed to be created. However attendance at the meetings of Modernisation Taskforce was dependant upon the other commitments of Officers

Overview and Scrutiny Committee was to provide a project assurance role to ensure that the delivered programme was 'fit for purpose', and to ensure the full engagement of service department. The role of scrutiny would also include monitoring the programme in relation to the delivery of the Priority Service outcomes and the progress of the ICT Capital Programme.

Members commented that Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be ensuring that the e Government Manager had the backing of all section heads as departmental engagement was the key to achieving the programme.

A query was raised by members regarding the training of customer relations staff to enable them to have the variety of skills etc. needed to undertake the job. In response, it was explained that more varied skills would be needed and remuneration would be dealt with through the job evaluation process. However, main requirement of staff would be the ability to ask the right questions which would be provided by the system as background information.

Reference was made by Members to the efficiency savings of £2.5 million which had been made by joint working with other authorities and were applauded as a step in the right direction.

Reference was also made to the information that would be available on the web, and to whom particularly in relation to security. It was explained that there would be a security aspect to the access to information and the amount of information available would be limited.

A query was raised by Members regarding the cost of the Programme. In response, it was explained that it was the first time that the way in which business was undertaken had been challenged and there were problems in delivering the first efficiency statement in relation to availability of information electronically and it was noted that baseline information was needed.

Discussion was also held regarding the use of information by Members. It was explained that access would be available to Members via a laptop which would be provided and training would be given.

The lead member for Performance Management and the e Government Manager then left the meeting to enable the Committee to reach recommendations.

AGREED: That Scrutiny Committee plays a pro-active role in:-

Ensuring full engagement of service departments in enabling the Council to realise its vision for customer services.

Monitoring the Council's progress in delivering the ODPM's priority service outcomes.

Monitoring progress and spend associated with 2005/06 e Government and ICT Capital Programme.

OSC(1).5/05 INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE - ANNUAL REPORT 2004/05

Consideration was given to a report of the Director of Resources detailing the work undertaken by Internal Audit throughout the year ended 31st March 2005 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Members were reminded that the Audit Plan approved by Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 on 30th March 2004 had scheduled a total of 936 days for the year. The final out-turn report however showed that a total of 950 days had been achieved this year.

It was explained the work had been undertaken on a number of policy areas as well as all major areas of regularity audit included in the Plan being examined during the year or prioritised for review in the current year following major system change.

Reference was made to the area of Energy Management and the need for appropriate comprehensive energy monitoring and conservation arrangements. This had been included in the Committees Work Programme.

It was pointed out that the Council historically had strong governance arrangements and they were being reinforced by the continuing efforts to enhance risk management and performance monitoring arrangements.

The Council's ability to demonstrate quality corporate governance arrangement would in future be linked to the Statement of Internal Control (S.I.C) requirements introduced by the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003. The importance of the S.I.C. was emphasised and officers representing all departments were currently developing formal policy procedural documents covering financial and operational controls, performance and risk management processes.

The report provided an update on three areas previously reported to the Committee on 23rd November 2004 , as follows:-

- Collections Accounting Reconciliation – Relevant managers were currently reviewing working arrangements to ensure that this area operated effectively.
- Financial Management Information System – reconciliation timetables had been introduced for 2005/6. The system would also be subject to Audit Commission review.
- Housing Capital/Maintenance Work –Where problems had arisen as a result of revised structure, single status, the impact of the Housing Maintenance Service Improvement Plan and the development of the proposed LSVT. In relation to housing capital works, significant progress had been made in the area of performance management systems and the development of a housing procurement protocol was expected to be progressed shortly. Housing maintenance works and in particular jobbing maintenance was an area where issues of Best Value still existed. However, the development of information systems was now taking place and work in relation to the Statement of Internal Control would provide a clearer indication of whether performance and monitoring arrangements were satisfactory.

It was noted that the Internal Audit Plan had been based on the establishment of six posts. During the year two members of staff had left the section and a modern apprentice had joined the team. The vacant post would however remain unfilled until the outcome of the forthcoming LSVT ballot was known.

During discussion of this item, Members made reference to consultation with service heads in relation to actions required etc. In response it was explained that close contact was maintained with section heads and responses to recommendations were required within agreed time frames. If appropriate progress could not be made, these would be highlighted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee who could request attendance of a particular manager at a meeting to discuss concerns.

A query was raised with regard to the Council's fixed assets and the monitoring of assets. In response it was explained that each area of service had an ongoing responsibility to check that satisfactory arrangements were in place to control assets. Audit work also included examination of stock and inventory control systems

It was considered that there were no matters of concern which needed to be brought to the attention of Cabinet, other than those contained in the report.

AGREED: *That the work of the Internal Audit Service Work during 2004/05 be noted and supported .*

OSC(1).6/05 AUDIT COMMISSION - AUDIT AND INSPECTION PLAN 2005/06

Consideration was given to a report setting out the Audit and Inspection work to be undertaken by the Audit Commission during 2005/06.(For copy see file of minutes)

It was explained that the Plan had been drawn up from a risk based approach to audit planning and reflected:-

- The impact for the new Code for Audit Practice that came into effect in April 2005.
- Local risks and improvement priorities: national risks relevant to local circumstances.
- The impact of international standards on auditing.
- The Council's current Comprehensive Performance Assessment rating of "Good".

The report also identified the responsibilities of the Commission and the fee for the core audit and inspection work planned for 2005/06 which would be £92,500.00. A summary of key audit and inspection risks were also identified.

In relation to Comprehensive Performance Assessment it was noted that following the Council's classification as a 'Good' Council in the CPA in March 2003 the Audit Commission had applied the principles of strategic regulation recognising the key features of Sedgefield's performance, including improvements in the Council's frontline services and improvement in corporate arrangements and as a consequence the inspection would consist only of the new formal direction of travel statement which was part of the CPA 2005 arrangements.

The areas of audit risk to be addressed were identified in the report and Asset Management Arrangements would be reviewed, as would the arrangements for producing the Statement of Internal Control. Progress towards LSVT would also be reviewed and monitored.

In respect of grant claim certification the Audit Commission would continue to certify the Council's grant claims.

It was also noted that in respect of voluntary improvement work, the Audit Commission had identified the potential to undertake cross cutting improvement works and these would be discussed in further detail at a later date.

AGREED: That the Audit Commission Audit and Inspection Plan 2005/06 be noted.

OSC(1).7/05 ANNUAL REPORT ON COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY CORPORATE COMPLAINTS STAFF

Consideration was given to a Report of the Chief Executive's Office (for copy see file of Minutes).

In respect of complaints/issues received by the Corporate Customer Relation Staff in the Chief Executive's Department during the period 1st April 2004 to 31st March 2005.

It was explained that the Lead Member for Welfare and Communications together with the Customer Services Manager and Principal Admin Officer, Customer Relations, were present at the Meeting to present the report and answer queries.

The Committee was informed that the Borough had recently adopted a revised complaints policy aimed at providing residents and other users of Borough services the opportunity to comment on /criticise Borough services.

The Policy provided for a publication of a half yearly and an annual report on complaints handling. Future reports would include information relating to complaints received by departments as well as those dealt with by the Chief Executive's Office Corporate Complaints Staff.

It was reported that the number of complaints/issues dealt with by the Corporate Complaints Staff had increased from 845 in 2003/04 to 946 in 2004/05, an increase of 101. 50% of the increase was however, attributable to enquires/complaints regarding matters, which were the responsibility of other organisations or agencies.

The main area of complaint (40% of the total) related to housing maintenance management, improvements and adaptations for the benefit of people with disabilities.

The report identified a number of complaints etc. received within each service area and the nature of the complaints. It was explained that the Corporate Complaints Staff aimed to respond to 100% of complaints and enquiries within ten working days and achieved 97.25% in 2004/05 compared with 99.4% in 2003/04. The average time to respond to a complaint/enquiry was 2.3 days. The recent appointment of a Customer Service Manager would allow the Corporate Complaints Staff to focus on resolving complaints received within target time.

The Committee was also advised of the complaints procedure whereby complainants had the right to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman if they had exhausted the Borough's complaints procedure. In 2003/04 thirteen cases had been investigated and decided by the Ombudsman and the Borough Council had not been found guilty of mal-administration in any of the cases. In 2004/05 thirty cases had been investigated and decided by the Ombudsman and again the Borough Council had been found not guilty of mal-administration in any of the cases.

It was noted that in future complaints were to be dealt with initially within departments prior to the customer complaints section.

Members made reference to the refuse collection service and the need for a system to be in place if problems arise in relation to the delivery of the service.

Members of the Committee also made reference to problems being encountered with letters from Development Control to consultees in relation to planning applications on occasions not being received. The question of the need for proof of posting etc. was discussed. In response Officers explained that the system used in Development Control automatically generated letters and there was a record of them being sent. It was recognised that the Royal Mail handled hundreds of thousands of letters and it was not feasible to obtain certificates of posting or despatch mail by recorded delivery. Internal postal arrangements had been checked and found to be satisfactory.

AGREED: That the Annual Report be received and published on the Borough's website.

OSC(1).8/05 WORK PROGRAMME

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

An update was given in relation to progress ongoing Reviews .

It was explained that at the next meeting consideration would be given to the Human Resources Best Value Review Service Improvement Plan and the Procurement Service Improvement Plan.

In relation to Energy Efficiency Monitoring it had been intended for the Energy Efficiency Officer to attend the next meeting in relation to monitoring energy efficiency in the Council's buildings. It was explained that the Energy Efficiency Officer gave advice to people externally . However it was not part of his role to monitor energy efficiency within the Council buildings. Some research therefore would need to be done as to the level of monitoring currently being undertaken . A report would be presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 to decide best course of action. It was suggested that this report be submitted to the October meeting of the Committee.

AGREED:

- 1. That the item relating to Energy Efficiency Monitoring be considered at the meeting on 11th October 2005.*
- 2. That the Committee's Work Programme as outlined in the Report be agreed*

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Liz North

