

Item 7

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

PROSPEROUS AND ATTRACTIVE BOROUGH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Council Chamber,
Council Offices
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
11 December 2007

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor G.C. Gray (Chairman) and
Councillors Mrs. I. Hewitson, B. Lamb, Mrs. E. Maddison, A. Smith and
A. Warburton

In Attendance: Councillors Mrs. A.M. Armstrong, A. Gray, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh,
Mrs. S. Haigh, J.G. Huntington and Mrs. E.M. Paylor

Apologies: Councillors Mrs. L. M.G. Cuthbertson, P. Gittins J.P., D.M. Hancock,
G.M.R. Howe, J. Robinson J.P and B. Stephens

P&A.15/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

P&A.16/07 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6th November, 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

P&A.17/07 PROGRESS TOWARDS HOUSING BENEFITS BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS RELATING TO THE PROSPEROUS BOROUGH COMMUNITY VALUE 'REDUCED SOCIAL INCLUSION'

Following discussions at the meeting of the Committee held on 6th November, 2007 and concerns expressed regarding Performance Indicators relating to Housing Benefits, a presentation was given in relation to progress towards Best Value Performance Indicators BV76d, BV78a, BV78b, BV79b(ii) dealing with Housing Benefits.

Colin Jennings, Revenue Services Manager, and Harold Moses, Head of Financial Services, were present at the meeting to outline progress and respond to queries.

It was explained that the Benefits Service had 11,500 claimants representing approximately 2/3rd of the Council tenants. It was anticipated that around £32.4m in payments would be made in 2007/8 and was the largest budget of Sedgefield Borough Council's services. The Service was undertaking at no cost to Sedgefield Borough Council taxpayer.

In 2001 it was taking 105 days to process new claims because of the difficulty in obtaining various evidence from claimants. This was clearly not acceptable and a Best Value Service Review was undertaken in

2001 following which a Service Improvement Plan with over 100 actions had been drawn up. Regular reports were submitted to Scrutiny Committee on progress particularly in relation to Performance Indicators.

The Committee was informed that in relation to the Benefits Service there were three Performance Indicators regarding fraud, three Performance Indicators on processing of claims and three Performance Indicators dealing with overpayment of benefits.

In respect of the Performance Indicators relating to fraud, it was noted that the number of investigators per 1,000 caseload (BV076b) was 0.18. The number of investigations per 1,000 caseload (BV076(c)) was as at end of October 2007, 26.9 and the number of prosecutions and sanctions per 1,000 caseload (BV076d) was currently 4.46.

Reference was made to the transfer of data and issues relating to the recent loss of data records at the Department of Works and Pensions. This would impact on the Council's performance.

Dealing with Best Value Performance Indicators relating to the processing of benefit payments, it was explained that as at the end of November, the speed of processing new claims (BV078a) was 20.6 days. It was noted that this was well within the top performance nationally. The speed of processing change of circumstances (BV078b) was running at 10.1 days and it was anticipated that the target of under 10 days would be achieved. The target relating to accuracy of processing (BV079a) was running at 100% - the top performance was expected to be achieved.

The Best Value Performance Indicators relating to overpayments were performing well with the total recovered during the year (BV079b(i)) and total written off (BV079b(iii)) performing better than 2006/7 and well within target. With regard to the total recovered during the year including the amount brought forward (BV079b(ii)), although this target was not being achieved currently, there was an upward trend and there was no reason to believe that the target would not be achieved by the end of the financial year.

The Committee was informed that the Performance Indicators were expected to meet targets subject to staffing difficulties and problems of data transfer in relation to the fraud Performance Indicators.

Achievements which had been made by the Benefits Service were also highlighted. These included securing of £302,000 additional funding from the Department of Works and Pensions. This had allowed for the installation of an electronic document management system which had had a major impact on the service.

Other achievements included the introduction of a pilot homeworking scheme, the introduction of an electronic claims system and the chartermark award which had been given to the service and would be allowed to be retained for the next two years. It was also noted that there had been a reduction from 105 days processing to 20.7 days

processing. A considerable achievement which had been highlighted as Best Practice by the Department of Works and Pensions.

Current issues relating to the service were also identified. These included:-

- Voice risk analysis
- Integration with back office system
- Taking service to the customer

The following were identified as issues which the service would have to face in the future :-

- Local Housing Allowance which would come into effect April, 2008 changing the way in which benefits were calculated
- Changing Performance Indicators
- Large Scale Voluntary Transfer
- Local Government Re-organisation

During discussion of this item a query was raised regarding the differentiation between BVPI78a and 78b and the time taken to process change of circumstances compared with the time to process new claims. It was explained that in relation to change of circumstances although most of the information was available there was still other information which had to be gathered which could take time.

Reference was also made to the security of data in respect of homeworking. In response it was explained that secure laptops were provided for homeworking and the network had to be accessed to obtain information.

AGREED : That the Committee is satisfied with progress in relation to the Best Value Performance Indicators on Housing Benefits.

P&A.18/07 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW: THE COUNCIL'S CONTRIBUTION TO REDUCING ECONOMIC INACTIVITY (INCREASING EMPLOYABILITY) - PROGRESS ON ACTION PLAN

Consideration was given to a report detailing progress to date on the Cabinet's response and Action Plan following consideration of the recommendations arising from the Council's contribution to Reducing Economic Inactivity (Increasing Employability) Review. (For copy see file of Minutes).

It was explained that Graham Wood, Corporate Policy and Regeneration Manager, was present at the meeting to outline progress and respond to queries.

Members were reminded of the background to the Review and recommendations produced by the Review Group, the Action Plan which had been drawn up and suggested timescale.

In respect of the official unemployment rate and the true picture of

economic conditions, it was explained that the Council now used a range of information to determine the true rate of employment for strategic and priority setting purposes. The information included: Jobseekers allowance, the Labour market, incapacity benefit figures and the number of people economically inactive.

It was noted that the Economic Development Service had been refocused to provide more support for enterprise in disadvantaged communities. Support focused now on smaller/medium sized businesses.

With regard to the recommendation that the Borough Council cease grants of up to £10,000 for companies and refocus on smaller grants for individuals starting up business, it was explained that the Council now offered small grants to those starting in business to supplement the grants available through Local Enterprise Group Initiative.

It was also being recommended that systems needed to be in place to link training services to information on company expansions and relocations. Members were informed that Economic Development officers had attended one-stop-shop meetings with the Council's Planning officers to gain an insight into developments which may be coming on stream. This information was shared with training services through the divisional management team of strategy and regeneration.

The Committee was informed that the area where most progress had been made was in lobbying Government to provide further funds for Neighbourhood focused regeneration activity. The Government had announced that there would be a new fund to replace Neighbourhood Renewal fund - Working Neighbourhoods Fund which would be available for three years allocation and would focus on economy. The allocation to Sedgefield Borough was £7.8m over three years. Discussions were now being held on how the funding was to be accessed and issues in relation to the Programme for funding to be in place. A lobby for further funding had been made and the results of the Comprehensive Spending Review was awaited.

In relation to the value of the LSP in tackling employability, it was explained that the Leader of the Council now chaired the Local Strategic Partnership Board.

The important role of the voluntary and community sector in delivering services locally had been recognised. The Local Enterprise Group Initiatives funded coaches were located in voluntary community sector premises throughout the Borough promoting self-employment and social enterprise development. The voluntary/ community sector organisation provided much of the information, advice and guidance element of the Worklessness Commission as well as some health conditions programmes. CAVOS, the Bishop Auckland College and the PCP were instrumental in exploring how the community and voluntary sector could be commissioned to carry out in this area.

During discussion of this item reference was made to monitoring training programmes and progress of trainees. It was explained that it had been

recognised there was not a comprehensive tracking process to identify the effectiveness of the training programme. However, single programme funding had been obtained to procure a tracking system which was to roll out across the Borough. Job Centre Plus would have a comprehensive tracking programme to seek how effective interventions had been.

A query was also raised regarding Construction Training and Cerification of Training Officers. It was explained that the Training Officers in the Construction environment did have approved certification. Trainees were fully trained to industry standard. There was potential to do more in terms of Construction training and the Council was working with Bishop Auckland College regarding apprenticeships.

During discussion Members queried the accessibility to training programmes, for disadvantaged/disabled. Reference was made to the continued impact of Finchale Training College in that respect.

- AGREED :**
- 1. That the Committee is satisfied with the progress on the Action Plan for the Overview and Scrutiny Review – Reducing Economic Inactivity (Increasing Employability).*
 - 2. That the Committee review the progress of the Action Plan and that the item be included in the Work Programme.*

P&A.19/07 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REVIEW: FUTURE RECYCLING SERVICES OPTIONS - PROGRESS ON ACTION PLAN

Consideration was given to a report detailing progress to date on Cabinet response and Action Plan following consideration of its recommendations arising from the Council's future Recycling Services Options Review. (For copy see file of Minutes).

It was explained that Gordon Lennon, Technical Services Manager, was present at the meeting to outline progress and, together with the Lead Member for Environment, Councillor Alan Hodgson, to respond to queries.

Members were reminded of the background to the Review and recommendations produced by the Review Group, the Action Plan which had been drawn up and suggested timescales.

It was noted that in respect of the County Council's Waste Management Strategy a Working Group of senior waste management officers representing all the Durham Districts/Borough Council in the County Council were currently working on the development of the County Durham Waste Management Strategy. The challenge would be for the Strategy to be flexible enough to allow for future recycling options.

With regard to the Kerb-it scheme , the existing scheme would continue in place until March, 2008 following which legally the contract could not be extended and would terminate on 31st March, 2008. Agreement had been reached between the four current recipient authorities of Kerb it,

Derwentside, Easington, Sedgefield Borough and Durham City to jointly procure a new kerb side recycling collection service to be effective from 1st April, 2008. Tenders had been received from five companies to carry out the service and all those companies and their tenders had been rigorously evaluated.

Cabinet had considered the options and had agreed to offer the service to Greencycle Plc. It was noted that two additional materials would be collected under the new scheme – plastics and cardboard. The segregated collection of glass was included in the new service proposals. Each household would receive a hessian sack in which to place cardboards and plastics. There would be an education process and the new scheme would commence on 2nd April, 2008. It was noted that a new local recycling centre would be developed.

In relation to the rationalisation of bring sites, it was anticipated that all 23 of the identified redundant bring sites would be removed by the end of this financial year.

It was explained that regarding the free green waste collection service, funding provision for the continuation of the existing service was currently being investigated. However, as a consequence of Local Government Review, long term arrangements for the collection of green waste would need to be addressed in the Waste Management Strategy of the new unitary authority.

A comprehensive educational and awareness raising campaign to support recycling arrangements was ongoing.

During discussion of this item reference was made to the Green Waste Collection and the benefits which would be gained from the scheme being rolled out across the Borough. It was explained that, this would be addressed as part of the County Waste Management Strategy.

A query was raised regarding whether the new company would have skips available at recycling centres to leave cardboard, plastics, and other materials for use particularly at holiday times. It was explained that the centres run by Premier Waste provided skips for various materials, and there was no reason to assume that they would not continue as a contract was in force. The new company would not be placing skips on Premier Waste sites.

In response to a query regarding the adequacy of the size of hessian sacks, it was explained that if the sack was found to be not sufficient an additional sack would be provided on request.

- AGREED :*
- 1. That the Committee is satisfied with the Action Plan for the Recycling Services Option Review*
 - 2. That the Committee review the progress of the Action Plan and that the item be included in the Work Programme.*

P&A.20/07 WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to the Work Programme for the Prosperous and Attractive Borough Overview and Scrutiny Committee. (For copy see file of Minutes).

- AGREED :*
- 1. That the report be noted.*
 - 2. That the following be placed on the Committee Work Programme :-*
 - Overview and Scrutiny Review : The Council's Contribution to Reducing Economic Inactivity (Increasing Employability) - Progress on Action plan*
 - Overview and Scrutiny Review : Future Recycling Services Options – Progress on Action Plan*

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Liz North 01388 816166 ext 4237 email: enorth@sedgefield.gov.uk

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