

Item 6

SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Council Chamber,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
8 January 2008

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor A. Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors B.F. Avery J.P, D.R. Brown, V. Chapman, D. Farry,
T.F. Forrest, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh, T. Hogan, Ms. I. Jackson and
B.M. Ord

In

Attendance: Councillors Mrs. D. Bowman, G.C. Gray, Mrs. S. Haigh, J.E. Higgin and
J.G. Huntington

SL.21/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

SL.22/07 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 20th November 2007 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

SL.23/07 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY - CORPORATE EQUALITY PLAN - PROGRESS UPDATE

Consideration was given to a report of the Head of Organisational Development setting out progress made to date on equality issues within the Council against the Corporate Equality Plan. (For copy see file of Minutes).

The report set out progress to date on the following:

- Equality Standard for Local Government
- Corporate Equality Plan (CEP) Action Plan
 - Leadership and Corporate Commitment
 - Community Engagement and Accountability
 - Service Delivery and Customer Care
 - Employment and Training
- Future issues

It was pointed out that the Council's Corporate Equality Plan had been updated to reflect recent legislation and had been republished on the Council's web site.

Specific reference was made to the Council's challenging target of achieving Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government by March 2008. It was pointed out that whereas Levels 1 and 2 were self-declared, Level 3 needed to be externally assessed and the Council could not undergo the I&DeA quality mark accreditation until April/May 2008. The achievement date for Level 3 had consequently been revised to May 2008. It was noted that Durham County Council had just achieved Level 3, however, Sedgefield Borough Council was still ahead of most districts within the County, having achieved Level 2.

It was questioned what percentage of the Council's employees were disabled and how many migrant workers there were in the area. It was reported that in the Council's annual survey of employees last year, 2.54% of employees had declared themselves as having a disability.

With regard to migrant workers, it was noted that the number of migrants to the north east had increased in 2006/07 to 1.86%, however, the region still had relatively few migrants per head of population compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. Durham had seen the largest rate of increase across the sub regions, with the increase mainly occurring in Derwentside and Sedgefield. 73% of all national insurance registrations by migrants within the Borough were from Poland.

A query was raised regarding gender equality in relation to employment of women in top paid posts. It was reported that with regard to Best Performance Indicator 11a – 'Percentage of Top Paid 5% of Local Authority Staff who are Women', the Council had for quarter ended December 2007 had moved up a performance quartile. A detailed report would be presented to the March meeting of the Committee.

Specific reference was made to Local Government re-organisation and the fact that a number of Councils within County Durham had not yet achieved Level 2. It was pointed out that as Durham County Council had recently achieved Level 3, it had been assumed that this would be the required standard.

Members asked for details of any changes made to services as a result of the Council's Corporate Equality policies. It was explained that Leisure Services had provided more activities for older people within the Borough - exercise classes especially designed for older people.

- AGREED :*
1. *That the progress made to date be noted.*
 2. *That progress against the Corporate Equality Plan be reported to Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.*

SL.24/07

COUNCIL TAX SERVICE - PERFORMANCE

Further to Minute No. SL19/07 of the meeting held on 20th November 2007, the Committee considered a report outlining the main issues

regarding the collection of council tax and how performance could be improved. (For copy see file of Minutes).

It was reported that despite the Council having an excellent record of collecting tax over time, with low collection costs, its in-year collection rate had however not kept pace with improvements made by other authorities.

Specific reference was made to the collection rates for the District Councils in County Durham. It was noted that Wear Valley District Council was the top performer in 2006/07 collecting 99.5% in year: Teesdale – 98.8%, Derwentside – 98.5%. Sedgefield Borough had collected in-year 95%.

It was, however, noted that in 2005/06 the costs by other Districts within County Durham were between 23% to 49% higher than Sedgefield Borough. In the 15 years since council tax had been introduced, the total amount due to be collected from taxpayers was in excess of £316m of which the total amount written off during that time amounted to £614,000 – less than 20p for every £100 collected.

It was pointed out that the Council had a duty to maximise its in year collection to achieve the Government's Best Performance Indicator of 98.3% and thereby minimise the arrears to be transferred to the new unitary authority. Consequently, officers had reviewed the council tax recovery procedures and Management Team had given approval to increase the level of staffing. A Visiting Officer was to be appointed to ensure that vulnerable taxpayers receive all the reductions to which they are entitled to and an Administration Officer to assist the Council Tax Service to speed up recovery by issuing Recovery Notices earlier and promoting payment by direct debit more actively.

With regard to the methods of paying council tax, Members suggested that the amount collected could improve if swipe cards for payment at the post office were introduced. Officers reported that the Council already had an extensive range of methods of payment currently available, with direct debit being the most cost-effective means of collection.

It was pointed out that the introduction of income payment cards was currently being considered for housing rent collection, however, the use of cards for council tax would increase the unit cost of collection.

A query was also raised on whether the Council received a fee from the precepting authorities for collecting council tax on their behalf. It was noted that although the Borough Council only kept 12 pence in every £ it collected, it could not charge a fee.

It was also questioned whether any incentive was offered to encourage payment by direct debit. It was explained that an incentive had been offered a number of years ago through the Co-operative Bank however, there was no current incentive. Currently, two thirds of owner occupiers in the Borough pay by direct debit.

It was reported that as a result of increasing the staffing capacity and revising procedures, the Council's in year collection rate would improve in the next 12 months, however probably not to the extent of the Government Best Performance Indicator target of 98.3%. It was pointed out that this Performance Indicator was to be abolished from April 2008 so national comparisons with other local authorities would not be available for the 2008/09 financial year.

AGREED : That the progress made by officers in improving the collection rate for Council Tax be noted.

SL.25/07

WORK PROGRAMME

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

AGREED : That the Work Programme be noted.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Any person wishing to exercise the right of inspection, etc., in relation to these Minutes and associated papers should contact Mrs. G. Garrigan Tel 01388 816166 ext 4240 email ggarrigan@sedgefield.gov.uk