

**SEDGEFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Council Chamber,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
20 November 2007

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor A. Gray (Chairman) and

Councillors D. Farry, T.F. Forrest, Mrs. J. Gray, B. Haigh, T. Hogan and
B.M. Ord

In Attendance: Councillors G.C. Gray, Mrs. S. Haigh, D.M. Hancock, J.E. Higgin,
B. Lamb, Mrs. E. Maddison, J. Robinson J.P, A. Smith and T. Ward

Apologies: Councillors B.F. Avery J.P, D.R. Brown, V. Chapman and Ms. I. Jackson

SL.16/07 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
No declarations of interest were received.

SL.17/07 MINUTES
The Minutes of the meeting held on 9th October, 2007 were confirmed as a
correct record and signed by the Chairman.

**SL.18/07 HALF YEARLY REPORT ON COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY
CORPORATE COMPLAINTS STAFF**
Consideration was given to a report of the Chief Executive (for copy see
file of Minutes) outlining complaints/issues received by the Corporate
Customer Relations staff in the Chief Executives department during the
period 1st April, 2007 to 30th September, 2007.

It was explained that the Borough Council had adopted a revised
Complaints Policy aimed at providing residents and other users of the
Borough Services with the opportunity to comment on and criticise those
services or service delivery. The Policy provided for the publication of a
half yearly and Annual Report on complaints handling.

The Committee was pleased to note that the number of complaints/issues
dealt with by Corporate Complaints staff had decreased from 394 in the
first six months of 2006/2007 to 195 in the same period for 2007/08 – a
decrease of 199 (51%). This could be attributed to Service Departments
and the Customer Services Centre being able to deal with substantially
more complaints to the customers satisfaction at the first point of contact
and avoid issues being referred to Corporate Complaints staff.

The report identified the number of complaints received within each
Service area and the nature of the complaint.

The main area of complaint (37%) related to services provided by the Housing Department. However, the total volume of complaints about those services fell from 153 to 73 with justified complaints falling from 16 to 9, a reduction of 43%.

In respect of Housing Maintenance Service, it was noted that there had been a continuing decrease in the number of complaints from 66 to 45 with the number of justified complaints decreasing from 14 to 6. The reason for the justified complaints was work not being carried within target.

It was also noted 15,135 jobs were issued in the period and justified complaints represent 0.05%.

Members were informed that although 18 complaints had been made in relation to the Housing Management Service only 2 complaints were found to be justified.

With regard to complaints made about capital improvements, it was noted that of the ten complaints received only one had been found to be justified.

It was noted that ten complaints had been made against the Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates Services with only 1 regarding Benefits being justified.

In relation to the Development Control Service, six complaints had been received with one being found to be justified.

It was explained that Corporate Complaints staff aimed to respond to 100% of the complaints and enquiries within 10 Working days and achieved 97.5% in the first half of the current year compared with 98.9% in the first half of 2006/2007. Procedures had been changed to ensure that all complaints received at least a 'holding response' if it was not possible to fully resolve a complaint within target. 78% of issues were, however, responded to within 1 working day.

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 Council's Complaints Procedure.

In 2007/08 10 cases to date had been investigated and decided by the Ombudsman. The Council was not found guilty of maladministration in any of the cases.

It was pointed out that there were no complaints made relating to any of the six strands of the Equity and Diversity Standard for Local Government.

During discussion of this item a query was raised regarding criteria for determining whether a case was justified. It was explained that as a general rule a complaint was considered justifiable if the Council was found to be not providing a service in accordance with agreed policies and procedures.

Reference was made to a complaint which was contained in the Ombudsman's report relating to the repair of a central heating system. It was explained that the issue had been resolved and the tenant had been compensated as suggested by the Ombudsman. Systems had also since been put in place to ensure that the chances of a similar situation arising again were minimised. It was suggested that this issue be brought to the attention of Healthy Borough with Strong Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

A query was raised regarding the complaint received against Licensing and whether it was related to taxi licensing. It was explained that as part of the new regime a new policy had been introduced to protect taxi owners and members of the public. The complaint related to the policy.

AGREED :

- 1. That the half year report be received and the full year report for 2007/08 be prepared by consideration at a future meeting.*

- 2. That Healthy Borough with Strong Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee be requested to consider the issue relating to the complaint highlighted in the Ombudsman's report*

SL.19/07

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Consideration was given to a report measuring performance against corporate health element of the Corporate Plan covering the period 1st April, 2007 to 30th September, 2007. (For copy see file of Minutes).

The report provided data on 21 Performance Indicators of which five were key to the Council's aims and objectives. The report did not include figures that were calculated on an annual basis.

Members expressed their satisfaction with the following key points of progress :-

- Calls to main switchboard answered within 30 seconds
- Corporate Employee Turnover
- Number of Current Vacant Posts which had been advertised and had remained vacant for six months or over.

The Committee then broke into workshop session to give detailed consideration of performance information.

The following issues were identified for inclusion on the Committee Work Programme for further in-depth examination:-

- **Percentage of Council Tax Collected in the Year (BV009)**
Concern was raised regarding the target of 95% which was lower than most other authorities. It was considered that an explanation was needed with a view to the target being lifted.

- **Number of Working Days/Shifts Lost to the Local Authority due to Sickness Absence (BV012)**
It was noted that sickness absence was improving but sickness remained in the bottom quartile and below target by 2.7 days. All sickness cases were being addressed by new procedures and plans in place to reduce long term absenteeism via rehabilitation, redeployment, ill-health retirement and dismissal processes. Short term absences were being addressed through structured notification processes, return to work interviews and reference point reporting on a monthly basis to Heads of Service triggering formal investigations. In normal circumstances resultant improvements in sickness levels could be expected 6 – 12 months from the implementation of the new procedures. However, given Local Government Re-organisation it was uncertain whether an improvement would be realised.

- **Percentage of Non Council Housing Capital Projects within 5% of Budgeted Cost (CPC03) and Percentage of Non Council Housing Capital Projects within 5% of Projected Timescale (CPC04)**
Further information was requested in relation to these areas for which no information was yet available as at Quarter 2.

- **Percentage of Complaints Responded to in 10 Working Days (LPI20)**
Concern was expressed that the performance was 2.56% under target. Members however recognised that as approval had been given to appoint two further staff to the Council Tax Section this should, ultimately improve the turnaround times for answering correspondence in the section. The procedure had been amended to ensure all complaints received at least a holding response within 10 working days if it was not possible to fully resolve their complaint within target.

This was also linked to :-

Response or Holding Response to Letters within 10 Working Days across the Authority (LPI22)

Which was performing 11% under target due to the high volume of Council Tax mail. Members again recognised that as approval had been given to appoint two further staff to the Council Tax Section this should improve the outturn figure

The Committee suggested however that these Indicators (LPI120 and 122) could be considered as part of the Work Programme when the Annual Report on Customer Complaints was submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2008.

- AGREED :*
1. *That the key points of progress be noted.*
 2. *That areas of concern be incorporated in the Committee's Work Programme.*

SL.20/07

WORK PROGRAMME

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

Members had identified Performance Indicators to be addressed in the Work Programme. It was highlighted that Council Tax Collection Performance Indicator would be identified as priority.

Members requested that a report be presented in relation to the Housing Maintenance Service and in particular the monitoring of jobs processed.

- AGREED :*
1. *That the Work Programme be noted.*
 2. *That the following items be placed on the Committee Work Programme:*
 - *Progress towards Council Tax Collection Performance Indicator (BV009)*
 - *Progress towards Best Value Performance Indicator (BV012) relating to sickness absence.*
 - *Progress towards Corporate Plan Performance Indicators (CPC03 and CPC04) relating to Non Council Housing Capital Projects.*
 - *Progress towards Local Performance Indicators LPI20 and LPI22 relating to Complaints Response time.*

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 01388 816166 ext 4237 email:enorth@sedgefield.gov.uk