

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

Council Chamber,
Council Offices,
Spennymoor

Tuesday,
18 November 2008

Time: 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor A. Gray (Chairman) and
Councillors B.F. Avery J.P, D.R. Brown, V. Chapman, T.F. Forrest,
B. Haigh, T. Hogan and B.M. Ord

In

Attendance: Councillors J.E. Higgin, J.G. Huntington, Mrs. E.M. Paylor and T. Ward

Apologies: Councillors D. Farry and Mrs. J. Gray

SL.14/08 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

SL.15/08 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7th October, 2008 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman. (For copy see file of Minutes).

**SL.16/08 HALF YEARLY REPORT ON COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY
CORPORATE COMPLAINTS STAFF**

Consideration was given to a report of the Chief Executive outlining complaints/issues received by the Corporate Customer Relations staff in the Chief Executives Department in the period 1st April, 2008 to 30th September, 2008. (For copy see file of Minutes).

Members were reminded 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/criticise those services or service delivery.

It was reported that the number of complaints/issues dealt with by Corporate Complaints staff had increased from 195 in the first six months of 2007/08 to 278 in the same period in 2008/09. This was an increase of 83 complaints (42%). 47 of these issues were, however, requests for service/advice and not complaints. Also the number of justified complaints had only risen from 11 to 14.

50% of the issues related to services provided by the Housing Department with 10 of the justified complaints relating to the maintenance service. The main reason for the justified complaints was work not being carried out within the timescale.

Two complaints were made against Customer Services with one relating to the telephone system being justified. Intermittent problems had been experienced with callers being cut off when incoming calls were at high levels. This had since been resolved by the supplier of the system.

13 complaints were made against the Benefits, Council Tax and Business Rates services with one relating to Council Tax being justified. This was a case of human error where an incorrect date had been input into the Council Tax system which had caused recovery action to be instigated for a debt which did not exist.

There were four complaints regarding Development Control with one being found to be justified. This involved a delay in responding to a letter relating a particular development. Staff had been reminded to respond to all correspondence within 10 days.

Refuse Collection had seen a slight increase in the number of complaints with one being found to be justified. This was an oversight in not responding to an enquiry.

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.

The Committee was informed that whilst the number of issues being received by the Corporate Complaints staff had increased it was still below the peak of 561 complaints received in the first six months of 2005/06.

The Corporate Complaints staff aimed to respond to 100% of complaints and enquiries within 10 working days and achieved 100% in the first half of the current year compared with 97.5% in the first half of 2007/08. It was noted that procedures had been changed to ensure that all complaints received at least a holding response if it was not possible to fully resolve the complaint within target. 73% of issues were, however, responded to within one working day.

Members were reminded that if complainants were not satisfied after they had exhausted the Borough's Complaints Procedure they were advised that they had the right to complain to the Local Government Ombudsman. In the first six months of 2007/08, 14 cases were investigated and decided by the Ombudsman. The Borough was found not guilty of maladministration in any of these cases.

Reference was made to the Ombudsman's Annual Letter 2007/08. It was explained that each year the Ombudsman sent an Annual Letter outlining her reflections on the complaints received against the Council. A copy of the letter was attached to the report.

It was noted that the number of complaints received had reduced from 27 to 13. 23 cases were decided by the Ombudsman with none being found to be maladministration and 7 settled locally.

It was pointed out that the Ombudsman had commended the Borough Council for the way in which the local settlements complaints were dealt with during the course of the investigation.

The letter stated that the seven local settlements had previously been considered by the Borough Council through its Complaints Procedure. It was noted, however, that 3 of the 7 cases had not actually been through the Complaints Procedure and of the remaining 4 cases, 3 had been investigated and settlements offered by the Borough which the complainants did not accept. The final complaint had been investigated by the Borough and no maladministration found but the complainant had not been formally notified.

The Borough's response time to the initial enquiries from the Ombudsman were disappointing. It was noted, however, that there was an improvement compared to 2006/07.

It was explained that when responding to the Ombudsman the Council aimed to give a comprehensive response and not send off information/documentation in a piecemeal fashion. It was noted that there was often a lot of documents/files to be read and assimilated which would often be very time-consuming.

In order to ensure that response times improved, departments were being reminded to ensure that comments on the Ombudsman's initial enquiries were provided together with files/other documentation as soon as possible but no later than ten working days after receipt. It was also pointed out that in future all initial enquiries would receive a formal written response.

Members queried whether delays in responding to Ombudsman's enquiries were as a result of other departments not providing information/documentation on time.

In response it was explained that Corporate Complaints staff had a duty to reply to the Ombudsman. However, in general enquiries were very complex and time-consuming. Also Corporate Complaints staff were required to deal with current complaints which had to be dealt with immediately.

Concerns were also raised in relation to complaints made against Housing Maintenance. Members were reminded that the main reason for the complaint was work not being carried out within timescales and did not relate to the quality of work.

AGREED : That the half year report for 2008/09 be received.

SL.17/08

PERFORMANCE UPDATE REPORT - QUARTER 2 2008/09 (START APRIL 2008 - END SEPTEMBER 2008)

Consideration was given to a report measuring performance against the values and governance element of the Corporate Plan covering the period 1st April, 2008 to 30th September, 2008. (For copy see file of Minutes).

The report provided data on 21 Performance Indicators of which four were key to the Council's aims and objectives.

Of the 21 Performance Indicators, 14 had demonstrated improved performance against 2007/08 actual outturn and 4 were performing at a worse level. 12 Indicators were projected to achieve 2008/09 targets and 6 were off target.

Reference was made to **XBV012 – Number of Working Days/Shifts Lost to the Local Authority Due to Sickness Absence**. It was explained that the Council's Sickness Policy had been amended. It was anticipated that changes to a phased return implemented in November should reduce the overall outturn slightly in the medium term. Targeted action was also been taken in conjunction with departmental management teams.

With regard to **CPG01 – Corporate Employee Turnover (Voluntary)** – it was noted that turnover remained low despite Local Government Re-organisation.

It was explained that the figure in relation to **CPG04 – Calls to Main Switchboard answered within 30 seconds (Council HQ)** – was not available due to a server failure. The figures were, however, provided for a 3 month period.

Reference was made to **CPG07 – Response or Holding Response to Letters within 10 working days across the Authority**. It was reported that Council Tax received the highest volume of mail in the building. Staff illness had resulted in priority being given to recovery of Council Tax in year which was a Best Value PI and key to the Borough's objectives. This meant that their performance against this Indicator had reduced the authority-wide figure.

It was noted that this was a local PI and to divert resources from the collection of Council Tax was not an option. Additional staff had been recruited and further improvements were expected throughout the year.

AGREED : That the information be noted.

SL.18/08

WORK PROGRAMME

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

AGREED : 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 Mrs. L. Walker Tel 01388 816166 ext 4237 email lwalker@sedgefield.gov.uk