

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE ISSUES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 1A, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 27 March 2014 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Lethbridge (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Alvey, J Armstrong, L Armstrong, G Bleasdale, P Crathorne, K Henig (Vice-Chairman), J Hillary, E Huntington, N Martin, P McCourt, A Shield, T Smith, P Stradling, L Taylor and S Wilson

1 Apologies

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Buckham.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

4 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held 19 February 2014 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman.

The Head of Planning and Performance, Assistant Chief Executives (ACE), Jenny Haworth asked Members to note that the report "Fit for Purpose, Fit for the Future" – A Review of Durham County Council's Area Action Partnerships (Minute 7, 19 February 2014 refers) would be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting on 28 April 2014.

5 Quarter 3 2013/14 Performance Management Report

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Improvement Manager, ACE, Tom Gorman who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the Quarter 3, 2013/14 Performance Management Report (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillors noted that some of the key achievements in Quarter 3 included: the number of telephone calls being answered within 3 minutes being ahead of target; the processing of Housing Benefit (HB) and Council Tax Reduction (CTR) claims being ahead of target; the

average number of days lost to sickness absence per full time equivalent (FTE) having reduced from the previous quarter; and the total tenant rent arrears for Durham City Homes (DCH) had fallen and was now ahead of target, albeit there was a 2 week rent-free period in December that could have contributed to the improvement in the figures.

Members noted progress with Council Plan actions, compliance with the Public Service Network Code of Connection (PSN CoCo) and the Digital Durham Programme.

It was added that key performance issues going forward included: payment of supplier invoices within 30 days, at 91% below a target of 92%; Employee appraisals completed and recorded across the Council being at 73.3% below a target of 80%; and the percentage of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests responded to within 20 days being at 80%, below target and national standard of 85%.

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Improvement Manager and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillors asked questions relating to: having the number, in addition to percentages relating to employees sickness, broken down by short, medium and long term and the types of sickness, looking at trends/underlying causes; the pressure on staff after redundancies are made, increased workloads and the types of support offered; identifying cancer within sickness reporting, in understanding patterns of long term sickness; trigger points for referral to Occupational Health and whether this was an in-house service; patterns within sickness absence figures to identify any specific issues or groups, noted as a potential topic for review by the Committee; and the management of absence, how return to work interviews were scheduled and how employees were monitored upon "reporting in sick".

The Policy, Performance and Planning Manager, Resources, Bev Stobbart noted that the numbers of employees could be provided in addition to percentages and that monitoring of sickness used percentages to help identify trends and work was ongoing with colleagues from Human Resources (HR) at Attendance Management Groups. It was added that management offered support to staff, with courses such as change management and counselling offered where appropriate.

The Policy, Performance and Planning Manager explained that the 12 categories of sickness as recorded was based upon a nationally agreed list of the Local Government Employers (LGE) and these were the categories programmed into the recording software.

It was explained that the Occupational Health service was provided in-house by DCC with referrals being after a trigger of 20 days, or sooner if deemed appropriate and in line with advice from HR. Members added that information as regards the percentage of staff returning to work before trigger points may be useful for Members. The Head of Planning and Performance noted this was a different breakdown of figures and could be looked at. The Policy, Performance and Planning Manager added that figures could be broken down in a myriad of ways as Members required. It was added that the system as regards return to work interviews was in effect automatic, once a period of sickness was inputted into the system managers would be given an alert to remind them of the requirement for an

interview to take place and should the interview still not be undertaken and recorded the issue would be escalated to the next level of management.

The Policy, Performance and Planning Manager explained that the approach was flexible in conducting interviews with staff on long term sickness, with managers meeting with those staff at times and venues appropriate to their circumstances. Members were reminded that e-mail or text message were not appropriate methods of contact as regards reporting sickness, a manager must be contacted by telephone, then information is recorded into the MyView system.

The Committee asked additional questions in relation to: invoices not paid within 30 days, whether the invoices were incorrectly presented; communication between the Authority and Suppliers as regards template invoices and systems in place; whether the below target response to FOI requests was a resource issue; and comparing like-for-like figures, for example percentages of Council Tax collected, not cumulative figures compared to year end forecasts.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager, Resources, Ian Ferguson explained that several small issues had been identified in the move to new software used for invoices and payments, including ensuring that invoice templates being used by suppliers matched those being used by the system, for example suppliers with more than one address/site, and that the software company had provided on-site support to address issues. It was explained that suppliers were contacted as regards providing correct invoices and purchase orders so that they could be matched up within the system to ensure prompt payment. It was added that information as regards resolution of issues could be reported back to the Committee at a future meeting.

The Head of Planning and Performance noted that like-for-like data regarding Council Tax Collection and Business Rates would be provided for Members for the next meeting. The Head of Planning and Performance added that in respect of FOI requests, there had been an increase in the number of requests. It was explained that the resource in dealing with FOI request remained the same and the complexity of requests appeared to be increasing, with 18 hours of officers' time per request being allowed under regulations. Members were asked to note that many neighbouring Local Authorities were not hitting targets for FOI responses, however, a positive point to note was that the quality of the information being provided was high, evidenced by the low number of challenges from the Information Commissioners' Office (ICO).

Members commended Officers as regards the success of customer service improvements, most specifically telephone calls being answered within 3 minutes. The Head of Projects and Business Services, Neighbourhood Services, Alan Patrickson thanked Members and noted that staff had worked very hard over the last 12 months to make a number of "small-gains" that in total added up to improved performance

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

6 Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Quarter 3 Report 2013/14

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services which provided details for each service grouping in relation to both statutory and non-statutory complaints, compliments and suggestions received in Quarter 3 2013/14 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Projects and Business Services proceeded to provide detail regarding complaints, compliments and suggestions received across the council during Quarter 3, 2013/14 and it was reported that between 1 October 2013 and 31 December 2013, 707 non-statutory complaints, 299 compliments and 58 suggestions were received. It was added that there was steady improvement from Quarter 1 to Quarter 3, noting an increase in Stage 2 complaints. It was further reported that analysis of the data for the quarter showed that the highest number of complaints received overall were due to refuse and recycling, changes to household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) and the Revenue and Benefits Service. Section 2 of the report provided in depth detail for each service grouping and the Head of Projects and Business Services provided a summary against each, highlighting key data for the quarter. Detail was also reported in respect of Local Government Ombudsman current activity.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Projects and Business Services and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillor L Armstrong commented as regards the table on page 25 of the report, specifically that the figure for complaints received by Children and Adults Services (CAS) up to Quarter 3 2013/14 was 49, higher than the full year figure for 2012/13 of 33. Councillor L Armstrong added that the figure for Quarter 3, for CAS, was set out in the table as 24 however it was set out on at paragraph 18 as 20. The Head of Projects and Business Services noted that the figure at paragraph 18 was a typographical error, the table on page 25 being correct with a figure of 24. Councillor L Armstrong noted that the CAS Quarter 3 figure for 2013/14 was at least 5 times higher than the Quarter 3 figure for 2012/13.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

7 Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2013/14

The Committee considered two reports, the first of the Assistant Chief Executive (ACE) and the second of the Corporate Director, Resources which provided details of the forecast outturn budget position highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget based on the position at the end of December 2013 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Accountant, Peter Dowkes provided a summary report for the Assistant Chief Executive's service grouping detailing the analysis by Head of Service and highlighting significant variances in the core budget. Councillor J Armstrong asked what the £34,000 additional income against Overview and Scrutiny referred to. The Principal Accountant noted that this was in reference to a grant relating to the Police and Crime Panel.

Councillors noted that the overall position, after taking into account Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) savings, was for a forecasted year-end underspend of £84,000.

The second report related to the Resources service grouping and an analysis by Head of Service was provided alongside those significant variances to the core budget. Members noted that there were underspends in respect of Audit fees; bank costs; and within Financial Services an underspend as regards early MTFP savings relating to employees within Revenues and Benefits. It was added that there were underspends as regards HR, ICT, and Legal and Democratic Services, relating to early MTFP savings.

The Chairman thanked the Principal Accountant and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillor N Martin asked for further details as regards capital programme overspends set out on page 56 of the report: telephony replacement; Coco – Government Connects Secure Extranet; homeworking; NHS Datacentres; and Voice Recording for Mitel Telephone System. The Principal Accountant agreed to provide a response to the Councillor.

Resolved:

That the content of the reports be noted.

8 Council Plan - Refresh of the Work Programme for Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Chairman asked the Head of Planning and Performance to speak to Members in relation to report on the Refresh of the Work Programme for the Committee (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance explained that the report set out information as contained within the relevant sections of the Council Plan 2014-17 reflecting the 4 objectives and subsequent actions identified for the “Altogether Better Council” priority theme. It was added that this was the initial opportunity for Members to input into the Work Programme for the Committee, with the final draft to come back to Committee in July for further comments and ratification.

The Committee noted the 4 objectives were: putting the customer first; working with our communities; effective use of resources; and support our people through change. Councillors were reminded of the work that had been previously undertaken by the Committee in relation to: the budget and MTFP process; Postal Services; Telephones; and Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). It was added that in addition to the in depth and systematic reviews, there were several areas of overview activity, namely: ICT Strategy; Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA); Welfare Reform; Customer First Strategy; Asset Management Strategy; Direct Services; Customer Feedback; and the quarterly budget and performance monitoring reports.

The Head of Planning and Performance noted the rolling work programme including the ongoing Customer First Task and Finish Group and highlighted a potential topic within the

objective “supporting our people through organisational change” of Workforce Development Planning.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Planning and Performance and asked Members for their questions and comments as regards the report.

Councillor J Armstrong noted that the MTFP was an area of major focus for the Committee and that early involvement of Overview and Scrutiny allowed for proactive involvement. Councillor J Armstrong added that Councillor R Bell had mentioned at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board “fairness of funding” and noted that County Durham had not been classed as a rural county by Government, accordingly “rural proofing” would be important. Councillor J Armstrong added that as a caring Local Authority, continued emphasis would need to be given to change management, succession planning and career paths within the Authority.

Councillor N Martin reiterated previous comments as regards the information as presented within the regular quarterly Performance Reports relating to sickness absence and the need to look at the topic in order to have benefits for both staff and taxpayers, looking at best practice within other Local Authorities and organisations. Councillor N Martin added that another area the Committee had highlighted was the payment of invoices within 30 days and suggested a light touch review with a small Working Group, reporting back to the Committee accordingly, could be a sensible approach.

Councillor J Armstrong noted that capacity to carry out a number of reviews would need to be taken into account, ensuring that there was some capacity in place should a pressing matter need to be addressed by the Committee.

The Vice-Chairman, Councillor K Henig took the opportunity to thank Officers for their work over the previous year, commending the workshop looking at Performance Indicators, undertaken earlier in the process as per Members’ request. Councillor K Henig added that the review of Customer Services was welcomed and that the issue of asset transfer to the community was an area for the Committee to be aware of. Councillor J Armstrong noted that seminars giving information to the public as regards possible community building transfers would be important and Councillor P Stradling added that how the information was communicated would be key.

Resolved:

- (i) That the information within the Council Plan 2014-17, Altogether Better Council priority theme be noted.
- (ii) That the Work Programme be refreshed as discussed, taking into account the actions identified under the Altogether Better Council priority theme of the Council Plan 2014-17.
- (iii) That the Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a further report detailing the Work Programme for the Committee 2014-16 at its meeting to be held 7 July 2014.

9 Customer First Task and Finish Group - Progress Update

The Chairman asked the Head of Planning and Performance to give a verbal update in relation to the Customer First Task and Finish Group.

The Head of Planning and Performance reminded Members that the Task and Finish Group had met 4 times and was making good progress, having received a demonstration of the new website for the Council and noted issues of: Strategy; the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system; access channels; the use of social media and service standards. Councillors noted that there would be site visits organised in April and also there would be work undertaken in relation to benchmarking DCC against other comparable organisations, and looking at examples of best practice.

Members were reminded that the final draft of the report would be brought back to the Committee in June and that Members could provide any further comments via the Chairman or Overview and Scrutiny Officers.

Resolved:

That the update be noted.