

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE ISSUES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 25 November 2013 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Lethbridge (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

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

1 Apologies.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Armstrong, J Hillary and P McCourt.

2 Substitute Members.

There were no substitute Members.

3 Minutes of the meeting held 14 October 2013.

That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2013 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

- (i) Information requested in relation to appraisals and sickness absence was not available at an accurate level at this time to report. Further work would be undertaken in order to provide this information to Members.
- (ii) Terms of Reference for a working group in relation to the Customer First Strategy was to be considered at item 11 on the agenda.
- (iii) Information requested regarding Council Tax income has as requested been included in next Cabinet report.
- (iv) Information requested regarding Direct Services income had been reported back direct to Councillor Martin.

4 Declarations of Interest, if any.

There were no declarations of interest submitted.

5 Report on the Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 - Quarter 2 2013/14

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which informed members about the Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) during the period 1 July 2013 until 30 September 2013 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Property, Planning and Projects Manager advised that during Quarter 2, there had been 2 new RIPA directed surveillance authorisations.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

6 Review of Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS), Council Plan and Service Plans

The Committee received a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided an update on the development of the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and Council Plan and detailed the draft objectives and outcomes for each priority theme. The report further included feedback from the County Durham Partnership (CDP) Away Day and Members seminars and next steps (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance reported that over the past month key groups and partnerships had been consulted on their views regarding the draft objectives and outcomes for each priority theme and the proposed future partnership approach.

In addition she advised that 42 councillors had attended Members' seminars held on 22 October 2013 linked to an initial briefing on the MTFP approach this year. It was further reported that the outcomes of the consultation (which were appended to the report at page 22 would form part of the considerations for the next stage of the SCS and Council Plan development. The timetable for the remainder of the process was detailed within paragraph 9 of the report.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

7 Quarter 2 2013/14 Performance Management Report

The Committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which presented progress against the council's corporate basket of indicators (PIs) for the Altogether Better Council theme and reported other significant performance issues for the first quarter of 2013/14 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Improvement Manager proceeded to detail the key performance highlights including improvements in respect of benefits processing, collection rates for council tax and NNDR, telephone calls answered within 3 minutes, invoices paid within 30 days, appraisals and employee sickness.

Councillor Smith added that in her experience the level of customer service provided by the Council was excellent and queried whether any further staff training had been carried out recently. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that staff were constantly refreshed in training and the feedback was appreciated and would be fed back to staff.

Further discussion took place regarding the types of calls received and which of those were taking the longest to deal with. In response the Customer Relations Policy and Performance Manager advised that the new service model within customer services meant that Council tax and benefit enquiries / change in circumstances were dealt with at first point of contact and therefore these calls did require more in depth discussion.

Councillor Huntington queried whether sickness related to mental health was concentrated in one service area or whether found across all council services. The Corporate Improvement Manager advised that sickness related to mental Health was high across all services within the council, however it should be noted that a third of those absences was not work related stress. Further discussion took place regarding the active management of sickness absence and the toolkits which were in place to assist managers to do so, efficiently and effectively. It was noted that the stress management toolkit was initiated at the very early stages of the onset of stress related illness.

Councillor Martin raised a point regarding the percentage of calls which were abandoned. He added that the figures suggested that over 30,000 calls were abandoned. In addition he commented that of the 78% which were answered within 3 minutes, tens of thousands were answered in over 3 minutes.

He further raised a query regarding falling tenant arrears and in particular made reference to paragraph d of page 36 of the report. He commented that it had been recently reported in the news that rent arrears were on the increase, however this appeared not to be the case in County Durham.

In responding to Councillor Martin's second point the Head of Planning and Performance advised that the council was not seeing an increase in rent arrears within County Durham, however the Finance Manager advised that what the council was experiencing was an increasing number of voids, which meant that people were in fact moving out of social housing, into private accommodation. Further discussion and debate took place regarding this indicator and the Head of Planning and Performance agreed to check the definition of such and report back to Councillor Martin at a later date.

In response to Councillor Martin's first point, the Head of Projects and Business Services advised that of course the council wanted to ensure that the number of abandoned calls was reduced, however there were other factors which may result in a customer hanging up the phone and these also needed to be taken into account. He did however advise that improvements in operations were planned so that the service could forecast demand better and manage those peaks and troughs within the service more effectively.

Councillor Shield then raised a number of points relating to sickness absence and, that the figures suggested that although sickness absence figures had decreased, it appeared that those who were still taking sick leave, were in fact taking more. He further commented that

he was disappointed to see that all recommendations of the scrutiny review which had taken place 14 months ago had not yet been implemented.

Councillor L Armstrong queried whether the working days lost due to sickness also included schools. It was noted that this figure did include school staff sickness. Further discussion took place regarding how absence was measured and it was suggested that the top five categories should be broken down into service areas.

Councillor Wilson further questioned whether there was a high percentage of staff sickness due to those staff with protected characteristics. The Corporate Improvement Manager advised that recording of disability related illness did need some improvement; however it was noted that some people may not identify that they have a disability and therefore it was difficult to always capture this information accurately.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

8 Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions - Quarter 2 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 2 2013/14 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager proceeded to provide detail regarding complaints, compliments and suggestions received across the council during Quarter 2, 2013/14 and it was reported that between 1 July 2013 and 30 September 2013, 901 non-statutory complaints, 222 compliments and 71 suggestions were received.

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. In addition it was reported that there was also an increase in complaints in relation to Durham City Homes compared to the previous quarter. It was noted however, that there were 353 occasions (39%) where the complaint had not been upheld.

Section two of the report provided in depth detail for each service grouping and the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager provided a summary against each, highlighting key data for the quarter. Detail was also reported in respect of Local Government Ombudsman current activity.

In summarising the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that the Council's Customer First Strategy was in the process of being refreshed and included a review of the current Corporate Complaints Policy and a revised mechanism for capturing learning outcomes.

Councillor L Armstrong commented on page 49 of the report paragraph 26 and in particular queried why the Chester-le-Street area had a higher volume of safeguarding complaints in

comparison to other safeguarding areas. Members were advised that this information would be reported back to a future meeting or direct to Councillor L Armstrong.

Further discussion took place regarding how complaints were handled following a question by Councillor Smith. In response the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that there were various methods used however as part of the Customer First Strategy refresh, processes would be standardised.

Discussion then ensued regarding contaminated bins and missed bin complaints and how these issues were dealt with in line with the council's policy on contaminated bins. In addition it was reported that mechanisms were in place to flag up properties where bins had been missed.

Councillor K Henig raised a query regarding Member complaints and whether there was a separate system for complaints made by elected members. In response the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that member complaints were dealt with under priority correspondence and were therefore not included within this report.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

9 Children and Adults Services Annual Representations Report 2012/13

The Committee considered a report of the Children and Adults Services which provided key messages in relation to the management and handling of Representations of Children and Adults Social Care Services during the period 1 April 2012 – 31 March 2013 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager Quality and Development proceeded to give details of statutory complaints. It was reported that in 2012/13 a total of 276 statutory complaints were received by CAS. Further details relating to the performance and year on year trends was also provided. The report further went on to detail key messages in respect of benchmarking comparisons for statutory complaints. The Strategic Manager Quality and Development advised that comparisons had been made in both Children's Social Care services and Adult Social Care services.

The report went on to further detail performance in respect of compliments in statutory services, noting that 758 compliments were received by CAS in 2012/13.

The Strategic Manager Quality and Development then went on to detail Local Government Ombudsman decisions during 2012/13, 8 of which were in adult social care services and 4 in children's social care services.

In conclusion it was reported that there had over the preceding 7 years, been a general upward trend for complaints and compliments, however in comparison to population size this showed positive performance. In comparison to other Local Authorities in the region, County Durham had the lowest number of children's social care complaints and one of the lowest for Adult Care Complaints. County Durham also had one of the lowest numbers of

Stage 1 complaints progressing to Stages 2 and 3 of the statutory children's social care complaints procedure.

Councillor Stradling raised a query with regard to partially upheld complaints. In response the Strategic Manager Quality and Development advised that some complaints may consist of a number of components. In these cases, it would be possible for only some of those components to be justified. This would result in a partially upheld complaint. Further discussion took place regarding the procedures for recording complaints and whether multiple complaints from one person could be split and dealt with individually. The Strategic Manager Quality and Development advised that this would have to be investigated further.

Councillor Martin commented that he found the benchmarking exercise flawed in that not all authorities in the area had been compared. He suggested for the benchmarking exercise to be meaningful comparitors could not be chosen. In addition he made reference to the graph which was displayed on page 91 of the report and commented that the graph and detail could not be read properly as there was no axis and the line appeared to be hand drawn.

In response, the Strategic Manager Quality and Development advised that as a result of the formatting process, several graphs contained additional information that had made them difficult to read. A revised version with this information removed would be circulated to members following the meeting.

In relation to the benchmarking exercise members were assured that all authorities had been targeted however not all had responded with the relevant detail within the prescribed timescales,

Councillor L Armstrong with reference to page 65 of the report commented that other directorates could learn from the practices used within CAS to help manage complaints. He further raised a query regarding the subject matter of complaints and why Professional Conduct of Staff and Staff Attitude were split, as in his opinion these were the same. In response the Strategic Manager Quality and Development added that she would feed suggestions back and seek clarification on classifications.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

10 Quarter 2 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 September 2013 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Finance Manager provided a summarised report for the Assistant Chief Executive's service grouping detailing the analysis by Head of Service and highlighting significant variances in the core budget.

Furthermore the position with regard to the Members' neighbourhood budget, AAP area budgets and the capital programme were also reported.

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.

In relation to the Resources capital programme it was reported the main area of expenditure was within ICT. Full details of those capital programme schemes were included at Appendix 2 of the report.

In conclusion the Finance Manager advised that across both service groupings, MTFP savings were being met, along with some pre-achievement on next year's savings also being met.

Resolved:

That the content of the reports be noted.

11 Customer First Strategy - Proposed Corporate Issues OSC Task and Finish Group

The Committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which outlined proposals for the establishment of a Corporate Issues Task and Finish Group to review the development of a revised Customer First Strategy and Terms of Reference for the review (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance advised that following a meeting of Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny held in September 2013 it was agreed that a task and finish group be established to examine the area of customer services including telephone calls and e-mail transactions. A copy of the proposed terms of reference and timetable for the group were attached to the report.

It was noted that the first meeting would take place in January 2013. Ten representatives were sought to serve on the Task and Finish Group, and nominations were welcomed.

Resolved:

That the recommendations contained in the report be approved.