

## **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 7 July 2014 at 9.30 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor J Lethbridge (Chairman)**

#### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors J Alvey, J Armstrong, L Armstrong, K Henig (Vice-Chairman), J Hillary, E Huntington, N Martin, T Smith, P Stradling, L Taylor, M Wilkes, S Wilson and R Young

#### **1 Apologies.**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Bleasdale and A Turner.

#### **2 Substitute Members.**

There were no substitutes.

#### **3 Declarations of Interest, if any.**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **4 Minutes of the meeting held 27 March 2014.**

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 March were confirmed as a correct and signed by the Chairman.

#### **5 Report on the Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 - Quarter 4 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 January 2014 until 31 March 2014.

A query was raised by Councillor Wilkes regarding the timing of the reporting of activity and questioned whether it was necessary to receive quarterly. In response the Property, Planning and Projects Manager advised that the quarterly reporting of RIPA activity had been agreed by the Committee and showed that the Committee were actively monitoring activity.

#### **Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted.

## **6 Quarter 4 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 performance indicators (PIs) for the Altogether Better Council theme and reported upon other significant performance issues for the 2013/14 financial year (for a copy of report and slides of presentation see file of minutes).

The Corporate Improvement Manager reported on key achievements during the quarter including, processing times for new benefit claims, council tax and collection rates, tenant rent arrears, improved telephone call handling and improved sickness absence levels.

Members further noted key performance challenges in respect of staff appraisal levels, percentage of Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulations requests responded to within the deadline and the payment of supplier invoices within 30 days.

Discussion then took place regarding call length and whether calls were now taking longer to deal with. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that Council Tax calls generally took on average 3–4 minutes, waste calls 2.5-3.5 minutes. However there were changes around payment card compliance implemented from April 2014 and this meant that by diverting calls to an automated payment line, call times would be shorter.

Moving on to sickness absence Councillor Stradling queried the high volume of cases recorded as digestive / liver and kidney and whether it was known if these were long standing issues. In response the Policy, Performance and Planning Manager advised that she would have to check this after the meeting and follow up accordingly.

Further discussion took place on absences related to mental health and it was queried whether the council was doing anything constructive to train managers in dealing with mental health issues. The Policy, Performance and Planning Manager advised that there was a policy in place which provided advice for managers and rehabilitation advice for those being supported back in to work.

Members then discussed categories of sickness and in particular sickness related to cancer. It was noted that cancer was not recorded within the system as an individual category and therefore it was very difficult to pull this information off, however individual managers will be aware of staff within their own services dealing with cancer.

Further debate took place regarding staff appraisals and Councillor Huntington added that in her opinion one to one staff meetings should also be recorded to sit alongside staff appraisal records.

Councillor Martin raised a query with regard to the average days per post in the sickness categories listed, and commented that he felt that the data could be presented with more clarity.

He further, in noting the 40% increase in FOI requests, queried what area of activity was causing this increase.

In response the Head of Planning and Performance reported that increase of FOI requests was not specific to one area of activity and was in fact across the board. The requests continued to be from a mix of the local and national media, local people and commercial organisations. In addition the increase in requests was in line with the national upward trend. Further details were reported in relation to the wider publication of information.

Further discussion took place regarding the cost of sickness absence and it was questioned whether agency and overtime costs had reduced in line with sickness absence. In response the Policy, Performance and Planning Manager advised that this would need to be looked into further and reported back to a future meeting.

Councillor Wilkes queried whether sickness absence could be broken down by the day of the week. In addition he commented that he was disappointed to learn that the launch of the council's new website had been delayed.

In response the Policy, Performance and Planning Manager advised that due to the current management of 2 recording systems, retrieving this type of sickness data was a current problem.

Councillor Wilkes commented that he failed to see how Heads of Service could effectively manage sickness and appraisals without the appropriate data.

**Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted.

**7 Customer feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Year End Report 2013/14**

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services which presented the Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Year End Report 2013/14 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014, Durham County Council received 3,298 non-statutory complaints, 1,003 compliments and 325 suggestions. 194 complaints were escalated to stage 2 of the complaints process.

She further pointed out an error in paragraph 10 of the report, advising that the figure in Q3 for 2013/14 should read 701 not 707.

It was reported that complaints received during 2013/14 had reduced by 9% when compared to the previous year. Further details relating to service area complaints, compliments and suggestions were included within the report.

Moving on the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that during 2013/14 the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) made initial enquiries / investigations into 121 matters.

In conclusion she reported that of the complaints received, 96% were resolved internally and only 4% referred to the Local Government Ombudsman as unresolved.

Councillor Wilkes added that in his opinion paragraph 48 relating to Durham City Homes gave a misleading view and added that Durham City Homes managed over 6,500 homes and all had been subject to increased renovation works recently. The figures equated to 35 complaints per month however only a few of those were valid.

Councillor Smith queried whether there had been any focus on the refuse team and customer services training. In response the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that regular meeting with Direct Services take place to go through customer service journeys in relation to refuse collections.

Further discussion took place regarding strategic highway complaints and it was noted that this type of complaint generally related to verge hardening requests etc.

Councillor L Armstrong further queried whether it would be possible to drill down complaints to wards / divisions to highlight hot spot areas. In response the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that she would report back to the committee as to whether this was possible.

Councillor Wilkes further commented that he had in previous years asked for a list of CRM issues relating to his ward on a 3/6 monthly basis, however this had never been implemented. It was noted in response that this task was very resource intensive however it would be investigated further.

Councillor Stradling raised a query regarding the recording of refuse incidents. In response the Customer Relations Policy and Performance Manager advised that each incident reported was recorded even if it was from another caller reporting the same incident.

Further discussion took place regarding the CRM system and Councillor Henig commented that she felt it made a lot of sense to share the CRM information with Members on a regular basis or allow mediated access to the system so that it could be viewed directly. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that she would take the comments back to the Corporate Director responsible for this area.

#### **Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted.

## **8 Creditor Payment Performance 2013/14**

The Committee received a report of the Head of Finance – Financial Services which presented an overview of creditor payment performance for 2013/14 and actions being undertaken to improve performance.

The Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that the 2013/14 target to pay 92% of undisputed creditor invoices within 30 days from the date on the invoice had been 1% higher than the target in 2012/13, despite the Council only achieving the previous 91% target in three months in 2012/13. The target of 92% had been retained for 2014/15.

He reported that whilst performance had been improving over the last two years as a result of the actions put in place by the Scrutiny review group, overall creditor payment performance for 2013/14 was only 90.47%.

Further information relating to performance was reported, including updates to the Oracle E-Business Suite and OCR functionality to enable multi-line purchase order matching. Various further actions had been implemented to improve performance including additional resources, which had driven up performance to 93% for April and May 2014.

In conclusion the Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that further work would continue to be undertaken in order to maintain the current performance levels and performance would be closely monitored and resources deployed accordingly.

Further work would be undertaken alongside ICT to ensure that a robust and efficient system was delivered.

Councillor Wilson asked what the current read rate was on the scanning of invoices. In response the Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that at this time he was unable to say however this was due a system reporting failure, the suppliers had been asked to improve this function.

Councillor Wilkes commented that the team had made staggering improvements since the review and he was highly impressed with the ways things were moving forward. He did however comment that there was still a substantial amount of invoices being received with either no purchase order number or the incorrect number. He further asked what percentage of invoices received still had no PO number.

In response the Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that work was being undertaken with suppliers to improve this element of invoicing. However he was unable to say what the current percentage was, however agreed to report back to Councillor Wilkes on this in due course.

Councillor Stradling complimented Councillor Wilkes on the work that he had undertaken on the review group and the success those actions had made in improving performance.

Councillor Smith added that in her opinion the ICT system was the key to the success of the service, and therefore queried whether work was being undertaken to look at the best practice of other authorities. She further asked whether procurement advised suppliers on the correct way to send invoices.

In response the Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that this was not currently undertaken but could be looked into further in the future.

**Resolved:**

That the content of the report be noted.

## **9 Refresh of the Work Programme 2014/15 for the Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee received a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided for Members consideration an updated draft work programme for the Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2014/15 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance advised that the draft work programme was attached for Members' consideration with the final programme to be agreed at the meeting.

Councillor Stradling commented that given the good progress reported in respect of creditor performance he did not feel it was necessary to look at invoices. He did however think it was important to look at appraisals.

Councillor Wilkes agreed with Councillor Stradling, but did however comment that sickness absence should also be looked at alongside appraisals in an in-depth review. Further members concurred with these comments and agreed that a combined scrutiny review looking at appraisals and sickness absence would be useful.

### **Resolved:**

- (i) That the content of the report be noted.
- (ii) That the review of accounts payable be removed from the work programme.
- (iii) That a review into appraisals and sickness absence be included in the work programme.