

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 **Friday 17 October 2014** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Lethbridge (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

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

Also Present:

Councillors A Hopgood

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Alvey, J Armstrong, P Crathorne and R Young.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

4 Customer First Task and Finish Group Review

The Chairman asked the Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Assistant Chief Executive's, Stephen Gwilym to speak to Members in relation to the draft report of the Customer First Task and Finish Group (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer thanked the Chairman and reminded the Committee that the review was undertaken subsequent to the Committee considering the Quarterly Performance Report in September 2013. It was noted at the meeting that work was being undertaken at the time in relation to a revised Customer First Strategy (CFS) for the Council.

Members were reminded that the review group had looked at the development of the new CFS in addition to looking at key outcomes identified within the development of the strategy:

- Providing a range of effective and easy to use ways in which our customers can deal with us
- Delivering responsive and customer focussed services
- Ensuring that customer feedback informs learning and results in improved services.

It was explained that Cabinet had agreed for consultation on the CFS 2014-17 at its meeting held 15 January 2014 and the strategy was agreed by Cabinet at a subsequent meeting held 16 July 2014.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer highlighted the main sections of the review report including:

- ICT and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) - noting significant progress in terms of broadband provision through “Digital Durham” and the need for an effective CRM system to be able to deliver against the CFS.
- Access channels - noting the need to get phone contacts “right first time” and a need to rationalise the approximate 1,000 telephone numbers listed to contact the Authority. It was added that the Customer Access Points (CAPs) would be supported by a wider customer service information provision, through other Council establishments, partner organisations and the community/voluntary sector under an “Information Durham” brand.
- Website - noting that the new website had recently gone live and will link to the new CRM, providing more opportunities to access services digitally, which will have an associated saving in comparison to dealing face-to-face and via telephone.
- Social Media, it was explained that there was increasing demand for feedback via social media. The potential channel shift for customers to more digital means via the website in particular would assist in freeing up resources for those customers that needed either face-to-face contact or a telephone call.
- Service Standards - it was noted that while there were already service standards in place, they were not consistent across all services and all access channels and a review of service standards was being undertaken. It was added that the review group had highlighted the importance of qualitative and quantitative information, encouraging “mystery shoppers” and customer surveys to obtain qualitative data. Members noted that services standards would be linked to a robust and fit-for-purpose CRM system.
- Customer Learning, with a number of service improvements being included such as: reducing missed bin complaints; processing requests for sandbags via the website; an agreed approach in respect of managing enquiries and complaints regarding the street light energy reduction project; updated staff training and manuals for refuse and recycling; and a “missing address data” process to ensure customer requests via CRM are processed consistently while the address file is updated.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer added that a project plan with milestones in addition to feedback being provided, would help to keep Members up-to-date in respect of the CFS and outcomes.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer concluded by noting that, subject to approval by Committee, the review report would be tabled for consideration by Cabinet at its meeting to be held 19 November 2014.

The Chairman thanked the Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer together with the Members and Officers involved with the review and asked the Head of Projects and Business Services, Neighbourhood Services, Alan Patrickson for the comments from the Service in relation to the review report.

The Head of Projects and Business Services thanked Members for their work within the review and was appreciated the opportunity to feedback comments from the Service. It was noted that the review had covered a large area of work, contained a huge amount of data and had proved to be very useful to the Officers involved in the development of the new CFS. It was added that the review report noted the progress at this point and also set out aims, with improvements having been achieved in respect of performance of the call centre and in dealing with Revenue and Benefit enquiries. The Head of Projects and Business Services also noted that it was recognised that there was a need to ensure easy access to services for customers, including the use of social media where applicable. It was added that the move to digital channels would not mean that face-to-face and telephone services would be neglected, with improvements such as the CAPs ensuring this option was still there for those customers that needed it. The Committee were reminded of the work that was being undertaken in order to reduce the amount of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses given to the public and to use feedback from customers more effectively. The Head of Projects and Business Services noted that the recommendations of the review report were fair and balanced, with achievable aims and further progress would be brought back to the Committee for Members' information. It was noted in summary that since the review there had been progress that included:

- Rationalising the number of telephone contacts, professional call handling systems where appropriate.
- New Service Standards and Customer Charter, with the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services attending the Customer Board next week.
- Further progress with super-fast broadband via the Digital Durham programme.
- The review of the CAPs, which was agreed at Cabinet in January 2014, the work being rolled out across the CAPs.
- Engaging with potential suppliers regarding a new CRM system, with the procurement process to start shortly.
- The new website had gone live, noting a few areas to improve, however an excellent platform to build upon.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Projects and Business Services and asked Members for their comments on the review report and its recommendations.

Councillor N Martin welcomed the report and appreciated the work that had been undertaken by the Members and Officers involved, however, he noted that Recommendation 3 as set out in the draft report concluded with the word "encouraged":

- (iii) That Cabinet seeks to ensure that the provision of broadband/digital service connectivity in respect of new residential and commercial developments is encouraged.

Councillor N Martin felt that the word "encouraged" was not sufficiently strong and there should be requirements of developers within building regulations in respect of broadband/digital service connectivity.

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer acknowledged that the review group had considered a stronger recommendation in this respect but advice from Planning Officers had indicated that including any requirement or condition regarding broadband provision within the emerging County Durham Plan would not be enforceable. Councillor N Martin asked whether the Authority had tried to see if any conditions would be enforceable, and noted that he believed that Members should listen to the people they represented rather than listening to developers. Councillor P Stradling noted that it would be preferable if such conditions could be enforceable, however, if advice was that they are not then the recommendation as set out could be “beefed up” in some form. Councillor J Hillary noted that increasingly people were accessing the internet through mobile connections and the reliance upon fixed telephone lines would diminish in the future. Councillor A Hopgood agreed with comments from the Committee Members and suggested an alternative wording for Recommendation 3 could be:

- (iii) That Cabinet seeks to ensure that the provision of broadband/digital service connectivity in respect of new residential and commercial developments is expected.

Members noted the alternative form of words and the Committee agreed the change be reflected in the report.

Resolved:

That, subject to the amended wording of Recommendation 3, the draft review report be agreed and submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

5 Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Quarter 1 Report 2014/15

The Chairman thanked the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager, Neighbourhood Services, Mary Readman who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions for Quarter 1 2014/15 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that between 1 April 2014 and 30 June 2014, Durham County Council received 617 non-statutory complaints, 238 compliments and 67 suggestions. It was added that 62 complaints had been escalated to Stage 2 of the complaints process.

An error was noted in paragraph 7 of the report, with Members advised that the total figures in the table for 2013-14 should have read 1,007 for Quarter 1, 702 for Quarter 3, 687 for Quarter 4 and an overall total of 3,297.

It was reported that complaints received during Quarter 1 2014/15 had reduced by 11% when compared to the previous quarter and reduced by 33% when compared to the same period 2013/14. Further details relating to service area complaints, compliments and suggestions were included within the report.

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised that during Quarter 1, 2014/15 the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) made initial enquiries / investigations into 12 matters. It was noted that of the complaints received: 4 were resolved as no fault by the Council; 1 had proceeded to full investigation, with the LGO concluding there had been injustice and maladministration; and 7 cases were awaiting outcome.

The Chairman thanked the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillor T Smith asked whether Senior Managers involved in customer service undertook “back to the floor” exercises to better inform the Performance Plan and improvement activities. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager noted that last week was the national “Customer Services Week” and a number of Senior Officers, including the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services and Head of Direct Services, had worked in the Complaints Team and worked on the helpdesk, answering queries. It was added that the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager would be undertaking a quality assurance exercise, sampling 10% of responses to complaints to ensure how responses are articulated was consistent. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager noted that her office adjoined the switchboard and therefore she was well placed in order to understand the workload and issues of those staff.

Councillor M Wilkes noted that caution should be taken when reviewing the figures within the report, as there was an implication that all the improvements in performance were solely from work that had been undertaken. Councillor M Wilkes noted that an example would be the dry weather last winter and the reduction in flooding complaints in comparison to the previous year, where there was a lot of rain and snow. Councillor M Wilkes asked, in relation to the complaint upheld by the LGO, if more details as regards the level of financial settlement were available. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager noted that in relation to flooding and drainage, the complaints were often linked to service standards, for example how often drains and gullies were cleansed, and it was important to communicate to customers when and why activities were undertaken. In relation to the complaint upheld by the LGO, it was noted that further details were reported at the Council’s Standards Committee, however, the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager would speak to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services as regards what information could be included in the report to the Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Several Members noted that some further details in future reports as regards “lessons learned” and actions undertaken to mitigate future complaints following the LGO’s involvement may be useful in order for Members to understand the issues. Councillor N Martin asked whether the Authority was obliged to publish LGO reports and noted that he had typed “ombudsman” into the new Durham County Council website and was unable to easily find any reports or lists of activities. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager noted that this would be under the Head of Legal and Democratic Services’ area and that press releases issued on decisions, for a 28 day period.

Councillor A Hopgood noted that a good number of compliments had been received and asked whether those staff involved were thanked for their efforts and their work practices looked at as examples of best practice.

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager noted that good practice was shared and staff were thanked personally, were nominated for "Great Staff, Great Stuff" awards. An example of how staff achievements were acknowledged was given where the Head of Direct Services has a number of posters displayed at the Meadowfield Depot setting out the compliments received so staff can see that their efforts are appreciated. Councillor L Armstrong asked if compliment letters are acknowledged by a Senior Officer and the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager confirmed that this was the case.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

6 Children and Adults Services Statutory Annual Representations Report 2013/14

The Chairman thanked the Complaints Officer, Children and Adults Services (CAS), Gill Ward who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the Children and Adults Services Statutory Annual Representations Report 2013/14 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Complaints Officer gave the Committee details of statutory complaints, reporting that in 2013/14 a total of 229 statutory complaints were received by CAS, a reduction from the previous year's figure of 279. Further details relating to the performance and year on year trends was also provided. The report set out key messages in respect of benchmarking comparisons for statutory complaints. The Complaints Officer advised that comparisons had been made in both Children's Social Care services and Adult Social Care services. In comparison to other Local Authorities in the region, County Durham had the second lowest number of children's social care complaints and the fourth lowest for Adult Care Complaints. County Durham also had the fourth lowest number of Stage 1 complaints progressing to Stages 2 of the statutory children's social care complaints procedure.

The report went on to further detail performance in respect of compliments in statutory services, noting that 451 compliments were received by CAS in 2013/14.

The Complaints Officer explained that 20 Final Decisions by the Local Government Ombudsman during 2013/14, 10 of which were in adult social care services and 10 in children's social care services. It was explained that Officers tried to resolve issues at the Council's Complaints Stage 1, with a Complaint Resolution Plan being put in place as required. Members noted that subsequent to complaints being determined, learning outcomes are made and it was added that directions from the LGO in respect of financial remedy were rare.

The Chairman thanked the Complaints Officer and asked Members for their questions on the report.

Councillors asked questions in relation to: whether the Authority could make an offer of financial settlement prior to LGO involvement, if such would be more appropriate or cost effective in terms of the compensation compared to Officer time; whether statistics in relation to compliments were benchmarked against other Local Authorities; why the details

of other Authorities were anonymised within the report, as all the information would be publicly available; and whether there would be benefit in having information as regards Children's Services reported back at the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in addition.

The Complaints Officer noted that, where appropriate, financial compensation could be offered at stages prior to consideration by the LGO, it was noted this applied to Corporate Complaints in addition. The Complaints Officer noted that as regards benchmarking of compliments, this could be looked at for future reports. The Quality and Development Manager, CAS, Lesley Martin noted that the information within the report relating to other Local Authorities had been anonymised as those Authorities themselves had not yet reported back to their Members with final figures. The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer noted that in addition to reporting information back to the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, there could also be value in reporting the relevant sections to the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

The Chairman agreed to a question seeking clarification in relation to an upcoming meeting date.

7 Budget Meeting

Councillor M Wilkes asked why a meeting relating to budgets had been moved from 12 November 2014 to 4 December 2014, noting that early engagement with Members was important in providing feedback into the budget process. Councillor P Stradling noted he would bring the query to the attention of the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny, Councillor J Armstrong.