

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE ISSUES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of **Corporate Issues Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 1B, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 23 July 2015** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor J Lethbridge (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors B Armstrong, J Armstrong, L Armstrong, H Bennett, G Bleasdale, J Carr, K Henig (Vice-Chairman), N Martin, J Rowlandson, A Shield, P Stradling, M Wilkes and R Young

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Alvey, J Hillary, E Huntington and L Taylor.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Matters Arising

The Head of Planning and Performance referred to Minute 6, page 4 of the agenda pack and advised members that as suggested the staffing figures would be available in Quarter 1. She also advised members that the comments by Councillor Martin on page 5 of the agenda pack in relation to Customer Feedback had been fed back to the team.

The Head of Planning and Performance referred to minute 6, page 6 of the agenda pack in relation to Aycliffe Secure Services and advised that the previous recording for Quarter 2 had now been rectified.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

5 Quarter 4 2014/15 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 2014/15 financial year (for a copy of report and slides of presentation see file of minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager, Tom Gorman was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the Quarter 4, 2015/16 Performance Management Report.

The presentation looked at the Key Performance Highlights, Key Performance Challenges, Benefits, Customers Seen at Customer Access Points, Telephone Calls Answered, Customer Contacts, Undisputed Invoices Paid within 30 Days, Actions Undertaken to Improve Performance, Freedom of Information, Environmental Information Regulations Requests, Sickness Absence and Performance Appraisals.

Following the presentation the Chairman thanked the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager for his presentation and indicated that he was concerned at the number of children in poverty and the Freedom of Information targets.

Councillor J Armstrong referred to sickness absence which was disappointing as things had been put into place, but sadly it was not making a difference.

Councillor A Shield shared Councillor Armstrong's concerns and referred to some of the suggestions that scrutiny had made following the light touch review which had not been followed through.

Councillor Wilkes also referred to sickness absence and indicated that if recommendations were implemented changes would be seen. He also referred to page 25 of the agenda in relation to performance indicator REDP179 and that there was no triage data for this indicator. He also commented on Discretionary Housing Payments which were increasing and what was the reason for this increase and that it needed to be looked into.

Ian Ferguson, Revenue and Benefits Manager responded that the Discretionary Housing Payments were monitored and controlled.

Councillor Wilkes responded that controlled would suggest that there was not enough money. The Revenue and Benefits Manager responded that it was controlled by a policy and payments were made within the policy.

Councillor Henig referred to performance indicators 184 and 185 in that telephone contacts had increased and web contacts had reduced which was in the opposite direction to expected trends. She also referred to performance appraisals and how maternity leave was not an excuse for an appraisal not to take place.

Mary Readman, Customer Relations, Policy and Performance responded that work was been undertaken by an anti-poverty group and this information may be useful to be fed into Quarter 1.

In relation to telephone contacts the Registration Service was added to the Automatic Call Distribution during this quarter and a large number of calls were received in relation to the garden waste collection service. She also indicated that 3 years ago they had received £1m calls and that figure was now 650,000 per year. Abandoned calls figures had reduced and operators had received training on how to respond. The Council weren't quite there with regard to self-service, they were trying to get more services on self-service and the registration service and bulky waste were now on line and more services would be added.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager referred to maternity leave and that they tried to ensure that a performance appraisal was completed before they commenced leave but this was not always possible if they had to start their leave earlier than anticipated.

Councillor A Shield commented that it was encouraging about the action group and referred to tenants not being able to move into smaller properties if they had rent arrears. Members discussed this issue in particular if the policy could be looked at to enable tenants to move into smaller properties who were subject to the bedroom tax and this was the reason for the arrears.

Councillor L Armstrong referred to child poverty and asked if these figures could be broken down into wards. The Head of Planning and Performance responded that they would see if this could be done.

Councillor Wilkes referred to target RES/001 Savings delivered against the Medium Term Financial Plan and the figures published at the Cabinet meeting in July and the figures were not the same. It appeared that more savings had been made than anticipated. Officers advised members that the July 2015 Cabinet report represented the latest update.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

6 Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions Quarter 4 Report 2014/15

The Committee considered a Joint Report of the Assistant Chief Executive and Corporate Director, Neighbourhood Services which provided details of the Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliment and Suggestions Year End Report 2014/15 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager, Mary Readman advised that between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015 Durham County Council received 2,649 stage 1 complaints, 193 compliments and 299 suggestions. 195 complaints had escalated to stage 2. During this period 177 complaints and 509 compliments received were in relation to adult and children's social care statutory services.

It was reported that complaints received during 2014/15 had a steady decline overall.

She also referred to the handling of stage 2 complaints where 24% were responded to within 20 days and advised members that they struggled with this target as they were often complex and required thorough investigation. A significant improvement had been made in responding to stage 2 complaints with the average complaints open at any one time reducing from over 60 at the beginning of 2014/15 to fewer than 20 by the end of the year. 47% of the complaints processed were not upheld

Further details were provided for each service grouping for 2014/15 in relation to complaints, compliments and suggestions.

Moving on the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager advised members that in order to provide an analysis by area of complaints they were geocoded and included in the geographic analysis which considered complaints by Strategic Partnership Areas. They also looked at the rate per 1,000 households which showed a noticeable difference.

Members were also advised that during 2014/15 the Local Government Ombudsman made initial enquiries / investigations into 130 matters. The Ombudsman delivered decisions on 36 matters in 12 of the cases no fault was found, 11 cases maladministration and injustice to the complainant was found and they were still waiting for decisions on 19 cases and 1 case relating to planning issues was on hold pending legal proceedings.

Following the presentation, Councillor A Shield complimented the report and referred to the table on page 40 of the agenda and indicated that there were only two areas which had seen an increase in complaints.

Councillor Wilkes referred to the same table and indicated that there had been a big reduction in the number of complaints however Neighbourhood Services was less than last year but was still a 20% increase from 3 years ago. Weather related complaints were not removed so he would like to see a figure in future with the weather related incidents removed. Also could compliments be better drawn out.

The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager responded that it was difficult to get a status quo as they had introduced a lot of services, changes had been made and some services reduced. The biggest changes were in 2012/13, but she would take his comments on board. She had discussed with the Head of Planning and Performance about reviewing the report and taking some factors out.

Members discussed the take up of the garden waste which was 63,000 and how this compared to the projected figure and how much money had been saved.

Councillor Stradling and the Chairman complimented the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager on her report.

Members also discussed the Local Government Ombudsman settlements and if the details could be shared with Members. Officers responded that this was reported through the Standards Committee. Members were also advised that the Local Government Ombudsman did publish information on their website.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

7 Corporate Complaints

The committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive to present to members the revised corporate complaints policy following the Corporate Complaints Review agreed by Cabinet on 10 June 2015 (for a copy of the report and slides of presentation see file of minutes).

Su Jordan, Civil Contingencies Unit and Programme Office Manager, Assistant Chief Executive's was in attendance to give members a presentation outlining the key revision to the corporate complaints policy.

The presentation looked at the Corporate Complaints Review, Baseline Process, Baseline Volume, Timescales, Customer Feedback, Officer Feedback, Themes from Feedback, Ideas for Improvement, Testing the Ideas, Direct Contact, Service Ownership, Learning Cycle, Lessons Learned, Policy, The Revised Process and Implementation.

The Chairman thanked Su Jordan for her very informative presentation and that he was pleased that there was a process for dealing with vexatious complaints.

Councillor Wilkes indicated that he was pleased with the way it was moving forward but he was concerned with the difference in targets and who would be monitoring.

The Civil Contingencies Unit and Programme Office Manager responded that they had a lot of historical data so they knew what the target should be.

Councillor Wilkes then went on to ask about what was classed as a complaint. Officers responded that there would be an assessment by the team and they would talk to the customer.

Councillor J Armstrong welcomed the positive report in particular the vexatious policy. He asked that it be monitored in 6 or 7 months' time. The Civil Contingencies Unit and Programme Office Manager responded that evidence should be available after December and would form part of the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager's report.

Councillor L Armstrong commented that the report made sense and if a complaint could be resolved in 10 minutes this would be better. He also referred to Facebook and Twitter and asked if this could be monitored and some of the comments removed. The Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager responded that it was monitored and comments were removed but they received complaints regarding the removal of comments.

Councillor Henig thanked the Civil Contingencies Unit and Programme Office Manager for her report.

In response to questions from Councillor Henig the Civil Contingencies Unit and Programme Office Manager and the Customer Relations, Policy and Performance Manager indicated that they had a guidance pack for staff and training had been provided. The Local Government Ombudsman had produced a booklet on how to handle complaints and they had used some of this for the training and guidance.

The pilot scheme had showed that some people just wanted an apology and the incident resolved. The form on the website asked for the outcomes and they were looking to have more realistic service standards. They were learning but the pilot had not been running long enough to get information but this would eventually be fed through.

Resolved:

That the revised Corporate Complaints Policy that included a new approach for dealing with abusive, unreasonably persistent or vexatious complaints be noted.

8 Council Plan 2015/2018 - Refresh of Work Programme for 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 2015/16 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance advised members that the Attendance Management Light Touch/In Depth Review was underway. She also referred to a potential scrutiny on the CRM which would involve the whole committee but this had not been added to the work programme at this stage.

Councillor Wilkes referred to the Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan Process on page 80 of the report and indicated that he was concerned that September 2015 to March 2016 was not giving the committee enough time to feed in to the Medium Term Financial Plan. He also referred to the amount of reserves and asked that this be looked at in more detail and could some of the reserves be allocated to services. He asked that audit investigate the matter and report back to the committee.

Councillor Armstrong responded that the financial settlement would not be received until January 2016 so they had a tight deadline. He agreed if there were concerns with reserves Directors could give reasons which the Scrutiny Committee could look at.

Resolved:

That the work programme be agreed.