

MINUTES of the meeting of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 5 April 2011 at 7.00pm.

- Present:** Councillors Barry Johnson (Chair), Wendy Curtis, Bukky Okunade and Mike Revell.
- Apologies:** Councillors Terry Hipsev and Danny Nicklen
- Attendance:** Councillor Tunde Ojetola
R. Waterhouse – Corporate Director, Change and Improvement
M. Hone – Corporate Director, Finance and Corporate Governance (from 8.35pm)
S. Welton – Corporate Performance Office
Laura Last - Performance & Communications Manager
C. Stratford – Head of Housing
D. McLoughlin – Client Contract Manager
J. Olsson – Corporate Director, Children, Education and Families
B. Foster – Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes
R. Harris – Head of Strategic Commissioning and Resources
M. Boulter – Principal Democratic Services Officer
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22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

a) Interests

Councillor Curtis declared an interest in relation to item 5 by virtue that she has a daughter who works in adult social care.

b) Whipping

No interests were declared.

23. MINUTES

The minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Meeting held on 4 January 2011 were approved as a correct record.

24. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORT – MONTH 9/ QUARTER 2

In relation to Initial Assessments for children's social care (NI59) officers explained that performance had been affected by a reliance on agency staff. This indicator needs organisational skills in addition to social work skills. It is hoped that performance will improve as the Council is trying to recruit permanent staff (including experienced social workers) very soon and in the interim, a new agency manager had been employed who is able to manage the process more efficiently. It was hoped performance at the end of the year would be above national average and the average of statistical neighbours, although performance would not reach the Council's aspirational target. Members were assured that children were safeguarded throughout the process.

Officers explained the reason for underspend in the Capital Programme (RES010), which was attributed to three major factors in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Council was currently holding £2.8 million in reserve for future work on cladding at a number of Grays high rise buildings. There was a chance that the cost of this work would be less than the reserve but it was unknown until the work was started in July 2011. The Council had also saved £200,000 on decent homes activities and a change to tender in fire suppression work had led to another £350,000 not being spent. These three items accounted for nearly 50% of the underspend.

The Committee discussed the cost of fencing around the high rise buildings and officers confirmed the fences and scaffolding cost £100,000 per year to maintain although they were essential for health and safety reasons. Officers also confirmed they had received competitive prices for the lift maintenance and were satisfied they would get a good deal. Following another question regarding the cladding, officers clarified that the work to replace the cladding was expected to take nine months and the reserve would cover this. In the eventuality that the project overran, the department would need to re-prioritise its spending to cover the costs.

The Committee proceeded to discuss performance in relation to the percentage of repairs completed on time (LA72 and LA73). Officers explained that reliable data was now being produced by the systems in place and that this was showing the Council completed 89.9% on time as opposed to its target of 95%. It was steady performance.

Officers explained that the challenges faced by the service were the responsibility of not just Morrison's but Vertex and the Council as well. Emergency jobs were far higher than would be expected from the housing stock and this caused problems in that Morrison's were unable to deal with normal repairs or undertake planning activity which was crucial to an efficient service.

The Council would be working with Morrison's and Vertex to improve the categorising of jobs and integrating the Saffron system into their systems so that jobs were recorded accurately. The introduction of the national standard of rates (instead of Thurrock's unique standard of rates) would also help officers clarify what repair jobs were being requested. It was hoped that this sort of activity would reduce the number of emergency jobs through better initial assessment of the work needed. This would be enhanced by increased staff training and a suite of performance indicators would be introduced to monitor the processing of repairs through the contact centre. Officer hoped the issue would be resolved by July 2011.

The Committee briefly discussed void properties and were informed that the Council would be introducing a Thurrock Void Standard which meant all vacant homes would be maintained and kept in good order before a tenant moved in. This would increase void costs in the short term but also a reduction in day to day repair costs. Overall, void costs were more cost effective than repair costs. It was added that Thurrock did have poor void standards at present but as soon as the new standard was introduced contractors would be able to prepare voids for use within 25 days.

With regards to the timeliness of social care assessment (NI132) the Committee heard performance was improving and the adult social care assessment process had been reviewed and new guidelines issued to staff. It was still unlikely that the target would be reached by the year end due to the poor performance in the first part of the year.

Carers receiving a service following an assessments (NI135) was an indicator that was not improving as much as the Council had hoped but a number of activities had been undertaken to contact and reach more carers including the forthcoming launch of the Carer's Strategy in May 2011, the revamping of the Carer's Centre which would be outsourced to a third sector provider for management of day to day activity and the establishment of a carer's forum.

Thurrock had a similar number of carers compared with other local authorities (approx 8% of the population according to the last census) but in general carers were sometimes reluctant to seek help. Carers could find out about Council services in a number of ways including self-referral, GP referral, Carer's Centre or posters in the libraries.

With regards to staff sickness (BV12) officers reported that levels had increased since the last report although it was felt this had occurred because absence was better recorded. Long term sickness (over twenty days) was a major challenge and caseworker support to reduce these instances was being continued. A nurse contact centre pilot would soon be introduced whereby staff would need to ring a given number to speak to a nurse to report sickness.

It was [subsequently] clarified that those on long term sickness were allowed six months full pay and then six months half pay once they had worked at the council for 6 years (this is the maximum allowed) In relation to another question officers stated that stress could be a future factor for sickness considering the need for staff to cover more work and therefore this needed to be monitored closely. There was also a well-being agenda that would be introduced to promote healthy lifestyles and stress reduction.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) The Committee notes the latest performance in areas of concern and areas for further focus.**
- ii) The Committee notes the improvement activity that is either currently underway or being commissioned in respect of underperforming indicators.**

25. MORRISON'S HOUSING REPAIRS REPORT

Due to the discussion in the previous item, the Committee decided this issue had been covered.

26. ESTABLISHMENT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP

Although the Council had a good performance framework and risk assessment framework already, there was a national need for more transparency and methods were changing. Officers wanted the group to meet after the local elections with a view to completing the work by August 2011.

Some Councillors from the Committee had already volunteered to sit on the panel and this was noted again.

RESOLVED: That:

- i) 5 Members be appointed to a working group to refresh the Corporate Performance and Risk Management Frameworks.**
- ii) The working group make recommendations, following its work, to August 2011 Cabinet.**
- iii) The Working Group set its own terms of reference at its first meeting.**

27. DEBT COLLECTION SERVICE WORKING GROUP

Councillor Johnson, who had been Chair of the working group, stated that this had been an important piece of work. The Group had met with the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Vertex contractors and the two local MPs to discuss issues. It was hoped debt collection would significantly improve with the introduction of a refreshed Fair Debt Policy.

Councillors requested information on the pay points for paying their council tax so that they could inform their residents.

A brief discussion took place around the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) and it was explained that the Council was able to resolve the issues the two organisations had with each other. There was a challenge in that the CAB advised people to pay off bank and other debts before those of the council simply because banks and other companies were more aggressive in collecting their debts. However, this could cause people's council related debts to increase year on year. It was hoped the refreshed policy would resolve this issue.

The Committee debated the role of the credit union and although they felt it was a good body through which to manage debt collection, those who used the union were not necessarily the same people who were not paying their council tax.

RESOLVED:

- i) **That the Committee note the findings of the working group.**
- ii) **That the Committee recommend to Cabinet the proposals set out in Section 3 and summarised in Section 5 of the report.**

The meeting finished at 8.59pm.

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIRMAN

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
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or alternatively e-mail mboulter@thurrock.gov.uk**