

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a Meeting of the Service Delivery and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Knowle, Sidmouth on Wednesday 21 October 2009

- Present:** Councillors:
Steve Hall (Chairman)
Frances Newth (Vice Chairman)
Vivien Duval Steer
Douglas Hull
Ken Potter
- Officers:** Mark Williams – Chief Executive
Debbie Meakin – Democratic Services Officer
Mark Reilly – Head of Streetscene
Paul Deakin – Streetscene
Cherise Foster – Customer Service Manager
Steve Belli – Development Management Manager
Denise Lyon – Corporate Director and Deputy Chief Executive
- Also Present** Councillors:
Paul Diviani
Ray Bloxham
Jill Elson
Iain Chubb
David Cox
Graham Godbeer
Helen Parr
Andrew Moulding
- Apologies:** Councillors:
Roger Boote
David Key
Brenda Taylor
Derek Button
Tony Reed

The meeting started at 6.30pm and ended at 9.00pm.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Service Delivery and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

***18 Public question time**

There were no questions from the public raised at this point of the meeting.

***19 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September were confirmed and signed as a true record.

***20 Development Management Quarterly Measures Report**

Steve Belli presented the quarterly measures report, reminding the Members of the principles for both front line staff and managers, that had now become embedded in working practices. Improvements in performance included:

- Average end to end times for all applications dropping from 57.2 days to 48.8 days in April – June 2009;
- 55.5 days for minor applications compared to 69.3 days for the previous quarter

*20 **Development Management Quarterly Measures Report continued**

- No backlog of applications has built up over the quarter despite the volume received;
- Pre-application enquiries down to 16.1 days to respond to, improving on the previous quarter at 20 days;
- Permitted development enquiry time down to 1.5 days.

High levels of satisfaction were recorded following the surveys of applicants to ask how they found the planning process.

One area of preventable demand identified related to agents. Many agents would call on the day after consultation was completed, to enquire how their application was progressing. There was work to be done in managing the expectation of the agents in explaining that it was not possible to issue a decision notice as soon as the consultation period ended. A regular forum is held with agents and this issue would be discussed at their next meeting.

The number of appeals had decreased with performance being above the national average of 35%, at 22.2%

Members raised some questions on the report, including:

- Did quicker end to end times mean that the quality of assessing the applications was affected? No, consultation with Towns and Parishes and directly affected neighbours continued; no corners cut in the process; and officers took professional pride in the service they provided.
- Were mystery shoppers used to provide user satisfaction information? No, a random sample of actual applicants were contacted by telephone, and asked how they found the service, regardless of the outcome of their application.
- Ward Members would be sent a copy of the officer report on the application where there is a difference in opinion of the Ward Member and the Team recommendation on a householder type application; the Ward Member could ask for the application to go before Development Management Committee, but the Chairman of DMC had the final say. For minor applications, the Ward Member has the right to call the application to Development Management Committee if there were reasonable planning grounds.
- Using the new website for viewing and making comment on applications was causing concern for some Members who felt more training was required. Nick Wright from the planning service had undertaken some training with the Towns and Parishes, and Members were advised to contact him to make arrangements for training.
- Each application was treated on a case by case basis as requested by the customer and validation was carried out in accordance with the published guidance on the type of application, but not to a rigid regime.
- Reception enquiries would be added to the quarterly report under capability at the point of transaction survey.
- End to end charts were difficult to read and officers were asked to review the way this information was presented.

Paul Diviani, Chairman of the Development Management Committee, advised Members of the benefits of the pre-application service, and his request for the Overview and Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee to look at a proposal for charging for pre-application advice. He welcomed the quarterly measures report, which showed clear improvements and evidence that the systems thinking approach is delivering good improvements.

***20 Development Management Quarterly Measures Report continued**

The Chairman added his congratulations to the work undertaken by the service in adopting the new approach and the improvements made as a result.

RESOLVED: that the report on Development Management Quarterly Measures April – June 2009 be noted.

***21 Preventable demand in the Customer Service Centre**

The Chairman reminded Members of the origins of the report, as a request by Councillor Douglas Hull to investigate why there were difficulties in contacting the Council by telephone at certain times.

Cherise Foster, Customer Services Manager, presented a further report covering comparable periods following phases one and two of the new refuse and recycling scheme. Despite an increase in call volume following phase two, preventable contacts had decreased to 38% of the refuse and recycling cases recorded.

David Cox, Portfolio Holder for Streetscene, ran through a number of improvements made following phase one, and circulated a paper highlighting the volume of collections and the percentage of those collections missed at 0.22% for October 2008 to September 2009.

In preparation for phase three, which covered Honiton, further improvements were being made:

- the information leaflet for householders, which included information about the roadshows being held;
- complete lorry fleet should be in place;
- many part-time/casual staff used for the first two phases taken on as full time staff;
- new routing software to aid efficiency of routes and easily handle changes of routes;
- meeting with the new bin delivery contractor to ensure better service delivered and feedback on success of delivery.

Members robustly questioned the Portfolio Holder and officers Mark Reilly, Head of Streetscene, and Paul Deakin from Streetscene on the statistics presented, and management issues in general surrounding the collection of refuse and recycling, including:

- What lessons had been learnt from the first two phases, and assurances that such improvements would lead to fewer calls to the CSC to clarify. Improvements were re-iterated on items like the information leaflet and an increase in roadshows to help with public understanding of the new refuse and recycling scheme.
- Comparative figures on missed collections were being sought from other authorities in order to benchmark.
- Survey by MEL/WRAP on participation had shown an 84% take up on recycling service in Ottery St Mary and there was confidence that the estimate of 66% for the remaining phases was correct.
- Attempts had been made in the past to seek accurate information from the County Council about road closures or works that may disrupt recycling and refuse collections; as well as reporting issues of parking on narrow roads that prevented access to larger vehicles. It was hoped that newly elected County Councillors would help facilitate talks to improve this situation.
- Missed bins were regularly reported to the Refuse and Recycling Board and particular effort made to resolve cases where multiple missed collections had occurred.

Members were keen to see future improvement to the preventable demand identified from the telephone calls made to the Council following phase 3 and welcomed the success of the new refuse and recycling scheme to date.

- RESOLVED:**
1. that the report on Preventable Demand in the Customer Service Centre, and actions taken by the Board and StreetScene to reduce it, be noted;
 2. that a report on Preventable Demand is presented to the Committee following the roll-out of phase three.

22 **Use of Resources Action Plan**

Simon Davey, Head of Finance, updated Members on the action plan drawn up in response to the Areas of Improvement identified by the Council's external auditors. This followed the first Use of Resources assessment under the new Comprehensive Area Assessment for 2008/09.

The Council had achieved a scoring of level 2, "performing adequately". In previous assessment level 3 had been achieved; however the criteria had now changed and many authorities have seen a drop in their score on assessment as a result. The full report on the assessment would be considered by the Audit and Governance Committee.

Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder for Communities, raised concern on how to include all the work carried out in terms of networking and facilitating with partner authorities and other agencies, which was difficult to measure but took up resources. Mark Williams, Chief Executive, updated Members on a report being presented to the Strategic Management Team to define what a partnership constitutes; narrowing the scope would mean an easier task in identifying resource use.

Andrew Moulding, Portfolio Holder for Resources, endorsed the action plan and added that many of the areas identified by the external auditors were issues already known to the Council and processes already underway to address. These issues included strengthening internal audit and evidencing fraud work.

Ken Potter, Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee, advised Members that his Committee would be considering future plans to deal with identified areas such as internal audit and completion of the new risk register. Information from the risk register on fraud would be used to produce an action plan specifically targeted at that issue.

- RESOLVED:**
- that future reports on the progress on the Use of Resources Action Plan be submitted to the Audit and Governance Committee for monitoring.

- RECOMMENDED:**
- that the Audit and Governance Committee refers any areas of concern in the Action Plan to the Service Delivery and Performance Committee for consideration.

*23 **Quarterly Monitoring of Performance – 2nd Quarter 2009/10**

At the previous meeting of the Committee, the Head of Organisational Development took Members through some of the indicators where graphs on comparative performance had been provided. The way this information had been presented had been changed and improved to make it clearer for Members; the information had been arranged around the Council's corporate priorities.

*23 **Quarterly Monitoring of Performance – 2nd Quarter 2009/10 (continued)**

Members attending this meeting had not been present at the previous meeting and therefore had not had the benefit of this presentation and were concerned about how the information was presented. Denise Lyon, Corporate Director, explained how the summary sheet represented projects under way for each Corporate Priority and how subsequent information set out those projects.

Members still had concerns about putting the information in context, using the statistics on Affordable Housing as an example, where it was not clear exactly how many houses had been delivered. Jill Elson, Portfolio Holder for Communities, updated Members with detail on the related performance indicators, which helped to place the information into context.

- RESOLVED:**
1. that the report on Quarterly Monitoring of Performance – 2nd Quarter 2009/10 be noted;
 2. that further review of the presentation of the report is made to help put the information into context.

*24 **Benefits Service Inspection**

Simon Davey, Head of Finance, discussed with Members the recently published report from the Audit Commission, following their inspection of the Benefits service.

The overall finding was that the service was fair; with uncertain prospects for improvement. Following the changes to processes under the systems thinking review, claims were being processed quicker. However the Audit Commission criticised that weaknesses were still apparent in accuracy (disputed by us) and delays in dealing with claims received by post (agreed by us).

The report also criticised:

- limited opening times for the service
- lack of private space to discuss claims
- weak management of complaints
- minimal consultation which had resulted in advice given by voluntary groups conflicting with the Council's preferred method of benefit claim management
- not tackling fraud effectively
- Political and managerial leadership as weak

Positive comments in the report included:

- Improvement in value for money for the service
- 100% subsidy through improvement in reducing overpayment and unnecessary delay
- Discretionary Housing Payments scheme helping vulnerable people
- Good quality of information provided to claimants

In comparison with other authorities, 17 other inspections had been conducted where 13 resulted in a "poor" score, and the Council being one of the remaining 4 classified by the Audit Commission as "fair". Only a few authorities had a rating of having promising prospects for improvement.

A number of recommendations were contained within the Audit Commission's report, which officers, working closely with the Portfolio Holder, were undertaking.

*24 **Benefits Service Inspection (continued)**

The Chief Executive highlighted to Members the difficulties in reaching the final report following an appeal against the earlier draft. The systems thinking approach of meeting customer needs and getting improvement by using the measures did not match the Audit Commission approach of setting arbitrary targets. This would be an issue for future inspections and it was not clear if the Audit Commission would adapt its approach accordingly.

Members discussed some points for consideration in reviewing opening hours and running of benefit surgeries, in light of demands for space and the success of home visits offered by the service.

RESOLVED: that an update on progress on the Recommendations made by the Audit Commission on the Benefits Service be presented to the Committee at their next meeting.

*25 **Service Delivery and Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan**

Members considered the Service Delivery Performance Overview and Scrutiny Committee Forward Plan 2009/10.

RESOLVED:

1. that Forward Plan be noted;
2. that the item on exploring local issues with towns and parishes be deferred to a future meeting, to permit more time to prepare the item.

Chairman Date.....