

## MINUTES

### FINANCE & RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 MARCH 2012

#### Present:

H Chapman (Chairman)	Douris
Adshead	Marshall
Clark	Organ
Collins	Taylor
Doole	W Wyatt-Lowe

#### Also in attendance:

Councillor Ayling, Portfolio Holder for Service and Performance Improvement  
Councillor Tiley, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources

#### Officers:

Nicola Ellis	Group Manager – Revenues, Benefits and Fraud
Shane Flynn	Assistant Director – Finance and Resources
David Gill	Group Manager – Partnerships, Policy and Citizen Insight
Ben Hosier	Group Manager – Commissioning, Procurement & Compliance
Tracy Lancashire	Senior Manager – Contact Centre
Janice Milsom	Assistant Director – Strategy & Transformation, Community & Organisation
Elissa Rospigliosi	Corporate Graduate
Linda Smith	Senior Manager – Customer Service Centre
Lucy Stone	Member Support Officer (Minutes)
Louise Dolphin	Member Support Officer (Minutes)

**The meeting started at 7.30pm following a tour of the Customer Services Unit and Contact Centre.**

#### **OS/67/12 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meetings held on 31 January 2012 and 2 February 2012 were confirmed by the members present and were then signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendment:

Councillors Adshead and Marshall attended the joint budget meetings on 2 February, but had both attended the Housing and Community OSC and therefore should not be listed as present on the minutes for this Committee.

#### **OS/68/12 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were no apologies for absence. Councillors Townsend and White were absent.

#### **OS/69/12 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor Collins declared a personal interest as he was a trustee of the Dacorum Citizens' Advice Bureau.

**OS/70/12 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

None

**OS/71/12 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

None

**OS/72/12 THE ROLE AND PERFORMANCE OF THE CUSTOMER SERVICE UNIT**

Councillor Ayling said that he hoped the Committee had found the tour of the Customer Service Unit and Contact Centre useful. He said that the service was vital to the running of the Council and that a lot of knowledge was required by each Customer Services Representative as they covered all of the Council's services.

D Gill outlined the report and said it provided an overall picture of the service. He said that almost all enquiries were dealt with at the first point of contact in the Contact Centre. Some wait times within the Customer Service Centre were longer than desired, but there was no appointment system. There were on average 3 to 4 complaints a month which was a very small percentage of the nearly 300,000 calls received per year. Dacorum Borough Council had scored second highest throughout the County on a recent mystery shopper test.

D Gill explained that there were other initiatives underway to improve customer services; a customer first policy would be introduced and the appropriate use of voicemail would be strongly encouraged. D Gill said that people made judgements about the Council from their experience with the Customer Service Unit and that responsibility for the Council's reputation was taken very seriously.

Key points of discussion

Councillor Taylor thanked the officers for the tour and also gave congratulations on the achievements so far. He acknowledged the importance of reputation.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe said that he had looked at the Society of Information Technology Management which had showed that servicing customers through a Customer Service Centre cost around ten times more than through an electronic service. He asked what steps were in place to encourage that shift. D Gill said that Cabinet had approved a Web and Customer Access strategy last year which included measures to channel shift customers into cheaper interaction where appropriate. He added that this would not take over from the Customer Service Unit or Contact Centre but would move the interaction with a proportion of customers.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe asked if any staff were employed on a part time basis to cover the busier times. T Lancashire said that some staff were part time both to cover the busier times and also to cover the lunch breaks of the full time staff.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe said he was surprised that there was no caller identification system which would save time. T Lancashire said that it would not link in with the current system.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe suggested having a board with rolling text highlighting any messages for that day. D Gill said that was an excellent suggestion and that they would look into providing that.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe also asked if there was an emergency contact number when the Centre was closed. T Lancashire explained that the only out of hours telephone service was for emergency housing repairs. She said, however, that the external provider of this service had a list of emergency Council contact details for other services.

Councillor Collins asked if there was a way of reducing the corporate fields interaction. D Gill explained that this included payments and the Dacorum Card and said that this was being looked into.

Councillor Collins also referred to the Govmetric results for 2011, and asked work was being carried out to investigate why 28% of responses were average or poor. L Smith said that customers could leave text or voice responses onto the Govmetric system. She said that a lot of reasons for poor or average were due to the customer not getting the answer they were looking for rather than the quality of the customer service provided. If there were areas which could be improved from the comments received, actions were put in place.

Councillor Douris sought clarification on the first table of the appendix to the report. L Smith said it showed how many customers had been served, the average waiting time, the longest waiting time and how that related to performance. It then showed the same data for the serving time.

Councillors Marshall and Adshead asked why in the same table there were lines for 'Payments' and 'Payments And' and 'Env Health' and 'Environmental Health'. L Smith said the table included statistics from Berkhamsted and Tring which were listed differently as they did not have touch screens.

Councillor Doole said it was important to robustly test any technology before launching a service promoting a channel shift.

Councillor Douris suggested checking that the Police had the correct emergency contact details for Council emergency officers.

Councillor H Chapman said he was surprised that the self service facility in the Customer Service Unit was not used more. He suggested promoting it more.

Councillor H Chapman thanked the officers for the tour and report.

**Outcome:**

The report was noted.

**OS/73/12      EQUALITIES CONSULTATION**

E Rospigliosi presented the report which provided an update in response to changes in legislation. It was proposed that the equalities strategy be revised later in 2012. The Equalities Act 2010, however, required that the Council set and publish at least one objective in April. The following four objectives were proposed for consideration:

1. Develop a more robust, sophisticated and usable set of equalities data on our service users.

2. Improve inclusion, access to services and opportunities for involvement for all people in Dacorum. To develop a pilot project to address the needs of Deaf residents.
3. Increase the proportion of incidents reports to the Council which are recorded as hate crime or hate related incidents.
4. Develop our consultation base so that it becomes more representative of the community.

#### Key points of discussion

Councillor Marshall said that if users were being asked to provide more information than just their ethnicity, that it could cause offence. She suggested including a preamble to explain why the Council would be doing this. E Rospigliosi said this was a good idea.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe asked why more than one objective was being set when only one was required. E Rospigliosi said that although the legislation required only one, all four would be useful for the Council to adopt.

Councillor Douris asked if there was a timeline for achieving the objectives as they could potentially lose their focus if there was no end date. E Rospigliosi said that the precise timeline would be developed within the Equalities Strategy later in the year. This would include a set of measurable outcomes.

Councillor H Chapman asked how the proportion of hate related incidents being reported to and by the Council would be increased. E Rospigliosi said work would be carried out on raising staff awareness on what constituted a hate related crime as they were currently not being recorded correctly. There were toolkits being developed, aimed at people who were suffering discrimination but did not want to report it. These would also be used.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe said that he did not think that dedicated community centres were a good idea. He said that mixed use of existing centres was better for encouraging cohesion.

#### Outcome

1. Members noted the objectives and made comments included above.
2. Members agreed that the revised Equalities Strategy come back to this Committee later in the year.

### **OS/74/12 FINANCIAL QUARTER 3 MONITORING REPORT**

#### Key points of discussion

Councillor Collins said that although it was interesting to see how the budget was performing to target, that it would also be helpful to see how it compared with previous years. S Flynn said that trend data could be valuable. The number of budget lines, however, had been reduced by up to a third in order to simplify the process. The lines, therefore, would not be comparable with previous years. S Flynn said they would be able to provide this information in time and would look at the format of reporting for subsequent years.

Councillor Doole asked why money for CSU Development had been removed from the budget. S Flynn said he did not know exactly what the money had been for; he would

provide the Committee with an answer. It had been removed as it had slipped for two years.

Councillor Doole referred to the £10,000 'works not required' for the Denes Structural works and asked why it was not required. S Flynn said he would come back to the Committee with a response.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe said it was strange that there was an underspend of nearly £74,000 within Aids and Adaptations. He asked if this was because the rules were too stringent. Councillor Marshall said the Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee had looked at Aids and Adaptations and said that it was a demand led area with many factors to take into consideration.

Councillor Douris asked if there was a danger that the S106 monies would be lost. S Flynn said it was not likely as in some cases the schemes were fairly flexible in what they could be used for and there was a review process to help ensure it was spent by the due date.

Councillor H Chapman said he was pleased to see that there were no major overspends and thanked the officer for his report.

Actions:

S Flynn to provide responses to the following queries:

1. What the CSU Development money had been budgeted for
2. What works had been cancelled for The Denes Structural works.

Outcome

The report was noted.

**OS/75/12 REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE UPDATE**

Councillor Tiley expressed his apologies for the error in the Council tax leaflet. He said the cost of correcting this and sending out a revised document would cost around £15,000 to £20,000. He added that all the bills had been correct, but that the table which contained the mistake was statutory information and needed to be corrected. He said that lessons would be learnt from this mistake. S Flynn accepted full responsibility for the error, which was why the letters to all tax payers went out in his name.

N Ellis presented the report. She said that the service had faced a challenging year with high volumes of work, vacancies and the economic climate in terms of collection. In Benefits, the caseload had increased by 2.5% to over 11,000 in the last year. The Council also had a higher than average volume of changes relating to benefit.

N Ellis explained that there were various performance initiatives mentioned in the report and highlighted the main work, which was with Liberata. It was hoped that this would help improve productivity which was why challenging targets had been set.

Council Tax collection had been ahead of target despite the economic climate. Business rates had been more volatile and drops in collection rates had been experienced in Dacorum and across Hertfordshire. There would be a full review of the recovery strategy to maximise opportunities with joint working to support businesses.

The Corporate Anti-Fraud team had a target of achieving 50% positive outcomes and had achieved 61.3%. They were continuing to carry out proactive work with Deloitte on counter fraud work including looking at risk assessments for Council departments and housing tenancy fraud. This target had been increased to 55%.

#### Key points of discussion

Councillor Marshall asked if there were enough staff to deal with the demand of increased claimants in the recession. N Ellis said that it was currently difficult to meet the demand, but work was underway with Liberata to improve efficiency. There was potential also to buy and sell resources through a grid operated by Liberata. S Flynn added that additional resources had been put into the service to clear the backlog.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe said that some other authorities had targets of only 15 days where they did not differentiate between new claims and changes. He asked if Dacorum Borough Council's targets could be improved to match others. N Ellis said that where both new claims and changes to claims were recorded together, the average number of days would be fewer as the changes to claims would bring the average number of days down. She said, however, that the service constantly strived to improve.

Councillor Doole asked how the new target on accuracy would be measured. N Ellis said targets were set for individuals; there was a 4% standard check for each officer, with a desired further 10% of claims processed to be checked.

Councillor H Chapman asked if the Training Officer would be in post on 2 April. N Ellis confirmed that they would. Councillor H Chapman also said it would be helpful if the report could state what the previous targets had been alongside the new targets. N Ellis said she would include this information in future reports.

#### Actions:

N Ellis to include information on previous targets alongside new targets in future reports.

#### **Outcome**

The report was noted.

### **OS/76/12 ASSET MANAGEMENT**

S Flynn said a more strategic approach to Asset Management was being proposed. He went through the seven Key Asset Strategies outlined in the report which had been drawn out of existing approaches to provide a strategic context for future operational decision-making. S Flynn also stated that the parts of the report and Strategic Asset Plan relating to governance arrangements were as they existed in the current Asset Management Plan but were to be revised. Comments on these arrangements would be taken into account in the revision prior to submission to Cabinet.

#### Key points of discussion

Councillor Doole referred to this Committee reviewing the Asset Management Plan and asked if it differed to this report. S Flynn said that in future more detailed plans would come to this Committee.

Councillor Collins asked whether Town and Parish Councils would be consulted particularly given that they may be able to take on assets under the Localism Act. S Flynn said there was a Localism Action Plan which would overlap with the Asset Management Plan. There would be engagement with others and opportunities would be sought proactively as proposals came forward.

Councillor W Wyatt-Lowe suggested that the last bullet point of the first paragraph of the Strategic Asset Management Plan 2012-14 was impossible to achieve. He said it should state 'achieve the *best possible* sustainable use of local, national and global resources'

Councillor H Chapman asked if it was normal practice to consider the disposal of an asset when considering its acquisition. S Flynn confirmed that it was.

### **Outcome**

The report was noted.

### **OS/77/12      WORK PROGRAMME 2012/13**

The work programme was noted. Reports on Procurement and Equalities would be added to the work programme.

### **OS/78/12      EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC**

That, under s.100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 Schedule 12A Part 1 as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during the item in Part II of the Agenda for this meeting, because it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted, that if members of the public were present during this item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information relating to: Sensitive information regarding Watford Borough Council & Three Rivers District Council (Minute OS/79/12).

### **OS/79/12      PROCUREMENT REVIEW**

Full details can be found in the Part II minutes.

### **Resolved:**

The report was noted.

The meeting ended at 9.05pm