

MINUTES

STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

9 JUNE 2015

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Adshead
Anderson (Chairman)
Ashbourn
Bateman
Hearn
Hicks
Howard
Matthews
Ransley
Riddick
Wyatt-Lowe (Vice-
Chairman)

Officers:

Cabinet Support Members

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

1 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 March were agreed by the Committee and signed by the Chairman.

2 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor E Collins.

3 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

4 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was none.

5 **CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

None.

6 **PROVISIONAL OUTTURN 2014/15**

R Baker introduced the report and advised that the final figures are currently being worked on and any amendments would be taken to Cabinet on the 29 June 2015.

Cllr Matthews referred to Item 5.4 on Page 7 and the slippage on the regeneration of the Town Centre due to inaccurate forecasting and enquired as to what measures were being taken to ensure more accurate forecasting in the future.

R Baker advised that on this particular scheme the forecasting came from contractors and when they were reviewed in detail it became apparent that we were accounting on different basis, so we reviewed that and that has been taken forward into the 2015/16 forecast.

J Doe further added that the main Town Centre projects are on track and that what has been put in place is a whole team of people to review the costs moving forward, the key appointment being a Costs Manager for the Town Centre, so there are regular monthly meetings with the contractors to check the costs that are coming in that they are reasonable and proportionate and that the scheme is on track.

The Chairman enquired of J Doe if what he was suggesting was that in future when contractors give us cash flows, there may be more caution now regarding the accuracy of those figures.

J Doe advised that a lot of the Town centre works had only really begun in the last 12 months, so the actual money being spent and committed has only really happened in the last 12 months, so we are into the details of governance. He further added that assumptions had been made around when funds would be spent and committed and that is why there is some slippage showing on the programme.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe commented that she was glad that the problem had been identified and requested reassurance that this will now be closely monitored.

J Doe confirmed it would be.

Councillor Ransley offered her congratulations for the underspend on waste and recycling services, but noted that no money had been spent on Neighbourhood Centre Improvements.

J Doe advised that this referred to Growth Area Funding, a source of capital funding awarded to many Councils by the previous Government, in growth areas, such as Hemel Hempstead. He went on to say that around the time the money was awarded in 2008, a whole series of actions had to be put into place, around Hemel Hempstead in

particular, one of which was for improvements to some of the neighbourhood centres. Some of the works carried out were fairly minor, for example street furniture, and so what that money is, is a residual from the GAF allocation which is not actually committed at present and is awaiting allocation.

The Chairman advised that committee that you cannot compare revenue with Capital.

Councillor Hicks enquired with regards to the slippage if this was revenue not received this year but expected next year or if it was spending that had not been spent but was expected next year.

R Baker advised it referred to spending that will happen next year. Councillor Birnie enquired as to what was meant by – Redistributed non domestic rates.

R Baker advised that this needed rewording as it should just be Non domestic rates.

The Chairman noted the General Fund underspend again of 2.3% and acknowledged that this was a small amount at about half a million, but when members ask for small items or works to be done are advised there are no resources, then at the end of the financial year we find an underspend, can cause frustration. He went on to suggest that if, instead of bring back ward member budgets, whether there was another way to capture that underspend, so that rather than members having a set amount each year, the underspend could be captured in some other way.

R Baker advised that the difficulty was that although the underspends are reported they are not known about in advance. He went onto suggest that if members wanted something done then the recommendation would be to talk to senior officers who could then take this forward to Cabinet.

Councillor Matthews sought a point of clarity on FRS 17 adjustments.

R Baker advised that they are an account adjustment to the permission fund.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe referred to Item 3.2 on Page 6 Transport - £50k over budget and acknowledged the £25k savings due to a reduction in the price of fuel. However with regards to the overspend of £50k in relation to transportation costs, asked for a little more detail as this is a new contract and concerns the removal of recyclables to Kent.

D Austin confirmed it did relate to the transportation of co-mingled recyclants to Kent. At

the time of the change in the service, it was estimated that there would be some costs around transportation but they have come out a bit higher, however they have been offset by some of the savings achieved by the introduction of a new waste system.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe enquired as to whether this was due to a miscalculation in the fuel or the award of the transportation contract.

D Austin advised that the £25k savings were partly due to a drop in fuel prices and also partly due to the decision to install our own diesel pump at Cupid Green, to assist with business continuity. He went on to say that the actual transportation contract had been a complex negotiation, resulting in a three year contract with Viridor for the processing of the co-mingled recyclables and that the issue of haulage was being revisited as part of a tendering exercise later this year.

Councillor Matthews referred to Item 3.3 on Page 6 and the surplus of £200k in the area of building control due to large one off applications and enquired how it was envisaged that trend would go in the next fiscal year.

J Doe confirmed that the trend does appear to be increasing, however advised that they have had to be conservative when budgeting for this year, as we are keen not to set the provisional income level too high in case the applications don't come in.

Councillor Riddick continued on Item 3.3 and stated that it was very gratifying to see the over achievement, but enquired as to whether the introduction of CIL is likely to have a significant impact in the next 12 months.

J Doe advised that the introduction of CIL has led to a spike in applications before the CIL deadline, however it was not thought that it will. He went on to explain that the CIL charging levels in the schedule, have been discussed extensively, and we are not looking to depress development demand, but that it would remain to be seen.

The Chairman enquired of R Baker what the staff vacancy factor was.

R Baker advised that it was a percentage applied across the board, effectively a 5% reduction in salaries, that allows for staff turnover.

The Chairman went on to enquire as to whether there was any holistic analysis of the

staff vacancy levels and any mechanism to review if it is set at the right level.

R Baker advised that it is monitored throughout the year and is broadly in line with the 5%. He went on to state that this is not applied to waste services as the agency costs to keep that service running would be too high.

Outcome

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

7 ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

D Austin introduced the report.

Councillor Matthews referred to Item 11.2 on Page 15 relating to a noticeable increase from front line workers citing anxiety, stress and depression and enquired as to what measures were being taken to support staff.

D Austin advised that there was still some analysis being undertaken with regards to the correlation of the recent changes to the waste services and their impact on staff. He went on to advise that all Officers from Team Leader upwards have Mental Health training to make us aware of the signs and what can be done; the Authority also has a network of Mental Health First Aiders, offering a network of people to go to for advice; the Authority also has an Employee Assistance Programme, where staff can make contact anonymously and arrange to receive counselling.

Councillor Matthews enquired as to whether there was any indication of front line workers inordinately accessing or not accessing the services.

D Austin advised he would have to check those figures with colleagues in Human Resources, as the Employee Assistance Programme is operated by them.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe commented that with regards to mental health, Dacorum is taking a lead on this in certainly the South East, if not the County and the officers involved should be congratulated.

The Chairman noted that it still needed to be worked at because it does run at 11 days lost and has done for quite some time.

D Austin advised that they operate a team of between 160-170 front line staff. He went on to add that as an Authority we have a challenging target with regards to sickness absence but there is a recognition that staff are out in all kinds of weather, in a physical natured job but also in a close confinement of a cab, where germs are likely to spread, are likely to have a higher rates of absence than an office environment.

Councillor Ashbourn referred to Item 8.31 and the A41 and began by offering congratulations on the difference the clean made to the area, but enquired as to what was being done to monitor and prevent the littering from getting that bad again.

D Austin advised that the issue for the Authority is that there is a range of issues on the street cleansing side and we could probably invest more into cleansing the A41 roadside but that a judgement has to be made bearing in mind the expense of particularly the traffic management, which will be up to £1000 a day, so a judgement is made as to how frequently we will litter pick such a road and a judgement has been made that twice a year is adequate. More will be being done in terms of education awareness, talking to Hertfordshire Highways with regards to getting more signage put up on the A41, more signs on the automated boards to prevent littering. Also looking at enforcement initiatives, as on places like the A41 it is not so much domestic generated waste but more skip lorries that are not properly containing their waste, so we have written to all the skip companies to ask for reassurance about how they are securing their loads and looking at later this year carrying out Operation Tipstop, where, in conjunction with the Police, any vehicles carrying waste are stopped and duty of care certificates are inspected to make sure they are bona fide waste carriers, as it can also be about some people who are not following the law. He concluded by advising that it is a complex picture, where we can always do better and that it tends to be more noticeable before the grass grows in the spring time and we get the most complaints regarding the A41.

Councillor Ashbourn noted that this was very relevant to promoting Dacorum, which is generally an attractive place to be.

The Chairman particularly welcomed the enforcement angle as he believes a camera would clean up far more than it would cost very quickly, but that that was down to Herts Highways.

Councillor Adshead commented that the difference was noticeable after the clean up had happened but that it was already beginning to look like nothing had happened. He went on to enquire as to what was being done to make people aware that their Council Tax was being spent to clear this up and advertising the cost involved in this.

D Austin advised that lots of information goes out not just regarding the A41. There had recently been a press release not just about the amount of litter but also the various types of items that are picked up. However to deal with litter effectively, you need to have effective enforcement and the best possible education awareness. He went on to advise that they do a lot of work with schools and community groups on litter pick ups. Also operational effectiveness with picking it up as quickly as you can with the resources you have.

Councillor Hearn made reference to the collection of road kill from the A41 as this is disturbing for young people in vehicles. He went on to advise that the road kill is quite often there longer than 7 days and included deer, badgers and foxes and cited one occasion on the stretch between the M25 and Tring, he had counted 3 deer, 4 badgers, 3 foxes and not one was moved for 7 days. He enquired as to what steps could be taken to improve that as it is extremely disturbing.

D Austin advised he had not had that complaint raised to him for many years, but that he would look at that issue and that it may be a need to talk to Herts Highways to secure a better response to that.

Councillor Marshall commented regarding the sickness and stress and understood the concerns that had been raised and offered some background information that the Finance & Resources OSC have been looking into this in the past years and that they get the reports from the staff survey and the stress survey. She added that 3 reports had been received by the Committee last year as there appear to be some hotspots for increased stress levels and offered reassurance that it is on the radar for both the Finance & Resources OSC and also for Human Resources.

Councillor Sutton commented regarding the littering of the A41 and noted that the road runs through our Borough, that quite a lot of the litter is spread by people who do not live in the Borough and are just passing through and stated that his own personal opinion was that a lot of people who live in the Borough are proud of the Borough and don't litter like that.

Councillor Riddick noted that other neighbouring boroughs and districts use signage to tackle litter and enquired if there was any feedback as to the effectiveness of this.

D Austin advised that there is no objective evidence in terms of any positive effects, but clearly anything that raises awareness would have a positive effect. However he did advise that there is some complex legislation around signage.

Councillor Ransley commented that on the A41 in the Bucks area they have removed all litter bins and replaced with signs requesting people take their litter home with them and enforcement and noted that they do appear to have less litter on that part of the A41.

D Austin commented that this was an interesting approach that could be explored, however the feedback from the teams who did the A41 litter pick was that that stretch was actually much worse than the Dacorum stretch, however it is about opinion and that clearly any approach that has benefit would be looked at.

Councillor Matthews referred to the performance report on Page 16 and queried that CSG05 had not been signed off and enquired as to why.

D Austin advised that this appeared to be a glitch in the system that produces the performance figures.

Councillor Matthews then referred to TW03 and enquired as to why this PI was to be scrapped next year.

D Austin advised it was part of the service planning process and that a judgement had to be made as to which objectives are meaningful against performance. In this instance it was not felt that this was an externally focused indicator, but that they would relook at indicators if there are views regarding performance.

Councillor Hicks referred to the A41 being a strategic link and at what point this was paid for by us as a Borough rather than nationally.

D Austin confirmed that the M1 and A5 from Junction 9 are managed by Highways Agency but the A41 is managed by Herts Highways in respect of grass cutting and Dacorum in regards of litter picking.

The Chairman enquired as to why the Borough has to pay the County Council for traffic management to enable us to get on there to meet our statutory responsibility.

D Austin advised that where possible the litter picking teams try to 'piggy back' the grass cutters but it is also felt that we should be litter picking above and beyond that. There are also concerns from Hertfordshire Highways with regards to the congestion it can cause. He went on to advise that overnight work is currently being looked at to reduce the problems of traffic backing up to the M25. There is a regular operational meeting with Herts Highways to try and ensure the best joined up approach.

The Chairman enquired that at a strategic level is there any type of statutory responsibility that we could trade with Herts County Council that would make them responsible for the litter picking.

D Austin advised that that is an option that could be explored.

Councillor Matthews referred to Appendix 4 on Page 23 and asked what the figures 93.3% in Quarter 1 meant and what they are telling us about litter.

D Austin advised that the top figure referred to the number of inspections and the % figure referred to the % of acceptable cleanliness standard. He advised that inspected areas are graded A – D, with A being very clean and no litter to give an idea of quality control and where to allocate resources with regards to litter and cleansing.

Councillor Birnie enquired after the anomalies in the graphs on Page 21 for example the differences in plastic and plastic can starting off very high and ending up with zero.

D Austin advised that this was due to changes in the waste collection service at the end of last year from a source separated system to a co-mingled collection. He went on to say that as we move forward the initial graphs will no longer be relevant.

Councillor Matthews concluded by advising that a large number of constituents had said how much better the new system was and suggested that Dave and his department should be congratulated on these efficiencies.

Outcome

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

8 PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT & REGENERATION QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

J Doe introduced the report.

Councillor Matthews referred to Item 12 on Page 30 in relation to Land Charges and noted that the current processing time is 11 days which is below target and enquired as to why that was.

J Doe advised that Land Charges are a very precise thing and the information has to be 100% accurate. The information is gathered from various sources and so can take new officers a little time to get up to speed with the process. The other issue is that we do not have a fully digitalised system and therefore large parts of the process are quite manual.

Councillor Matthews challenged that the project had not yet been fully invested in to digitalise the system and if there were any plans to do so.

J Doe advised that there is a service plan for the department and that one task the new Group manager will be given is to action that project, however it was stated that discussions regarding resourcing of this are yet to be had.

Councillor Ashbourn noted that it was reassuring that the department was back up to full staff strength and noted the earlier comment regarding a back up of applications in a rush to beat CIL, enquired if there was now confidence that the staff were able to cope.

J Doe offered that assurance as they are now processing more applications than are coming in during a week. He went on to advise that they currently had a number of agency staff working at present which has provided professional capacity quickly, with the advantage of being able to let such agency staff go if the workload reduces. . He tempered that with the fact that full time posts are still being recruited into and that the service has grown to the extent that a new full time post has been created.

Councillor Howard enquired as to how much the agency staff had impacted on the salaries.

J Doe advised there is a formalised process that needs to be completed which includes making a case for why agency staff may be required, this is scrutinised by Finance department as well to scrutinise costs and budget pressures.

Councillor Sutton wished to pay tribute to the planning staff. As the previous Chairman of Development Control in the last 12 months he had witnessed the amount of pressure the staff had been under but commented that the quality of work had always been exceptional. He went on to say that it was a department to be immensely proud of and was one of the more professional planning teams if not in the South East, then in Hertfordshire.

The Chairman stated that was supported by the committee.

Councillor Birnie enquired as to what the risk register meant.

The Chairman advised that Risk is something that will be picked up by the Member Development group as a training need as it can be quite detailed.

J Doe advised that what is important is that risk management is an important part of project management and that risks almost become part of the agenda of projects along with finance.

Councillor Matthews asked for clarity on the difference between inherent probability and residual probability.

J Doe advised that once you know what the inherent risk is you can look at what types of mitigation could be brought in and once those controls are applied you should be able to bring the risk level down leaving you with the residual probability.

Outcome

The Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

The Meeting ended at 8.45 pm