

MINUTES

STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

8 SEPTEMBER 2015

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Anderson (Chairman)
Ashbourn
Fisher
Howard
Ransley
Riddick
Wyatt-Lowe (Vice-
Chairman)

Officers:

Cabinet Support Members

The meeting began at 7.32 pm

17 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 07 July 2015 were confirmed by the members present and signed by the Chairman.

18 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies received from Councillor G Adshead, Matthews and S Hearn

19 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

20 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

OS/175/15 PROVISIONAL OUTTURN Q1

R Baker introduced the report. Section two of the report provides an overall summary of the general fund position £785,000 overspend, of this £279,000 were in the budgets in the remits of the committee which are detailed in section three. Section 4 provides details of the variance of the capital programme which is at £64,000 overspend, details of which are outlined in the agenda.

Councillor Ashbourn referred to paragraph 3.1 and asked if the unproductive service was linked to the sickness levels or were there other reasons.

D Austin said that was a range of factors and there was a range of sophisticated modelling of the new service making sure the resources were sufficient. The sickness were higher than expected as there were long term complex issues within the department. Therefore, there was a need to use agency staff that can make the service less productive.

Councillor Ashbourn then asked what restrictive duties meant and what that involved.

C Thorpe said that some crew members are unable to fulfil full duties, for example, they might be able to empty some of the smaller bins but not the large commercial bins.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe referred to paragraph 3.1 and mentioned that the savings targets were not being achieved. Two additional waste collections required so why were they required. Quick overview of where the investigations are at and is the department likely to get the overspend back.

D Austin said that they have reigned in the additional round for garden waste so that is one piece of work already complete. Currently looking around ideas about working practices and including the contractual conditions of group task and finish which may be having an impact. Also looking at modelling work that was already done to look at any further efficiency.

Councillor Hicks arrived at 7.38pm

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe asked officers to clarify what task and finish meant.

D Austin said that historically in the waste industry, collection crews will typically work contractual hours, group task and finish or individual task and finish. Individual task and finish involves a crew – which is a driver and two loaders – going home once they have finished their allocated work. Group task and finish is when all crews must finish all the rounds before they can go home and this is what is currently operated.

Councillor Riddick referred back to paragraph 3.1 and the proportion of savings. Is the service not as productive or was the target set too ambitious in the first place.

D Austin said they had a member's task and finish groups which involved looking at several service combinations. An external waste specialist was used to come in and do the modelling work as part of the Herts Waste Partnership. The modelling is correct, but there is something else going on which means the targets are not being met.

Councillor Riddick then asked if there are instances of work-related sickness then is Health and Safety involved and also, agency staff are expensive but less effective. Councillor Riddick asked if there could be a culture of 'them and us' and wanted to know how much longer the agency staff will be required.

D Austin said that in comparative terms, agency staff are not more expensive per person but they can lead to service quality issues.

The Chairman asked if there were any other reasons that had been identified which may be affecting the service.

D Austin said it is quite difficult in terms of cause and effect to work out what is really going on. D Austin said he was pretty confident that a factor is the sickness absence, as well as the group task and finish which has led to some crews feeling that other crews are not working as hard as they could be and therefore slowing down to compensate. In the short term, one solution could be moving towards individual task and finish may be a better idea and could increase productivity. There may be other factors in terms of how staff adapt to changes in the service with regards to weekly food waste collections.

Councillor Fisher asked that when staffing levels are set, is there any allowance made for sickness and annual leave.

C Thorpe said that the full 27 days annual leave is taken into account and when the budget is set, they do include budgeted sick days.

Outcome

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

23 PERFORMANCE REPORT - ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES QUARTER 1

OS/176/15 ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

C Thorpe introduced the report and went through some of the current Environmental Services projects. The department celebrated National Compost week which saw the Council give away 10 tonnes of compost that was given to the Council from D Williams, who are the new Green Waste contractors. This

was all claimed within 50 minutes of Cupid Green opening. The biggest change on the waste collection service was the move to plastic shopping bags instead of the green compost liners has saved residents significant amounts of money throughout the year. The department worked for quite a long time with anaerobic waste contractor before deciding they preferred the fact that they could extract plastic shopping bags from the food waste. The change was well publicised online and in the Dacorum Digest. With regards to Clean, Safe and Green, the official opening of the Walled Gardens in Gadebridge Park was opened by the Mayor. Furthermore, the Women's Tour of Britain was well attended. The team completed a bedding display for Tring Town's 700th anniversary was completed. Three parks were judged and received green flag for them. The department have started harvesting timber from Chipperfield Common to be used to make benches to place in the borough. In terms of sickness levels within Clean, Safe and Green are slightly higher than the budget of 303 days and Refuse was again slightly higher and over the budget by 43.2 days. Long term sickness cases have now ended for this quarter and there is a mix of these long term cases ranging from a heart attack at work, deep vein thrombosis and cardiovascular problems.

In terms of the reasons for sickness, they have started to be recorded for the last few quarters to give the Committee a flavour of why staff members are off. Some of it is work related like back problems, muscular-skeletal and gastrointestinal problems. C Thorpe stated that sickness was to be expected as the crews work in close proximity of one another. Some members of staff have been on restrictive duties for a number of years and the reasons range from existing neck and back issues, injuries at work and this has resulted in mainly drivers, being able to move wheel bins but not being able to empty recycling boxes or food caddies. The members of staff on restricted duties have been referred to Occupational Health to determine whether they are able to return to full duties and the staff have been made aware of this process. Three staff members have now been declared fit to return to work, awaiting another report and one colleague is yet to see Occupational Health but they are all expected to return within one month.

On Clean, Safe and Green, the department has been working closely with the Health and Safety executive to ensure issues are being addressed in relation to hand-arm vibrations. Currently, it is not a major issue in the service but this disorder has been pre-empted and a lot of work is being done with the staff so they can recognise the conditions that cause it and the equipment is regularly tested.

In terms of performance data, in quarter one the team collected 3,600 tonnes of communal waste, 1000 ton food waste, 3770 tonnes of green waste which was slightly down throughout the country. Every quarter, the department is emptying 7.5 million containers and all targets have been achieved despite them being stricter than previously.

Councillor Ashbourn remarked that contagious illnesses also apply in other work places and how are anxiety, stress and gastrointestinal problems qualified?

C Thorpe answered that work related stress has only been a recent occurrence due to the service being changed and perhaps, crews working harder and longer to what they were used to in the past. The department undertakes return to work meetings and keeps in regular contact with staff members that are off work. Most of the stress is due to the staff member's home life not working life.

Councillor Ashbourn then asked if officers will be closely monitoring the sickness levels and comparing with other sectors.

C Thorpe stated that the department has been doing so for years and with the introduction of FirstCare, it is hoped that it will produce data of a higher quality.

Councillor Hicks asked if this data was for the last three months.

C Thorpe confirmed that it was for the months of April, May, and June 2015.

Councillor Hicks indicated that obviously, these months have good weather and absences due to colds and flu will increase in the cold winter months.

C Thorpe acknowledged this and said the service experiences peaks and troughs with season change.

Councillor Howard asked if the department encourages its staff to have the flu injection.

C Thorpe told the Committee that they have approximately 85-90% take up of the flu injection and every year it is advertised with posters so the crew are aware each year.

Councillor C Wyatt-Lowe referred to the Operational Risk Register and asked the department was satisfied with the measures in place and therefore confident it could remove the reds.

C Thorpe believed his department were doing everything they can to manage sickness. He said he was working closely with staff members and the return to work interviews are completed within 24 hours. The department offers out the assistance program if needs be and regular sickness reviews where staff are set targets and if these targets are not met, there is the option to suspend sick pay.

Councillor Riddick referred to item 11.2 and asked regarding hand-arm vibrations affecting other equipment as the grass cutting season is coming to an end. Furthermore, in item 3.1 the report states that FirstCare will reduce sickness levels but what does that actually mean.

C Thorpe advised that hand-arm vibrations can be caused by leaf blowers, strimmers and hedge cutters. The teams can have up to 10 staff and the jobs are shared between the staff. Also, each member of staff keeps a diary of the time spent on each piece of equipment. With regards to FirstCare, it will help manage sickness consistently as staff must ring a medically qualified operator and they can give advice about how long an absence is required.

Councillor Riddick expressed his support and stated that this was a positive new measure.

Councillor Ashbourn noted that it might be interesting to compare with other sectors.

C Thorpe said they intended to compare with other authorities.

Outcome

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

24 PLANNING DEVELOPMENT & REGENERATION Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

OS/177/15 PLANNING DEVELOPMENT & REGENERATION Q1 PERFORMANCE REPORT

James Doe introduced the report and made reference to item 4. He stated that the planning service is still dealing with the aftermath of the big staffing change in the first three to six months of the year which led to a dip in performance. There was a huge rise in planning applications as the economy improves. In terms of fee income, it is slightly below the income trajectory, this is something that can vary throughout the year. Land charges is an area with a lot of growth. The speed of the process is improving and in quarter 2, there should be an improvement.

Councillor Ashbourn congratulated the team for working so hard with a 40% increase in planning applications.

The Chairman asked J Doe the name of the new group manager and her start date.

J Doe advised that the new group manager's name was Sara Whelan and she started 7th September 2015. Sara Whelan's last role was within Strategic Planning and Regeneration.

Councillor Riddick noted that the planning staff were under pressure and he was aware of certain applications carrying on for a long time and is there any process whereby the planning department can tell the applicant that they cannot consider the application any longer.

J Doe stated that if a planning application is refused, the applicant has six months to resubmit without paying another fee. With regards to repeated applications on the same site, there is currently no mechanism to refuse. The government have looked at serial applications where the conditions for refusal are the same and have been rejected but legally, there are issues with changing policies and differing circumstances. However, if the same applicant resubmits after the six months, they must pay the fee which generates extra

revenue. Statutory fees do not allow for full cost recovery. The prices are set locally to encourage development. Currently, if repeated applications are refused, that itself becomes a consideration next time and applications must show change when resubmitted.

Outcome

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

25 COMMITTEE MEMBERS IDEAS EXERCISE

OS/178/15 COMMITTEE MEMBERS IDEAS RESULTS

Deferred to the next meeting.

26 COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Meeting ended at 8.07 pm