

## MINUTES

### STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

22 NOVEMBER 2016

**Councillors:** Anderson (Chairman)  
Birnie  
E Collins  
Fisher  
Hicks  
Matthews  
Riddick  
Timmis  
Tindall  
C Wyatt-Lowe (Vice-Chairman)

<b>Officers:</b>	James Doe	Assistant Director - Planning and Regeneration
	David Skinner	Assistant Director - Finance & Resources
	Craig Thorpe	Group Manager - Environmental Services
	Katie Mogan	Member Support Officer

**Also Attendance:**

Councillor Janice Marshall  
Councillor Graham Sutton

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

**247**            **MINUTES**

The minutes of the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 October 2016 were confirmed by the members present and signed by the Chairman.

**248**            **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillors G Adshead, Ashbourn, S Hearn, Howard and Ransley.

Councillor Birnie substituted on behalf of Councillor Ashbourn.

Councillor Timmis substituted on behalf of Councillor Howard.

Councillor Tindall substituted on behalf of Councillor Ransley.

**249**                    **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest

**250**                    **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There was no public participation.

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

None.

**252**                    **BUDGET MONITORING 2016/17 Q2**

D Skinner introduced the report and went through the highlights in quarter 2. The quarter was fairly consistent with quarter 1 and was showing a positive trend in line with previous years. The pressures in the service is employees – there was a £50,000 overspend in waste services due to the additional round for hard to access properties not being factored in last year’s budget. Also, there was a £130,000 overspend in building control. There are a lot of vacant posts in this department so agency staff are currently helping to carry out the work. There has been an under achievement of income in planning due to the uncertainty in the housing market after the EU referendum and there has been an over achievement of income in waste services as a result of an incentive payment from Hertfordshire County Council as a reward for improving recycling in the co-mingled waste service.

D Skinner was happy to take questions

Councillor Birnie asked for clarification in paragraph 2.4. Are the additional burden grants the same as section 31 grants?

D Skinner said the section 31 grants are now the new burden grant. It adds responsibility.

Councillor Birnie referred to the waste collection and the problem with access. Is the pressure of £50,000 likely to be a recurring problem?

D Skinner said this had arisen due to an error in the budgeting process last year. The round structures will be corrected for 2017/18 so we shouldn’t see this problem again.

C Thorpe said the new fleet vehicles are slightly larger than the old fleet therefore some areas have become difficult to navigate. For example, some areas in Dacorum have become permit only parking and so parked cars spill over into surrounding roads, making it difficult for the vehicles to get down.

Councillor Matthews referred to page 6 paragraph 4.2 and the under achievement of income in the planning service. Can this be solely due to the result of the referendum or are there other factors?

J Doe said this mainly commercial uncertainty. The budget income was set when there was modest growth and a large trajectory of sites coming forward. At the moment, these sites have not been forthcoming but there is hope that it will improve.

Councillor Anderson asked if this was a local issue as the current economic indicators do not show that trend.

J Doe said this was a trend nationally. There has been a mixed response from businesses and didn't understand it to be a local issue.

Councillor Matthews asked if the same pressures were being seen within commercial building.

J Doe said a little. We are currently awaiting the revised planning application for the retail park at Maylands. The volume of activity has increased and most of the work in the planning department is small householder applications.

Councillor Hicks referred back to commercial waste. Does the service include recycling? If not, maybe this is why private companies can undercut on price.

C Thorpe said that the department has been running a commercial recycling waste service for a while. However, we do not want to invest in this and extend the service until we are certain of the market.

Councillor Fisher asked about the overspend on disabled facilities. Does this reflect an increase in costs or demand?

C Troy said they do not know why. The grants awarded have been higher and the demand has increased.

Councillor Birnie noticed that the grant was larger than we were expecting but was still not sufficient. Can these costs be recouped from Treasury in the future?

C Troy said a larger grant was given to Dacorum because we were able to demonstrate that we had a greater need than other authorities. This grant comes from the Better Care fund from Herts County Council.

D Skinner said the level of grant was increased across the whole of Hertfordshire and is based on the Better Care fund. It is allocated to local authorities on a formula basis.

Councillor Birnie asked what facilities were provided.

C Troy said bathrooms, ramps, level floor accesses and stair lifts.

Councillor Tindall referred to line 169 and the slippage of £60,000. What is causing the delay?

J Doe said the projects are moving along in phases. The litters bins and benches are being installed.

Councillor Birnie mentioned the commercial waste shortfall and that another overview and scrutiny committee were told that an investigation is ongoing. Would it be possible to see the results once it is completed?

C Thorpe said the investigation is going through customers who the council are not providing the service to anymore to find out why. At the moment, the main reasons are companies are closing down or relocating.

### **Outcome**

That the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report.

## **253                    ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES Q2 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

C Thorpe introduced the report and said Q2 had been a standard quarter. Training has been taking place with front line staff, some have been upskilled. Three loaders have gone through their HGV licence. The department has had a visit from the Mayor who went out with crews and helped staff with their jobs. The department has been promoting the Love Food, Hate Waste campaign which has been quite successful. 45 people took part and were encourage to look at ways of buying and disposing of food and 58% of participants found they could reduce the waste they produced. Also in this quarter, the eighth community champion awards took place – winners included Boho Boxmoor and a young boy who actively encourages neighbours to recycle and helps take out their bins. There has been a lot of work around sickness and trying to reduce it. There was a blip in July and August due to long term sick but the levels reduced and were maintained in September. All performance indicators are green in the report and targets have been achieved in removing graffiti and fly tipping.

C Thorpe was happy to take questions

Councillor Timmis referred to the sickness levels in August. She said this is the traditional holiday period so could this be a reason. Do staff have to take on bigger workloads if some members of staff are off sick?

C Thorpe said if staff are off sick then we have to get agency staff in to cover.

Councillor Timmis said this was costly and asked if anything is being done to solve it.

C Thorpe said Dacorum had the best sickness rates within waste services across Hertfordshire. We have amended the sickness policy to make it harder for staff to have non-genuine sickness absences. However, we are sympathetic to genuine sickness and the rates are now comparable to DBC staff in the offices.

Councillor Timmis asked if DBC were responsible for the verges on the A5, especially in Markyate and Flamstead.

C Thorpe said DBC were only responsible for emptying litter bins in the laybys. Herts Highways are responsible for the verges and cutting hedges.

Councillor Matthews referred to page 15 and the way the data is presented. He said he was glad to hear the department is being proactive over sickness. He asked if it was possible to produce a percentage month variable within the reports. He said it would be helpful to see month on month changes.

C Thorpe said this data was already produced for our own benefit via FirstCare so this could be included in the next report.

Councillor Tindall referred to the point about manual staff now having comparable sickness levels to those in the offices. He said manual staff are more likely to have sick days due to accidents so are these included in the absences?

C Thorpe said they were but didn't have a breakdown.

Councillor Tindall asked if accidents are looked at to see if the process needs to change.

C Thorpe said yes. They have now implemented a 'Lesson learnt' template if the accident results in more than seven days off sick.

Councillor Tindall asked if staff are financially penalised if they are off sick due to an operational accident.

C Thorpe said they are not.

Councillor Timmis referred to the extension of the skate park in Berkhamsted and that it is subject to vandalism. She asked if there was CCTV at the site.

C Thorpe did not know but will contact the relevant officer to find out.

Councillor Tindall said it might be worth speaking to the police as they have access to portable CCTV in areas where incidents occur.

Councillor Matthews said the local PCSOs are aware of the issues and the police conduct regular patrols of the area.

Councillor Birnie said this was an excellent report and congratulated the officers involved.

### **Outcome**

That the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report.

## **254                    REGULATORY SERVICES Q2 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

C Troy introduced the report to members and ran through the key points. He said there had been issues with regards to the performance indicators in food safety. There is a problem with resources at the moment due to staff shortages which will continue into the next quarter. The recruitment issues have meant the ability to respond to service requests has decreased but we are doing our best to resolve the issues. The problem recently has been agency staff leaving (many are not local to the area so often move closer to home if a vacancy appears). The process then has to start again which takes up officers' time. Although there is a slippage on proactive inspections works he assured members that any serious issues are rectified immediately.

In quarter 2, there was a voluntary closure of an Indian restaurant due to an infestation of cockroaches.

We had a Community Action day on 7<sup>th</sup> September and happy to circulate the details of what was achieved to members.

We have been delivering health and safety training internally which allows for greater accountability and saves money. Legionella training has been carried out for all responsible managers last month.

A key area moving into next year will be an auditing role for the department. Departments were asked to give details on controls covering key risks in their area. These will be prioritised when it comes to auditing.

Following the audit from the external auditors, there was one action outstanding which has been rectified. Also, random alcohol testing is now fully implemented across the Council. There have been several testing exercises and pleased to report that all staff passed.

With regards to Private Sector housing, there has been an appeal against a HMO licence. An extra bedroom was added and we felt it was not compliant. The case was taken to a tribunal and they upheld the Council's decision. The Council were not awarded costs as it was not a prosecution. The department is also investigating an illegal eviction.

In pest control, we have had 2 or 3 bed bug issues. They are very difficult to get rid of. Also, there have been a record number of wasp nests reported in October.

#### C Troy was happy to take questions

Councillor Hicks asked what an E Club scheme was.

C Troy said they were sustainable electric cars. There will be a pool of these for employees.

Councillor Matthews referred to the illegal eviction investigation. If it is an unlicensed HMO, will action be taken against the owner?

C Troy said the investigation was ongoing. The government has changed the licencing criteria so they will be providing local authorities with the resources to deal with this change. This may mean we have extra staff to carry out HMO surveys

Councillor Anderson asked if anything could be done about the staff shortages by getting school leavers or having market force supplements. When there was a shortage of planning officers, this worked well.

C Troy said he would like this issue has been flagged up. We have taken on a trainee from within the department to upskill them after failing to recruit three times. The salaries for environmental health officers are some of the lowest in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. The salaries are not competitive and other authorities seem to be recruiting at the same time as us. Last time, Watford was recruiting at the same time but their salary was £4,000 greater. We are losing knowledgeable and experienced staff and it is proving difficult to attract officers that have the specialist skills required. C Troy said there is a service review in progress.

Councillor Marshall echoed C Troy's comments. The service review will need to be carried out first before we consider market force supplements as these are difficult to stop once implemented. The service needs to be competitive and comparable.

Councillor Anderson referred to the alcohol testing and thought this was very important work.

Councillor Hicks asked if exit interviews were undertaken to see why there is such a high turnover of staff.

Councillor Marshall said exit interviews are standard practice across the Council.

Councillor Birnie said maybe apprenticeships are a more valuable approach.

C Troy said there is no simple answer. The issue with apprenticeships is that qualifications are needed to start the job.

Councillor Anderson asked the committee if they would be happy for him to have a conversation with the Finance and Resources Chairman to see if we can take a report about staff shortages to both committees so that we are trying to deal with this issue.

The committee agreed.

Councillor Marshall highlighted that it was C Troy's last committee meeting as he was leaving the Council.

Councillor Anderson thanked C Troy for all his hard work and wished him well for the future.

### **Outcome**

That the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report.

## **255 PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION Q2 PERFORMANCE REPORT**

J Doe introduced the report to members and said it had been a strong quarter. Performance in building control had been strong and applications are being cleared within two months. Development Management are ahead of target with small applications. On page 6, it shows 3% under target. There is approximately 50-60 major applications out of approximately 2,000 applications received each year. These take a long time to determine so performance rates are volatile.

There has been a dip in land charge searches which reflects the slowdown in the property market. 111 new homes have been built this quarter so on target for 430 new homes this year.

### **J Doe was happy to take questions**

Councillor Tindall asked if there was a control on the fees charged.

J Doe said yes, they are set nationally but haven't been reviewed for some years. We cover 60% of the service through the fees we receive.

Councillor Matthews referred to page 12 and the 111 homes built. He asked if this meant they were built and occupied or waiting to be sold.

J Doe said built meant when they were signed off for building regulations.



Councillor Hicks asked how long the pre-application stage should take as he had been receiving some complaints from constituents.

J Doe said it should be done in eight weeks but this is a management set target. We are encouraging planning performance agreements between the agents and council so we can agree a timescale upfront and project manage the process.

Councillor Birnie asked if plans were coming through to give you that confidence of achieving the target income.

J Doe said we track planning consent so get a feel of the developments coming through. We have two major applications at the moment – the Manor Estate and Swallowfields at Three Cherry Trees Lane. The target of 430 new homes built each year is set in the Core Strategy but varies year to year. In 2015/16, 600 new homes were built.

Councillor Matthews asked if these would be completed and appear in Q3 or Q4.

J Doe said he hoped they would be completed in Q4.

### **Outcome**

That the Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the report.

## **256                    WORK PROGRAMME 2016/17**

Councillor Anderson said he felt the committee needed an extra meeting due to the number of items on the work programme and Luton Airport and Markyate Surgery to be on that agenda.

K Mogan to find a suitable date for an extra meeting in the new year.

Waste Service Update to be scheduled for March.

The Meeting ended at 8.45 pm