

**Minutes of:** PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Date of Meeting:** 2 October 2007

**PRESENT:** Councillor Sandiford (Chair)  
Councillors L. Barnes, Dickinson, Forshaw,  
Lamb, Morris and Neal  
B Divine, Co-opted Member

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Bill Lawley, Interim Legal and Democratic Services  
Manager  
Rosemary Agnew, Assistant Ombudsman  
Liz Murphy, Head of People and Organisational  
Development  
Andrew Buckle, Head of Customer Services and e-  
Government  
Andy Ormerod, Capita Contract Manager  
Pat Couch, Scrutiny Support Officer

**ALSO PRESENT:** Councillor Essex, Portfolio Holder, A Well Managed  
Council  
Councillor Cheetham  
1 Member of the public

---

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from Councillor Tickner.

**2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**

**Resolved:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 August 2007 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

**3. URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items for discussion

**4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**4. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

No questions were raised under this item.

## 5. CHAIRS UPDATE

The Chair welcomed Mr Bernard Divine to his first meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee and the Standards Committee.

The Chair indicated to members that having looked through the General Household Survey, which had been presented to the last meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee by the Head of Community and Partnerships, it would be beneficial to ask the Communications Manager to attend the next meeting to provide information on how the Council could improve its communication, especially aimed at the under 25s. Within the General Household Survey it appeared that this age group was the least informed.

Councillor Essex informed Members that action was being taken through the Council's engagement work, particularly the annual Local Democracy Week events and closer work with the Youth Cabinet and a section on the Council's website specifically designed for young people.

He explained that there would be a team of dedicated Officers and Councillors going into schools during Local Democracy Week and inviting representatives from high schools to form a Youth Cabinet to discuss local issues

The Chair asked for Members approval to invite Neil Smith, Divisional Commander of the Police to the next Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee to enable Members to discuss some issues within the General Household Survey including tackling anti social behaviour in the Borough.

Resolved:

That members agree to invite Nick Molyneux to the next Performance Scrutiny Committee and the Divisional Commander to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in December.

## 6. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN – ANNUAL LETTER FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31<sup>st</sup> MARCH 2007 AND ANNUAL COMPLAINTS REVIEW**

The Chair welcomed Rosemary Agnew, Assistant Ombudsman, and the Interim Legal and Democratic Services Manager to the meeting.

The Interim Legal and Democratic Services Manager indicated that next year's Annual Letter would be programmed to be presented to the first Performance Scrutiny Meeting in the new municipal year.

The Assistant Ombudsman informed Members of the improvements contained within the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for the year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007

She informed the meeting that there had been a remarkable improvement in terms of response times and she complimented the proactive approach which had been taken by officers at all levels. She indicated that the report was exemplar in terms of analysing complaints and she would like to see such a report adopted by Councils across the country.

The Assistant Ombudsman indicated that there had been a concern particularly in relation to the Planning Department and following discussions with the Chief Executive it had been recognised that improvements were being made in this area. Instead of writing to the Council, a visit was made to the Planning Department, which enabled the Investigator to conclude that improvement programmes were in place.

The Assistant Ombudsman informed members that in 2005/6 the Council's average response time was 52 days, which reduced to 41 days. She explained that monitoring of systems and spreadsheets had been introduced by the Liaison Officer, which provided an early alert that a Service Area would possibly not meet the deadline and she praised the work and helpfulness of Jenni Cook, the Liaison Officer.

The Assistant Ombudsman gave an update on the complaints received between April to September 2007, indicating that they had received only 6 complaints. They had made 2 formal enquiries which had taken only 21 days to respond.

Members raised a number of questions in relation to Ombudsman Complaints and the Assistant Ombudsman responded.

The Assistant Ombudsman and Interim Legal and Democratic Services Manager indicated that training was available for members and officers on effective complaint handling.

The Ombudsman's Office had produced a guidance report about telecommunications masts and the Chair indicated that a copy of the report was available to Members by contacting the Scrutiny Support Officer.

The Head of Customer Services and e-Government presented an update in respect of the Customer Complaints and Feedback Procedure, indicating that he welcomed complaints at a local level as a way of improving service delivery.

There had been a complete review of the complaints management process which included benchmarking best practices with regard to complaint management in other authorities.

Resolved:

1. That Members note the content of the Local Government Ombudsman's Annual Letter for the period ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007 and place on record their thanks to the Local Government Ombudsman's Office for their support and guidance over the past year.
2. That Members note the improvements carried out in respect of the Customer Complaints and Feedback Procedure.

## **7. PROGRESS OF SICKNESS ABSENCE**

The Head of People and Organisational Development presented a report in relation to sickness absence outlining the current position of absence levels within the Council and the position of BVPI 12, which was in the top quartile in the whole of the Country.

The Council had established robust arrangements in relation to the management of sickness absence and accordingly the outturn as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2007 was 6.96 days. The methodology of calculating the BVPI meant that with a smaller number of employees this resulted in any absence having a large impact on the outturn of the BVPI. The outturn at the end of August was 3.75 days, so there was some concern in relation to the achievement of the target of 8 days.

There had been a number of long term ill health issues which the Human Resources Team had been actively managing and as some of these had been resolved, it was anticipated that there would be improvements for the month of September.

Members raised a number of questions in relation to the process of the arrangements in place and whether this was done sympathetically.

Resolved:

1. That the Performance Scrutiny Committee notes the current position and outturn in relation to Sickness Absence.
2. That a further report be presented to the Performance Scrutiny Committee in twelve months.

## **8. EQUALITIES UPDATE**

The Head of People and Organisational Development updated Members on the Equality Monitoring Policy in relation to Employment,

Complaints and Services and asked Members to identify if any further action was required.

The Head of People and Organisational Development indicated that the Council had a legal duty under the Race Relations Act to monitor Equality Standards and the Equality Standard for Local Government set criteria for commitment, consultation, monitoring and assessment impact. The Policy was an element of quality standard and the Council had set a target of Level 3 of the Equality Standard for next year.

Equality monitoring was the process used to collect, store and analyse data about individuals and was now in place in a number of areas. It was essential that the results of the monitoring process was used to inform consultation and the development of policy and decision making.

The Council look at this monitoring information to ensure they are delivering services which meet the needs of everyone in the Borough. It was agreed that this sort of information was only used positively, correctly and effectively.

A member raised concern regarding the information required to be collected about ethnic origin and religious belief. It was felt that not all of these had been covered within the list. The Head of People and Organisational Development agreed to look at this and see if any further information would be available which would identify groups not listed.

There was also discussion on attendance at Council meetings and how these are communicated to the public. An enquiry was made on progress of siting Neighbourhood Notice Boards throughout the Borough.

**Resolved:**

1. That issues discussed by Members on the proposed Equality Monitoring Policy be looked at in more detail by the Head of People and Organisational Development.
2. That Members note the outcome of the current monitoring of the Policy.

**9. CAPITA MONITORING AND PERFORMANCE**

The Head of Customer Services and e-Government presented an update on the accuracy for the Capita contract and a review of the current performance for 2007/08.

The Capita contract had been implemented in September 2006 and covered areas of Revenues, Benefits, Fraud and any associated customer contact for those areas. The Council had implemented a

highly resilient and robust contract monitoring process and Capita had been set an accuracy target of 99% for 2006/07 and 99.5% for 2007/08 for claims accuracy. The Department of Works and Pension's (DWP) minimum standard for their performance indicator was 96%, while the top quartile target was 99%.

The DWP required a random sample of the whole caseload was checked each Quarter for accuracy and used a sample of 127 cases per quarter. The selection of individual cases was completely random and went back a number of years, with some of the historical errors dating before the Capita contract had commenced.

The Service Assurance Team introduced accuracy checking procedures at the start of the contract and evidence revealed that Capita had failed to achieve the specified level of accuracy in determining claims to Housing and Council Tax Benefit. A Service improvement notice had been issued to Capita to improve accuracy following which the implemented training procedures to reinforce accuracy.

The Capita Contract Manager was asked a number of questions in relation to second homes and empty properties and he indicated that reminders had been sent to 50% of properties to remind people to pay for their second home. They had the right structures in place and the main objectives were to ensure they have the right systems in place. There were approximately 400 empty properties within the Borough.

Long term empty homes were those that had been empty for 6 months, with short term being classed as those empty for less than 6 months.

The Council had an obligation to monitor new homes and had robust processes in place to find new dwellings and buildings. The same applied to commercial businesses and business rates charged on empty properties would be tightened up next year following new legislation.

Resolved:

That Members note the contents of the report and the improvements in performance of these services and support the Service Assurance team in their work in striving for continuous improvement.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and finished at 9.25pm.

Signed.....  
(Chair)

Date .....

