

POLICY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 31st October 2011

Present: Councillor J Oakes (Chair)
Councillors Essex, Kenyon, Milling, Pilling and M. Smith
Keith Pilkington (co-opted Member)

In Attendance: Sarah Blackwell, Assistant Solicitor
Joanne Hargreaves, Information Manager
Emma Hussain, Principal Policy Officer
Jenni Cook, Committee Officer
Councillor Serridge
Councillor Marriott
1 Member of the public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Steen, Councillor Crawforth (Councillor M. Smith substituting) and Councillor Driver (Councillor Essex substituting).

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the last meeting held on 12th September 2011 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

The Chair reported that there was one urgent item of business, being 'Tell Us Once Service Implementation' and this would be taken as Item D2 on the agenda.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair agreed to deviate from the Procedure for Public Speaking and allow the member of the public to ask questions as the reports were discussed.

The member of the public raised one question which related to an item on the previous meeting's minutes. He enquired as to what the Queen Street (formerly Clare House) project would cost to the taxpayers of Rossendale and how the project would be run. The Chair agreed to investigate this matter and respond directly to the member of the public.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair provided an update on the Petitions Scheme which was introduced on 1st July 2010 with the e-petitions facility going live in November 2010. At the time of its approval, Council resolved that the scheme would be reviewed by Policy Overview and Scrutiny within 12 months of being implemented. The Chair noted that this review process had started and, currently, the Petitions Scheme is being reviewed by the Council's Management Team along with the Community Impact Assessment. This would then be presented to Policy O&S in January 2012.

Councillor Essex enquired as to whether the public would be consulted during this review. The Chair agreed to investigate this matter and respond directly to Councillor Essex.

7. DEBT COLLECTION PROCESS FOR WORKS IN DEFAULT

The Chair noted that at the last meeting, Members asked that an Officer from Legal attend the next meeting to explain the legal process for debt recovery and provide details of the outcome of the joint meeting regarding recovery of debts on the Local Land Charges Register. The Assistant Solicitor provided the Committee with an update on the debt collection process for works in default and noted the legislation under which these works could be carried out, such as the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and the Building Act 1984.

The Council's procedures for debt recovery was outlined, along with the legal process for debt recovery. It was noted that for County Court proceedings, recovery action could not be taken if the debt was older than 6 years and for enforced sales, this deadline was 12 years.

It was noted that when deciding whether to pursue a debt, issues such as bankruptcy/administration, sufficient evidence, cost/benefit analysis and the likelihood of getting paid were taken into account.

It was noted that the November's Cabinet would be asked to approve an 'Enforced Sale' Policy, which was an option that the Council could pursue.

The Assistant Solicitor confirmed that a more detailed report would be produced which would specify in more detail the amounts of each debt and whether interest may be charged. This may not be ready in time for the January 2012 committee, however an update would be provided.

Members commented on the report as follows:-

- Concerns were expressed regarding the Council recording debts that could not be recovered. The Assistant Solicitor noted that charges against properties could remain unrecovered until such time as that property was sold.
- It was confirmed that the legislation did not permit the Council to charge for works upfront, thereby receiving payment prior to carrying out works.
- It was confirmed that any issues regarding rented properties, such as Greenvale properties should be referred to Greenvale and that this was often a tenancy matter.

- It was noted that some residents could genuinely forget that they owed money for works and that it could be worth writing to those residents again, before taking legal action.
- It was clarified that of the £300k of unrecovered debts for works in default, approximately £180k was more than six years old and therefore County Court action could not be taken in respect of these.
- Bulk liability orders were discussed and it was noted that this was in respect of council tax and business rates.

Resolved:

That the report is noted and that a further update would be brought to the next meeting.

8. TELL US ONCE SERVICE IMPLEMENTATION

The Information Manager introduced the report which asked for Policy Overview and Scrutiny's recommendation to Cabinet to implement the Department for Works and Pension's (DWP) 'Tell Us Once' service. The 'Tell Us Once' Service was designed to provide a voluntary, alternative method for notifying a birth or a death. The Information Manager noted that residents would be able to use the service to notify a birth or death to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by attending in person at an office of any participating Local Authority, or by telephoning a dedicated Department of Work & Pensions Freephone telephone service. It was noted that the longer term aspiration was for these changes to be reported online. The Information Manager stated that the implementation of this service would save time and money for residents, allowing them to notify of a birth or death just once, with the relevant government agencies and local authorities being notified.

It was noted that this service had been initially piloted in other authorities during 2006-8, however, the Council had chosen not to implement the scheme until now, in order to ensure that any IT application issues had been resolved. The Council were now looking to join the national roll-out of the scheme.

The Information Manager reported that there were two stages to the 'Tell Us Once' process, with the first stage being the registration stage, which would always be delivered by Lancashire County Council's Registrars. The second stage was the enrichment stage which would be delivered as follows:-

- Telephony – Department of Work & Pensions free phone telephone service signposted by Lancashire County Council registrar at registration stage
- Face to Face – Rossendale Borough Council officer delivers enrichment stage following on from registration by Lancashire County Council registrar. Exact delivery of the face to face element was still being discussed.
- Self-Serve – This option will be available in 2012

The Information Manager stated that the statistics for deaths in Rossendale were currently 663 per year, which equated to approximately 12 per week. It was noted that based on Lancashire County Council pathfinder findings, 54% of bereaved

customers chose to use the Tell Us Once service. Of these 61% chose telephone as their preferred channel, 31% chose face to face as their preferred channel and the remainder were expected to choose self-serve. This would mean minimal resource requirements with an average of approximately 2 face to face interviews per week for Rossendale.

Members discussed the report as follows:-

- The importance of this service at a particularly stressful time for the bereaved.
- Care and support for the bereaved once a death had been reported. It was noted that for those choosing the face-to-face interviews, questions would be asked which could give officers an indication of the further help and advice that may be required.
- Confidentiality of information was discussed and it was noted that the information regarding births and deaths would be relayed via the secure Government Connect service.
- Discussion took place regarding how this service could be used and promoted
- It was noted that it was unclear as to where someone would obtain a death certificate from in Rossendale and this would be included when the report was taken to Cabinet.
- It was noted that due to there being no hospitals in Rossendale, the births and deaths likely to be reported were those at home.

Resolved:

1. That Cabinet be recommended to implement the Department of Work & Pensions 'Tell Us Once' service be implemented by end of February 2012.
2. That the report taken to Cabinet should include more detailed information on where someone could obtain a death certificate.

9. UPDATE ON THE COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Principal Policy Officer provided Members with an overview of the Council's Community Impact Assessment process, considering the impact on protected equality groups, and where this fits into the wider Council policy development and decision making framework. Also highlighted were the stages and actions an officer would take in order to develop and implement a new policy or procedure from inception, through to final approval.

Members noted the update and the following points were made:-

- That an appropriate and proportional approach to equality should be taken.
- The importance of Councillors' input and, where necessary, challenge.
- Consultation and how Officers decide who to consult.
- It was suggested that actual age ranges be removed from the Community Impact Assessment template.
- It was noted that the previous 'Tell Us Once' report had been presented without its Community Impact Assessment. This would be circulated to the committee members.

10. FORWARD PLAN

The Chair outlined the Forward Plan document and the reports expected to be brought before the January and February 2012 Committees.

- The Co-opted Member requested a copy of the current Open Spaces Strategy.
- It would be investigated whether a Tourism Report was on the Forward Plan or Non-Key List.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and closed at 7.40pm

Signed
(Chair)

Date