

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 22nd September 2014

Present: Councillor J Oakes (Chair)
Councillors, Bleakley, Creaser, Hughes, Kempson, Procter and Sandiford

In Attendance: Carolyn Sharples, Committee and Member Services Manager
Emma Hussain, Principal Policy Officer
Pat Couch, Scrutiny Support Officer

3 members of the public

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Keith Pilkington (co-opted Member)

2. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETINGS

Resolved:

That the minutes of the last meeting held on 14th July 2014 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

There were no urgent items of business.

5. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

A member of the public asked a question in relation to the urgent decision and he agreed to ask the question at the Council meeting, which was a more appropriate arena to be asking the question.

6. CHAIR'S UPDATE

The Chair informed Members that as Chair of Corporate Scrutiny she agreed to a Special Urgency Decision on 15th September as she believed the decision was:

- Urgent
- It was a key decision
- The General Exception Rule could not be followed
- The decision could not reasonably be deferred

At the last meeting the Chair informed the Committee that there would be a Market update report to provide an explanation of the high increased expenditure on Rossendale Markets in 2013-4 as compared to 2012-13, within the draft Statement of Accounts considered by the Audit & Accounts Committee. The issue was raised with the Finance team who confirmed that the documented increase in expenditure was actually an error caused by double counting. This has now been corrected and the amended version would appear in the final Statement of Accounts. Therefore it was agreed that a report was not needed.

In relation to the minutes and the Vacant Homes Strategy, it was agreed to write to the local MPs. The Health, Housing and Regeneration Manager spoke to the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) and they offered to do a presentation which Members of the Committee had been invited to attend. The presentation would provide an overview into how owners request deletions, what information is considered by the VOA to support that request and the criteria that the VOA follow when assessing a property for deletion.

7. FORMAL COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS REVIEW

The Committee and Member Services Manager presented a report on the annual complaints and compliments received by the Council and the Local Ombudsman complaints recorded for the period 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014.

Formal complaints and compliments made to the Council, as well as the Local Government Ombudsman complaints are administered by the Committee and Members Services Team.

In 2013/14 there were 80 formal complaints received, which was 8 less than the same period in 2012/13.

During 2013/14 the average number of days taken to deal with complaints was 10.5 days, which was just over the customer service standard of 10 working days. This was mainly owing to their complex nature, with one complaint remained open as it was in relation to pursuing an empty property case. Also, three complaints were regarding a third party where the Council was acting in a liaison capacity with a third party in order to pursue the complaint.

Of the 80 complaints, 62 were resolved at stage 1, with 18 stage 2 reviews. Out of the 18 stage 2 reviews 4 were subsequently referred to the Ombudsman by the complainant, which were closed by the Ombudsman as follows:

- 2 – No fault
- 1 – No investigation
- 1 – Investigation discontinued

The Local Government Ombudsman provides an Annual Summary of complaints they have received against the Council each year. Members noted that the Ombudsman does not normally notify the Council of all contacts. In the majority of cases the Council finds out about a case once a decision has been made or if the Ombudsman requests additional information as part of the investigation. During 2013/14 the Ombudsman received 18 complaints about the Council of which, 5 were investigated, 5 were closed and 8 were referred back to the Council to go through the Council's complaint process.

The Local Government Ombudsman made decisions on the 5 complaints they investigated and 1 was upheld and 4 not upheld. For the 2013/14 period the Council was not aware of any decision notices issued by the Ombudsman informing them of an 'upheld' complaint being made. When the Ombudsman was contacted in relation to this the Committee and Member Services Manager was informed that the Ombudsman had received a number of queries from councils on the subject and a blanket email was sent to all councils indicating that they were not in a position to be able to provide any further detailed information on an individual basis as they do not have the resources available.

Members raised concern about this as if the Council has had a complaint upheld they need to know what it is in relation to so that they can continue to pursue the matter.

The Committee and Member Services Manager informed Members that she would be writing to the Ombudsman to raise the matter further. A Member asked that if and when the Council receives a response from the Ombudsman and they were not happy with it, could the Council make a formal complaint about the Ombudsman.

In the 2013/14 period the Council received 165 compliments, with a large proportion of compliments received for the STAN service (76).

A member queried the number of staff complaints which had doubled to 7 on the previous year, and whether the complaints were about a particular department. The Committee and Member Service Manager agreed to look at this in more detail and inform the Committee for the next meeting.

Resolved:

1. That Members note the number of formal complaints and compliments received by the Council and the Local Government Ombudsman complaints recorded for the period 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014.
2. That the Committee and Member Services Manager write to the Ombudsman informing the Ombudsman that the Scrutiny Committee are unhappy with their response and request additional information on the 'upheld' complaint.
3. That the Committee and Member Services Manager make further enquiries in relation to staff complaints and report back, through the Chair's Update at the next meeting in November.

8. QUARTER 1 INTEGRATED PERFORMANCE REPORT (APRIL-JUNE 2014)

The Principal Policy Officer presented the Council's performance report for Quarter 1 (April to June 2014), which showed that the Council was performing well, with 76% of performance indicators green in status, compared with 72.4% for the same period last year.

A number of performance indicators have exceeded target and some of these were as follows:

- Customers in the One Stop Shop were waiting 2 minutes less than targeted
- Percentage of recoverable overpayments of Housing Benefit finished Q1 13.36% above target
- The number of people accessing STAN was over double the target figure of 150 with 389 people actually seen
- Percentage of council tax collected finished above target at 29.02%
- Percentage of work days lost to sickness was 1.61 days under target
- All planning application targets finished quarter 1 above their targets, as they have been consistently doing

Overall, performance was excellent with 100% performance in relation to the Council's Corporate Priorities.

There were 3 performance indicators that were behind target and action plan for each of these had been completed by the appropriate officer, with actions being taken to improve performance.

The Principal Policy Officer informed Members of the changes to six Risks which had moved from Amber to Green in status as a result of progress on their mitigating actions.

Overall the majority of the Council's risks set out in the risk register were identified as low risk, with 6 medium risks and no high risks.

A number of questions were raised by Members which the Principal Policy Officer answered where possible and she agreed to report back to the next meeting on queries raised, which would need clarification from Officers within the Council.

Resolved:

1. That Corporate Scrutiny notes the levels of performance and risks as detailed in the report.
2. That Corporate Scrutiny continues to monitor the corporate risk register and the performance of those actions and performance indicators that are under-achieving target levels of performance.

9. CORPORATE RISK REGISTER REVIEW 2014/15

The Principal Policy Officer asked Members to consider the Council's Corporate Risk Register, which consists of the strategic and high level operational risks identified in its Business Plan.

Risk Management is an essential element of the council's business. Without a clear and robust risk register of those things that might stop us achieving our priorities, or impact on council business, it is not possible to ensure sufficient mitigation and intervention measures are put in place in a timely manner to manage those risks as far as reasonably possible.

Each risk is classified according to two factors

- a) How likely is it that the risk may occur (likelihood)?
- b) If the risk did occur, how serious might be the consequences (impact)?

Heads of Service and Portfolio Holders meet to discuss 'risks' within their service areas. It was also agreed that scrutiny act as another level for reviewing and considering risks during the business planning process.

A member suggested that Plan 6 – Monitoring delivery on time of requirements of Section 106 planning obligations, which had a likelihood impact of E3, should perhaps be looked at again in consultation with the appropriate Officer, as it was felt that it should be raised.

A member of the public raised concern about the timescales for adding planning applications onto the Council's website and the Principal Policy Officer agreed to provide a response, as part of Chair's update, at the next meeting in November.

Resolved:

1. That Corporate Scrutiny notes the 2014/15 Corporate Risk Register.
2. That Corporate Scrutiny continues to monitor the Corporate Risk Register via the quarterly integrated performance report, and annually review the register as a whole in relation to agreed business plan actions, key drivers and the priorities of the Council.

10. ANNUAL EQUALITY REPORT 2013/14

Members considered the Annual Equality Report 2013/14 which was presented by the Principal Policy Officer. The report provides another positive review of equality.

The Equality Act 2010 states that everyone has the right to be treated fairly and equally. The two main purposes of the Act bring together and simplify all of the existing discrimination law and strengthen the law to further support progress on equality.

The Council is required to publish equality information on at least an annual basis. It was noted that the Council continues to take an appropriate and proportionate approach to equality and diversity.

From a qualitative perspective, the report highlights that despite some difficult financial challenges and changes, the Council has been able to continue to support a range of projects and support services within the community, with some positive results.

Although the Council will continue to ensure it is compliant with its required duties, Members were asked to note that as financial challenges and changes continue within the Council, this could impact on the extent of the Council's involvement in this agenda in future years.

The report and the appendices provide an overview of the Council's key progress and achievements during 2013/14, in relation to equality and diversity. It also presents the Council's key equality data.

From a quantitative perspective, the equality data shows:-

- The majority of the workforce is male (62.1%) and female (37.9%)
- 2.4% of employees have disclosed they have a disability
- 1.2 of employees identified as Black or Minority Ethnic
- Over a third of the workforce are aged 50-59 years
- 4.2% of the workforce are 19-24 years
- The Council provided 22 Get Britain Working placements and 7 other work placement opportunities during 2013/14
- 150 people at risk of fuel poverty have benefitted from the 'Affordable Warmth' partnership project

A number of questions were raised by Members which the Principal Policy Officer answered where possible and she agreed to report back to the next meeting on queries raised which would need clarification from Officers within the Council.

The meeting commenced at 6.30pm and finished at 8.05pm

Signed
(Chair)

Date.....