

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: 15 April 2009

Venue: East Northamptonshire House, Cedar Drive, Thrapston

Time: 7.30 pm

Present: Councillors: - Phil Stearn (Chairman)
Gill Mercer (Vice-Chairman)

Richard Gell
Glenvil Greenwood-Smith
Sue Homer
Barbara Jenney
Brian Northall

Ron Pinnock
Duncan Reid
Pam Whiting
Clive Wood

PART A ITEMS

451. WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Duncan Reid to his first meeting of the Committee.

452. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2009 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

453. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillors David Bateman, Tony Boto and Marian Hollomon sent apologies.

454. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest under Section 50 of the Local Government Act 2000.

455. PERFORMANCE PANEL

The minutes of the meeting of the Performance Panel held on 5 March 2009 were received. The minutes appear at pages 892 to 895 and form part of this minute.

RESOLVED:

That the recommendation in minute 5.2 (b) of the Performance Panel meeting held on 5 March 2009 (and set out below) be approved:-

That a report by the Chairman of the Performance Panel be made to the next Scrutiny Committee meeting on the under-performing indicators for Planning Services.

456. UNDER-PERFORMING INDICATORS FOR PLANNING SERVICES

Members received a verbal report from the Chairman of the Performance Panel on the under-performing indicators for Planning Services as requested by the Performance Panel on 5 March 2009 (minute 455 refers). The Chairman drew Members' attention to the internal and external factors which had impacted negatively on the performance of Development Control, such as the high volume of applications early in 2008, publication deadlines, site visits, the rise in appeals, and, in particular, staff shortages which had led to an excessive backlog, increased delays and an increased number of complaints.

It was noted that measures had been put in place to address performance as part of the Development Control Improvement Plan. The Chairman detailed many improvements within the service, such as improved public access and increased liaison with Town and Parish Councils. Development Control now had a full complement of staff and the backlog was actively being cleared. Proactive monitoring of caseloads had been introduced, a pre-application protocol was being written and amendments to the delegation scheme were being considered. It was noted that Development Control needed to be prepared for an increased level of applications in the future when the economy improved.

Members questioned the Head of Planning Services on the rising number of appeals and asked for information about the appeals process at the next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted and further discussion of performance within Planning Services be considered at the next meeting when reviewing the Development Control Improvement Plan.

457. MANAGEMENT AND MONITORING OF S106 AGREEMENTS

The Committee considered a report summarising the current position in relation to the handling of Section 106 agreements, the improvements made since the Scrutiny Committee review in 2004, and the opportunities for changes to the approach in the future. It was noted that 19 of the original 21 recommended actions of the review team had been completed by February 2006 and had resulted in considerable improvement to processes and procedures, including more robust accounting arrangements. The creation of a dedicated monitoring post and the enforcement compliance post within Development Control in 2007 had led to much greater resilience in respect of the monitoring and enforcement of agreement timescales. Further improvements included the development of much more effective working relationships with Town and Parish Councils; a diary system for outstanding Section 106 agreements so trigger and payment points were monitored and action taken accordingly; regular updating of finance spreadsheets; and bi-annual meetings with Northamptonshire County Council in respect of Education obligations.

Members also noted that Officers were in the process of putting in place a major applications protocol which would set out the approach and timetable that developers would be expected to follow when submitting applications where a Section 106 agreement was required.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

458. COMMUNITY SAFETY

Councillor Brian Northall delivered to the Committee a statement on Community Safety prepared by Councillor Colin Wright, the Community Safety Champion. The following comments, concerns and suggestions were made by Members:

- Lack of good communication between agencies seemed to have led to a drop in performance.
- Publicity had recently been given to an increased occurrence of burglaries.
- Rural areas often suffered a lack of police presence as a consequence of the focus of resources on 'hotspots' in urban areas.
- Community safety was a multi-agency issue and it was no longer appropriate to focus specifically on the Police.
- There was a need to be more proactive regarding licensing and enforcement.
- The involvement of Town and Parish Councils was important.
- To decide whether to commence a review of community safety or a specific area of community safety, it was felt that Members would need more information on community safety structures, partnerships and arrangements.

It was recognised that, as an authority, the Council had a responsibility to put in place policies and procedures to ensure better working relationships between the agencies involved in ensuring safer communities.

It was suggested that, subject to compliance with Council Procedure Rule 14, the topic of community safety be considered at the Issues Debate on 22 June 2009 and the Head of Environmental Services deliver a presentation detailing what is being done to tackle crime in the area, actual crime levels set against perceived levels of crime, and the Safer Town Centres initiative in order to stimulate debate. The new sector Inspector, Nick Lyall, could also be invited.

RESOLVED:

That the issue of community safety be proposed as the subject of the Issues Debate on 22 June 2009 and, if this be agreed, that the Head of Environmental Services deliver a presentation to the Council on community safety at that Issues Debate.

459. COUNTY-WIDE SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS

Members considered a report describing proposals to set up county-wide scrutiny arrangements to undertake the overview and scrutiny function in respect of the Northamptonshire Public Service Board and considered the draft terms of reference for the Board. All Local Authorities in Northamptonshire had been invited to nominate two non-executive Members, along with representatives from the Police Authority and the Primary Care Trust, to form the Board. Assurances had been given that the Board would not seek to dictate the local Scrutiny Committee's work programme. The intention was that the county Scrutiny Board would review issues that affected the county as a whole, or recommendations made by the Public Service Board. There would be no compulsion to participate if any chosen topic had no relevance locally and no recommendations made would be binding on this Committee or on the Council.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That draft terms of reference of the Northamptonshire Overview and Scrutiny Board be approved; and
- (2) That the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee be appointed as the Council's representatives on the proposed Northamptonshire Overview and Scrutiny Board.

460. REVENUES AND BENEFITS

The Head of Revenues and Benefits gave a presentation on the work of his service area and the work being done to help the community during the economic downturn. The presentation covered the work of the Revenues and Benefits teams on the collection of Council Tax and business rates, the administration of Housing and Council tax benefit and the Concessionary Fares scheme, running the Corporate Post Room, and in Benefits Counter Fraud. He then explained the problems faced by the Revenues and Benefits service in each area and the increasing workload as a result of the economic downturn and the solutions being implemented or considered to deal with these problems.

The slides from the presentation are reproduced at Appendix 1 to these minutes at pages 896 to 907.

The Chairman thanked the Head of Revenues and Benefits for his explanation of the work of his Service and commended him and his team for the excellent service they were providing under difficult circumstances.

461. PROCEDURE RULE 8 – DURATION OF MEETING

During the above presentation, the meeting having lasted for two hours, it was

RESOLVED:

That the meeting continue.

PART B ITEMS

462. CARE AND REPAIR

The Committee considered a report which set out the progress of the Care and Repair Officers Working Group. It was noted that since the Scrutiny Committee review many of the recommendations had been addressed. Members were informed that the Council had a good working relationship with Spire Homes Care and Repair and Officers were committed to working with them to further develop the service. Members commended Officers on their successful bid for £126,000 from the Department of Communities and Local Government to fund the introduction of a handyman scheme across the East Northamptonshire Council and Borough Council of Wellingborough areas.

Members recognised there was a need to build on the existing relationship with Spire Homes and noted that a robust service level agreement would give Care and Repair stability and help the Council to establish the level of service it wished to provide.

R.9 RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:

That the Council enter into a Service Level Agreement with Spire Homes Care and Repair for a period of three years.

Chairman



EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Performance Panel

Minutes of a meeting held on Thursday 5 March 2009 at 7.30pm, in the Members' Room, East Northamptonshire House, Thrapston.

Present:

Councillors:

Glenvil Greenwood-Smith (Chairman)
Barbara Jenney

Gill Mercer
Phillip Stearn

Officers:

Lisa Hyde (LH) – Head of Policy and Community Development
Emma Gadsby - Policy and Performance Manager
Carolyn Aldridge - Policy Officer
Sacha Drew - Performance Officer
Rachel Reeds (RR) – Democratic Services (Minutes)

ACTION

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1.1 Councillor Pam Whiting and Barbara Ding, Monitoring Officer, sent their apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2.1 No interests were declared.

3. MINUTES

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2008 were received and approved and the Panel noted the action taken under minutes 4.2 and 4.4.

3.2 Minute 4.2 (a) -

ENENV51 – The number of food samples that had been done to date and an explanation of the nature of food sampling was provided.

NI180, ENENV20 and ENENV52 – All Service Plans for 2009/10 were being reviewed and this would involve a review of all targets.

ENREV10 – LH explained that the indicator did not mean that debts were not recovered outside of the three year period, but that the three years was used as a "point in time" to provide a benchmark.

ENPL01 – Members were provided with the definition of homelessness, (as included in the Housing Act 1996

ENENV25 – Members were provided with an explanation of what constituted a 'justified' complaint.

NI188 – Members noted that a report on progress made by the Council on adapting to climate change had been considered at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 23 February 2009. Members expressed concern that the Council was falling behind other Councils in the county in this area.

4. INTRODUCING THE NEW POLICY AND PERFORMANCE TEAM

4.1 LH introduced the new Policy and Performance Team to the Panel: -

Emma Gadsby - Policy and Performance Manager
 Carolyn Aldridge - Policy Officer
 Sacha Drew - Performance Officer

5. THIRD QUARTER PERFORMANCE 2008/09

5.1 LH reported on the Council's performance under the statutory national and local performance indicators for the period from 1 April to 31 December 2008.

5.2 The under, over and missing value performance indicators for the period were submitted for consideration and Members made comments on the indicators as follows:

(a) Over Performing Indicators

ENICT03 (% core system availability) and ENICT11 (% of external facing system availability) – The Panel queried the accuracy of the calculations. LH would check figures with ICT and ask how much of the down time was planned and when it occurred.

LH

ENPL01 (The number of people declaring themselves homeless) – It was noted that the figure under this indicator had not risen as much as had been expected.

ENREV10 (Amount of HB overpayments recovered within 3 years as a % the debit raised) – The Panel asked LH to pass on their congratulations to the Benefits team for their work in this area.

LH

(b) Under Performing Indicators

The Policy and Performance Team would continue to encourage service areas to add detailed explanatory comments to each of the indicators.

LH

ENPCD32/50 (Amount of external funding received) – It was noted that the North Northamptonshire bid for Rural Development Programme funding had been successful.

BV218b.05 (Abandoned vehicles – removal) – The Panel noted that success in this area was reliant upon timely removal of the vehicle by the external contractor.

ENENV41 – (% licences issued within target dates) – LH would ask the licensing officers to add a comment explaining which types of licences were included in this indicator and to identify if there was a problem in a particular area.

LH

ENICT16 (% corporate systems utilising spatial information & integrated into GIS) – The Panel requested an explanatory comment on this indicator.	ACTION LH
ENPL11 (Percentage of pre-applications completed in 20 working days) – Concern was expressed that performance in this area had not reached target levels despite a reduction in the number of applications that had been received. It was noted that there was no reference in the Development Control Service Improvement Plan to the improvement of performance with regards to minor and other applications despite a decline in the performance figures. It was	
RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND:	LH/RR
That a report by the Chairman of the Performance Panel be made to the next Scrutiny Committee meeting on the under-performing indicators for Planning Services:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ENPL11 (% pre-applications completed in 20 working days) • ENPL16/98 (% tree preservation order applications determined in 8 weeks) • ENPL17/97 (% conservation area tree work requests responded to within 6 weeks) • NI157a (processing of major applications within 13 weeks) • NI157b (processing of minor applications within 8 weeks) • NI157c (processing of other applications within 8 weeks). 	
ENENV16 (% of hate crimes reported resulting in further action) – The Panel asked for clarification on this indicator because it referred to comments for another indicator.	LH
NI195b (improved street and environmental cleanliness (detritus) – The Panel asked LH to provide information on the development of the Enviro-Crime Strategy and its likely impact on related performance measures.	LH
(c) <u>Missing Values</u>	
LH reported on the missing values for the third quarter and these were noted by the Panel.	
ENICT 02 (DC & BC records that have been computerised from 1974) – The Panel noted that this project had been completed.	
ENRES17 (no. of successful legal challenges to decisions or processes) – The Panel requested that a comment to be added to clarify what this indicator assessed.	LH
ENENV08 (% (HY) sites (identified as contaminated) that have been remediated annually) – It was noted that the half yearly report should have been added in September. The Panel asked that an explanation of the number of sites be included in this indicator.	LH
ENC505 (HY) % population) – LH would ensure that a comment was added to explain exactly what the indicator assessed.	LH

	<u>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</u>	ACTION
6.1	It was Agreed that the Chairman would agree the date of the next meeting of the Panel with the Head of Policy and Performance and the Committee Officer.	LH/RR



East
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Revenue & Benefit Services

Julian Derham – Head of Revenue & Benefit Services

'Serving the community during the
economic downturn'

Revenue & Benefit Services – what we do

- Council tax.
- Business rates.
- Housing & Council Tax Benefits.
- Benefits Counter Fraud.
- Concessionary Fares.
- Corporate Postroom (incoming post).



Revenue & Benefit Services – background

Council tax:

- Raise £41 million in 2009/10.
- 36,000 properties.
- Service provision: billing, collection and recovery.



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Revenue & Benefit Services – background

Council tax:

- Budget to collect 99.2%.
- Write off 0.221%.
- 85% of payments collected electronically.



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Revenue and Benefit Services – background

Business Rates:

- Raise £24 million in 2009/10.
- Collect 99.61%.
- Write off 0.39%.
- 2,228 business properties.
- Proactive support for business.



Revenue & Benefit Services – background

Housing and Council Tax Benefits:

- £16 million 2009/10.
- 14,600 claims processed per year.
- 9,306 claims in payment:
 - 5,372 Council tax benefit.
 - 3,934 Housing benefit.



Revenue & Benefit services – background

Benefits – Counter Fraud:

- Identified £375k overpaid benefit due to fraud or claimant error (918 cases).
- 83% collected within 3 years.
- 3% written off.
- 345 suspected frauds investigated.
- 22 Sanctions in progress.



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Revenue & Benefit Services - background

Concessionary Fares:

- 5,900 bus passes issued.
- 4,915 travel token issued (£47 for £10).
- 16 to 18 yr Student travel scheme (134 students).
- Cost: £517,000 in 2009/10.



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Revenue and Benefit Services - background

Corporate postroom:

- 13,000 items a month.
- Secure systems.



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Revenue and Benefit Services

- **Quality Managed Systems – ISO 9001-2000**
- *Compliments, complaints and comments*

Year	Complaints	Justified Complaints	Compliments	Comments
2005/6	18	6	9	10
2006/7	21	12	14	67
2007/8	32	19	25	47
2008/9	40	13	36	72



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Revenue and Benefit Services

Life has its lighter moments....

Reason given for not paying Council tax on time:

“ I recently had a lump removed from my leg and it left me a little short”



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Council Tax – problems:

- Rise in unemployment.
- Increased insolvencies.
- Downturn in housing market.
- Limited growth in the tax base.
- Reduction in collection rate - 0.43% down.
- Increase in recovery action.



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Council Tax – solutions:

- New booklet “Struggling to pay your bills”.
- Longer payment periods.
- Promote council tax benefit.
- Fraud prevention: data match single person discounts.



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Business rates – problems:

- Businesses with cash flow problems.
- Increased insolvencies.
- 5% increase in rates.
- Reduced collection rate – 1.03% down.
- Burden of empty properties.
- Increase in FOI (Freedom of Information request).
- Applications for hardship relief.



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Business rates - solutions:

- Temporary suspension of empty property rating for small properties.
- Deferred rate increase scheme.
- Longer term payment schemes.
- Promote rate reliefs.
- Applications for partially occupied properties.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Benefits - problems:

- Increased customer demand (30%).
- People with no previous experience of claiming.
- Recent new benefit schemes.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Benefits- solutions:

- Promote national & local benefits.
- Training in national benefits.
- Partnership working with DWP.
- Increase assessment capacity.
- Additional funding (DWP).
- Security enhancements – Gov Connect.



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Benefits (Counter Fraud) - problems:

- Likely increase in fraud.
- Increasing referrals (suspected frauds):
 - From staff sources.
 - Data matching.
 - Public.
- Increase in benefit overpayments.



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Service planning in an economic downturn

Benefits (Counter Fraud) - solutions:

- Maintain vigilance and security.
- Raise public awareness.
- Maintain staff resources.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Concessionary Fares - problems:

- Increased applications.
- Increased usage.
- Increased cost.
- Future changes.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Concessionary Fares - solutions:

- Scheme from 2011.
- Future decisions:
 - Transport tokens.
 - 16 – 18 yr old student travel.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Service improvements:

- Plain English letters and bills.
- Self service.



Service planning in an economic downturn

Service efficiencies :

- LEAN systems thinking.
- Increase electronic payments:
 - Direct Debit
 - Telephone
 - Website
 - OCR bank credits
 - SMS



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Service planning in an economic downturn

And finally.....

Quotes from people who received a reminders:

“My husband poor soul, is deaf, I told him to remind me to pay the council tax but he didn't hear me!”

“I get paid at the end of the month, so how can I be expected to pay on the 1st?”



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