

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD AT THE BOURGES/VIERSEN ROOM - TOWN HALL ON 15 MARCH 2010**

Present: Councillors M Fletcher (Chairman), S Allen (Vice-Chairman), S Day, S Lane, G Murphy and J Peach and P Winslade

Also Present: Councillor N Sandford – Representing the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group
Councillor D Seaton – Cabinet Member for Resources

Officers Present: John Harrison, Executive Director-Strategic Resources
Heather Darwin, Business Transformation Manager
Mark Sandhu, Head of Customer Services
Belinda Evans, Customer Services Manager
Kim Sawyer, Head of Legal Commercial
Louise Tyers, Scrutiny Manager

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Councillor D Day. Councillor Winslade was present as substitute.

2. Declarations of Interest and Whipping Declarations

No declarations of interest were made.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 18 January 2010

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 January 2010 were accepted as an accurate record, subject to Councillor Winslade being added to those members who had submitted apologies.

4. Call In of any Cabinet, Cabinet Member or Key Officer Decisions

There were no requests for call-in to consider.

5. Use of Consultants - Scrutiny Review

Councillor Fletcher read out a statement about the background to this item, including his concerns that the questions submitted at the meeting on 18 January 2010 had not been answered.

Councillor Seaton responded by saying that the questions previously submitted by the Committee had not been avoided but it was unclear at what they were trying to achieve and should not be seen in isolation. The Executive Director of Strategic Resources asked for it to be minuted that he had answered some of the questions supplied at the last meeting in a telephone conversation with the Chairman. Councillor Fletcher stated that he did not agree with that statement.

The first task any review would need to undertake would be to define the term 'consultancy' as there was a huge range of definitions used and the review would be useful in identifying an approach for the future. Once this definition had been agreed then officers would be able

to provide a like for like comparison on how much we actually spend in the organisation and where these consultants were employed.

Councillor Seaton introduced the report by saying that he welcomed the proposed review and its outcomes would help to inform future decisions on the use of consultants. This would be a very important review and he would offer his assistance to the Committee in undertaking it, including providing officer support. This was a review which could not be undertaken by just looking through documents and members might wish to interview staff who had worked with consultants and who now worked in a completely different way as a result. Interviews could also be held with external stakeholders as some of the projects taken forward by our consultants had involved interaction with those stakeholders. This would give members a rounded picture of how consultants had worked with our partners in achieving some of the Council's objectives and outcomes. An example of a review which had been undertaken by Salisbury District Council was included within the papers and this might be useful as an example of how to undertake the review.

The use of consultants was very complex and a return on our investment would occur every year and this needed to be looked at against the significant overheads of employing new members of staff. Peterborough was receiving considerable national acclaim for its work and our staff were now being paid to work with five other councils.

The report included three case studies of consultancy arrangements where the Council's spend was greatest. All three of these contracts had been authorised by Cabinet Member Decision Notices and had therefore been open to scrutiny.

Heather Darwin, Business Transformation Manager, gave a presentation on how projects and programmes were managed, including the process of how business cases were signed off and the governance arrangements for projects.

Observations and questions were raised around the following areas:

- £12m had been quoted in the Chairman's interview with local radio, where had that figure come from? *£12m was not a figure that had come from officers and it was not clear where they had got that figure.*
- A reporter from the press advised that the figure of £12m had come from the Leader of the Council.
- Why were officers not aware that £12m was now the figure being spent on consultants? *The figure that was given of £8-9m at the meeting of the Environment Capital Scrutiny Committee on 14 January 2010 was the figure from the most recent Freedom of Information request. There had been no notice given to update the figure at the Environment Capital meeting.*
- The use of the East Midlands Highway Alliance had been introduced a number of years ago and saved time in not having to go out to procurement for each project. Why was this now not being used by Atkins?
- What was meant by an in-depth review? *The terms of reference suggested in the report would give a focused way forward in reviewing the use of consultants in Peterborough.*
- Why could we not directly employ people of the same calibre as the consultants? *We were bringing in consultants for the right projects. Significant controls were put in place and we assessed the work at the end of the projects.*
- In the previous review undertaken in 2006, one of the recommendations made was that consultants should usually only be employed for three months. We had also been told that an effort would be made to reduce the number of consultants being used. *Once the task and finish group had agreed a definition of what was meant by 'consultancy', officers would be able to provide accurate figures about the numbers being employed. All roles were subject to a separate business case to ensure that we were able to demonstrate value for money.*

- In 2002/03, the figure for spend on consultants was £3.75m, why had this figure now risen by so much over 8 years? *In 2002/03 services such as ICT had been provided in-house but were now provided under contract.*
- It was clear from the presentation that there were now tight briefs and plans in place for projects, it may be useful to look at an example of a project to show the governance arrangements which were now in place.
- Do the savings which have been made take into account the salaries of the consultants as well as the heads of service already employed in the service area? *An example would be that prior to the Serco contract the Council employed a Head of ICT but now that a managed service had been introduced there was not a need for that post, but someone was needed to manage the contract.*
- Councillor Murphy suggested that the review be established but that it should report back to the Committee by the end of September 2010.

ACTION AGREED

- (i) to note the contents of the report;
- (ii) to establish a task and finish group to review the use of consultants by the Council and to report back to the Committee by the end of September 2010;
- (iii) to appoint up to five members to the task and finish group;
- (iv) to agree the terms of reference as detailed at Appendix 9 of the report; and
- (v) that the task and finish group identifies a definition for the term 'consultancy' prior to any detailed information being provided .

In line with protocol, the Scrutiny Manager would write to the Group Secretaries seeking nominations for the review. Councillors Fletcher, Lane and Murphy indicated that they would be happy to be put forward.

6. Complaints Monitoring Report 2008/09

The Head of Customer Services presented the report which analysed the performance of the Council's formal Corporate Complaints Procedure between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009. The report did not include complaints that fell outside of the Corporate Complaints Policy, for example, complaints relating to schools, Statutory Children Social Care and Adult Social Care.

Following the successful transfer of the Central Complaints Office (CCO) from the Strategic Improvement Division to Customer Services in February 2008, the service has been fully resourced. In previous years the service suffered from insufficient back up resources. The resource for this service remained 1.5 FTE but this was split over more productive working hours with the fall back of other trained Customer Service staff who could cover should the need arise.

The Corporate Complaints Policy has three-stages:

- Stage One (First Contact Complaint)
- Stage Two (Service Review)
- Stage Three (Independent Person Review)

During 2008/09 a total of 441 Stage 1 complaints had been received compared to 752 in 2007/08. The decrease in Stage 1 complaints could be attributed to various factors:-

- Enhanced data collection had distinguished between internal issues and corporate complaints.
- The relocation of the Corporate Complaints office into Customer Services.

- Differentiating between service requests and complaints
- The work of the Peterborough Direct Call Centre in dealing with issues quickly.

The number of Stage 2 complaints for 2008/09 was 60 compared to 71 the previous year. The Operations Directorate continued to have the highest number of Stage 2 complaints, but had seen a decline from the previous year which equalled the decline in Stage 1 complaints for the Directorate.

To reduce the number of complaints escalated to Stage 3 there was a need to ensure that the standard of Stage 2 responses was improved across all directorates. Quality checking of all Stage 2 complaints began and this had already resulted in some senior officers being recommended to attend the next available Local Government Ombudsman complaint training workshop. The next step in improving the quality of Stage 2 investigations was for senior managers across the directorates to ensure that the officers who investigated and responded to complaints within their areas had the necessary skills to undertake this important area of work.

During 2008-09, the Council received 25 stage three complaints, compared to 15 during 2007-08. Of those 3 were upheld, 2 were partially upheld, 17 were not upheld and 3 complaints were closed prior to the start of the investigation.

Each year the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) provided an annual review to the Council in respect of the Council and included comments on performance and complaint-handling. For the year 2008/09 the LGO received 43 complaints and enquiries regarding the work of the Council of which the highest number for a single business unit was 13 cases in respect of planning and building control. During the year one decision had been classed as 'maladministration with report' and related to a planning issue. £5,000 had been paid in compensation, as well as a further £500 for distress, anxiety and the time and trouble pursuing the complaint.

Observation and questions were raised around the following areas:

- There was some concern at the number of Stage 1 complaints. What was the definition of a complaint? *If a member of the public rang to say that their bin had not been collected and it was the first time, it would be logged as a service request. If they then came back and said it had not been collected again, then it would be logged as a complaint. We also looked at the level of dissatisfaction which was often dictated by the customer's response.*
- If councillors had a complaint should they use the corporate process or was there another process? *Councillors had other channels in which to raise issues with officers.*
- How was customer satisfaction with the complaints process measured? *Complainants were written to requesting feedback but this was under utilised. We concentrated on email customers and had about a 4% return which was very low but we were working hard to improve this.*
- How did you put over the importance of providing feedback? *The feedback forms were phrased to look at how we handled the complaint not the complaint itself. We usually heard from the people who were not happy. We did not record compliments as a Council and this was something we would like to start doing.*
- How were complaints made via councillors dealt with, as in one instance when working on behalf of a constituent, a telephone was continually on voicemail and no messages were returned? *The use of voicemail on Council telephones was an area which needed to be looked at. We would remind colleagues about responding to messages and emails promptly. If any issues were raised in councillors' surgeries, please refer them onto the complaints team.*

ACTION AGREED

That the Cabinet Member for Resources is advised of our support that senior managers actively encourage officers who undertake complaint investigations to attend specialist complaints training to improve the quality of Stage 1 and Stage 2 responses.

7. Forward Plan of Key Decisions

The latest version of the Forward Plan, showing details of the key decisions that the Leader of the Council believe the Cabinet or individual Cabinet Members would be making over the next four months, was received.

The Committee asked for clarification as to the current position of the following decisions:

- Connected Care Peterborough
- Surrender of Lease

ACTION AGREED

The Scrutiny Manager to clarify the position of the Connected Care Peterborough and Surrender of Lease decisions.

CHAIRMAN
7.00 - 9.15 pm

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