

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the RESOURCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held on Tuesday 10 September 2013 at 7.30pm at Campus West, Welwyn Garden City.

PRESENT: Councillors G.Michaelides (Chairman)

D.Bell, M.Birleson, J.Cragg (substituting for S.Markiewicz),
T.Crump, M.Levitt, G.Michaelides, J.Nicholls, N.Pace,
A.Prest, S.Roberts

A.Franey (Portfolio Holder – Resources)

OFFICIALS Director (Strategy and Resources) (P.Kettle)
PRESENT: Head of Resources (K.Ng)
Senior Performance & Strategy Officer (C.Jauncey)
Management Accountant – Projects (V.Osborne)
Finance Manager (M.Player)
Financial and Technical Accountant (D.Williams)
Committee Manager (S.Hulks)

11. SUBSTITUTION OF MEMBERS:

The following substitution of Committee Members had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 19-22:

Councillor J.Cragg for Councillor S.Markiewicz.

12. APOLOGIES:

An apology for absence was received from Councillor S.Markiewicz.

13. MINUTES:

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2013 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The minutes reflected that Members had asked for officers to look in to the performance figures of the Rushmoor Benefits Service. A briefing Note was sent out highlighting the reasons why Rushmoor Council performed markedly better in the speed of processing new benefit claims. This is appended to these minutes.

Members agreed with officers' recommendation to hold off reviewing the service until after the implementation of Universal Credits.

14. PERFORMANCE INDICATOR REPORT – RESOURCES:

Members were presented with a report which provided details of Performance Indicator data for those items within the remit of the Committee.

Members asked whether the figures for PI228 were for the quarter or annualised. They were advised that the figures were for the quarter. Members felt that this was high and they asked how it compared to other authorities. Officers replied that there was no data for benchmarking currently although it was hoped that this would change soon.

It was noted that an article in the Local Government Chronicle had shown that sickness absence in the public sector was at an average of 6.9 days and that this indicated that Welwyn Hatfield was well above average.

Members felt that there needed to be good management of long-term sickness.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

15. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING AT 30 JUNE 2013 (MONTH 3):

Members received a report detailing the budget monitoring position of the revenue and capital budgets.

The report provided information on underspends, overspends and variances.

Members asked for an explanation of the savings on the car allowance budget. It was explained that changes to the essential car user allowance were being phased in over three years. For some posts the allowance is being phased out. Assumptions made at the time of setting the budget were now being updated to reflect actual performance in respect of car mileage claims and the impact of staff turnover on the allowance. This has resulted in the budget being reduced.

Members questioned whether the costs of the repairs to Wellfield Road car park should fall to the Council when it was being used by the Housing Trust. It was explained that the car park was owned by and therefore the responsibility of the Council. There was a £10k contribution from the Housing Revenue Account towards the cost of the investigative work during 2012/13.

Members asked whether it was likely that the income figure for the car parks would be achieved bearing in mind that there was already a shortfall of £64k. Officers replied that car parking income is monitored on a weekly basis and at this stage of the year the budget is considered achievable.

Members asked whether a replacement was being sought for the vacant Street Warden post. Officers advised that a recruitment process had taken place and the position had been offered subject to the usual reference and employment checks.

A comment was made that the level of maintenance costs for housing should reduce as more Right To Buy opportunities were taken and the housing stock reduced. Officers agreed that this was the case, all other things being equal, but regard will need to be made to the affordable housing programme

Members queried the additional amount of £22k for pension costs and they were told that this was due to two things; an employee joining the pension scheme and the impact of a job evaluation exercise.

A Member commented that he was pleased to see that, despite resistance, a marketing plan was being prepared for the Building Control Service. He asked for information to be supplied on the trends in construction and how this related to the performance of the Building Control Service. A request was made for officers to provide an explanation of the Building Control Service figures in the report and this was agreed.

Members asked when the renovations on the Council's garages would take place. It was explained that a meeting of the officer and Member procurement group was being arranged. Details of this and a verbal update would be given on this issue at the next meeting of the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Members asked when Phase 2 of the Splashlands project would go ahead. They were informed that a meeting of this Project Board would be held in October.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

16. COMMITTEE OVERVIEW WORK PROGRAMME 2013/2014:

A Members asked for an item to be added to the agenda for December requesting a report on the Refurbishment Programme for Neighbourhood Shops. It was explained that this used to be a regular item.

Officers agreed to look into earlier reports to see whether this was a topic that should be included. However, it was thought that this would be covered in the Capital Budget.

Response from Cabinet/Council to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Members received a verbal response to the recommendations that had been made to Cabinet as follows:

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- (1) It was agreed that the Steria Customer Service Survey should cease.
- (2) Cabinet had deferred a decision on the recommendation for each Councillor to receive details of the complaints in their own Ward until consideration had been given to the methods of complaints reporting.

Details of these responses would be included with the next Resources Overview and Scrutiny agenda at which time it might also be possible to give an update on the second item.

Meeting ended 8.25pm
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Briefing Note – Rushmoor Benefits Service Performance

Introduction

At the ROSC meeting on 22 July Members were presented with comparative performance figures for the average speed of processing new benefit claims from other authorities within the CIPFA family grouping. One authority in particular Rushmoor Borough Council appeared to be assessing new benefit claims within a very low average time (6 days) compared to the other authorities in the group. Members have asked officers to investigate to understand how this level of performance is being achieved and secondly whether there is any good practice that Steria could adopt to reduce the average processing time, which was 14 days over the same period (currently 11.70 days in 2013/14).

Following discussions with Rushmoor Council Steria met their Benefits Manager, on 13 August 2013 to examine how the service had been transformed and to observe staff dealing with claimants.

Background

Rushmoor have adopted the “Vanguard Method to service delivery”. The Vanguard Method is a method used by service organisations to change the design and management of work.

The Vanguard Method enables managers to study their organisation as a system and on the basis of the knowledge gained, re-design their services to improve performance and drive out costs.

Rushmoor Service Delivery

Managers in the benefits service at Rushmoor first considered the Vanguard method as far back as 2002, but due to a number of issues did not undertake a full review of the service at that time. It was not until one of the Directors attended a Vanguard seminar about four or five years ago that the Council made a strategic decision to test the Vanguard (Systems Thinking) approach to service delivery in a number of key areas, the first of which was in Benefits.

Implementing the Vanguard Method in Benefits at Rushmoor

The process started with a forensic review of 200 claims to identify how much double handling was taking place and how many staff had played a part in the decision making process. Claimants were surveyed to find out what they wanted from the benefits service; what bits of the existing process added little or no value to them; and what changes would they be prepared to accept. E.g. longer waiting time in reception, if it meant the overall time taken to get a decision on their benefit claim was reduced.

The following table sets out in some of the differences in how the service at Rushmoor is now delivered compared to the service delivered to Welwyn Hatfield claimants.

Rushmoor	Welwyn Hatfield
Claimant deals with only one benefit officer from initial contact to award of benefit	Different benefit officers deal with the claim throughout the process
However the initial request to claim is received, i.e. telephone, letter or in person, all new claimants are seen by appointment at the council officers. Claimants are told in advance what information to bring in and the benefit officers are able to assess more than 50% of claims on the day. Claimants leave the meeting with their benefit notification knowing how much benefit they are entitled to, when it will be paid and have had any questions regarding the amount of benefit answered during the meeting.	<p>Claims are accepted by post or at reception and are worked on by 'back office staff' that frequently have to write out for more information.</p> <p>Once all of the information has been received the claim is assessed and a benefit notification letter posted.</p> <p>Numerous telephone calls are received by claimants, querying the amount of benefit, when it will be paid etc ('failure demand').</p>
Benefit officers are required to contact claimants by telephone rather than write to them when the need arises. They are then able to immediately answer any queries that may arise.	Contact with claimants is routinely by letter or email.

The approach taken at Rushmoor now means that they are able to assess around 57% of new claims on the first day. There are still claims that take much longer than this, but overall the average time taken for the majority of claimants becomes much quicker.

Conclusion

Preparing a service for delivery using the Vanguard Method does take time, up to 12 months to become fully operational. Rushmoor has approximately 8,000 benefit claimants compared to 8,900 in Welwyn Hatfield and 12.8 FTE for their 8,000 caseload compared to Steria's 13 FTE for a caseload of 8,900.

The approach taken by Rushmoor does require more resources in terms of staffing as it takes longer to sit with a claimant and go through their claim form rather than assessing from correspondence and writing out for more information. Also in many cases you may also do a 'triage' session with them on the telephone (if contact has been made by phone in the first instance) i.e. quick run through of circumstances so you can advise the claimant what documents to bring in for the face to face appointment. This is counter balanced to a large extent by the time saved chasing information, writing letters, answering queries.

It is the claims that are turned around in one day that brings the average down at Rushmoor, who still process a lot of claims over a longer period of time. At Welwyn, the process time for dealing with benefit claims is far more consistent.

Steria would be happy to discuss the possibilities of adopting the Vanguard Method of service delivery with the Council as a transformational project within Benefits but this could involve additional cost to the Council for a service that is already excelling in meeting the needs of our vulnerable customers. However, with the ongoing welfare reform changes to benefits it would not be prudent to make any changes to the benefit service at this moment in time. With universal credit on the horizon, which replaces housing benefits, it is very likely that we will have to renegotiate the benefit element of our contract with Steria.