

NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL REPORT OF THE MEETING

Committee: Service Review Committee

Date: Monday, 3 March 2008 starting at 2.00 pm

Venue: Council Chamber, Nordon, Salisbury Road,
Blandford Forum

Present: Cllr V G Fox (Chairman)
Cllr M Jeffery (Vice Chairman)
Cllr B Anderson
Cllr J Hickish
Cllr S G Hitchings
Cllr Mrs V Potheary
Cllr J E T Tanner
Cllr C Tomlinson

Officers Present: Mrs J Hind, Deputy Revenues Manager
Mrs S Valinski, Benefits Team Leader
M Williams, Research and Performance Policy Manager

Apologies: Cllr D L Beer and Cllr Mrs D L Jones MBE

35.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following declarations of interest were made by Members under the Code of Conduct.

Cllr M Jeffery – Minute No.38 – Personal Interest as Tenant of Signpost Housing Association.

Cllr J Tanner – Minute No. 38 – Personal Interest as NDDC Representative on Signpost Care Services

36.

REPORT OF THE LAST MEETING

The report of the meeting held on 14 January 2008 was confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

37.

URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

38.

**UPDATE ON HOUSING AND COUNCIL TAX BENEFIT ADMINISTRATION
WITHIN THE REVENUES TEAM OF NORTH DORSET DISTRICT
COUNCIL**

The Benefits Team Leader and Deputy Revenues Manager answered members' questions on the report prepared by the Revenues Manager.

The Chairman raised an issue which had been brought up at the Cabinet meeting earlier in the day regarding the average time to process Housing Benefit claims and the concern that this was causing issues for landlords and potential tenants. The Benefits Team Leader responded that processing times were the best they had ever been and if there were issues such as people threatened with eviction etc their claims were fast-tracked.

She stated that some issues were created by the applicants themselves due to information not being forthcoming to allow full consideration of a claim. The team could only process the information supplied and if this was not given within one month the claimant was informed that the claim has been unsuccessful. It was stressed that the claimant did have a right to appeal the decision and this would involve the claim being re-assessed. If the decision was still that there was no entitlement to benefit then there was a right to go to a Tribunal for decision. It was stated that there had only been 8 tribunal cases this financial year.

The Chairman noted that the figures presented did not include information on fraud cases and the impact they have. Cllr Mrs Pothecary felt this would be useful information to enable members to look at the whole picture. The Deputy Revenues Manager stated that these figures were collected and would ask that they be included in the next report to the Committee.

Members questioned the figures for speed of processing claims and were advised that figures dip around holiday times, especially if other staff were to go off sick. It was pointed out that the current staff level was below the optimum and most of the issues relating to speed of processing were a result of a lack of employees. Cllr Hitchings asked if the current vacancy management system was holding up the process of recruitment. He was informed that this was not an issue, the problem was purely a lack of qualified people in the market place. The Benefits Team Leader stated that she was hoping to recruit a new member of staff that week.

The Chairman thanked the Benefits Team Leader and Deputy Revenues Manager for their attendance and reiterated that the Committee would like to see figures for

- The number of Fraud cases undertaken
- Number of Council Tax liabilities

included in the next report to enable members to get a full picture of the burden on staff.

39.

PERFORMANCE INFORMATION UPDATE (THIRD QUARTER)

The Research and Performance Policy Manager presented the report which had been taken to Cabinet earlier in the day. He advised members that the format of the report, which used to be presented to the Committee, had been reviewed and now included financial and customer information alongside the Indicators.

He explained that the Senior Management Team (SMT) were constantly engaged with services where concerns were raised and were receiving monthly updates. He added that there were a lot of groups monitoring performance including Team North Dorset and the Accounts and Audit Committee.

He stated that of the 24 Performance Indicators considered by the Audit Commission 13 were on track, 6 would not meet target and the remaining 5 were collected annually and were therefore difficult to track.

He highlighted the following information contained in the report:-

- **Housing Benefits** – this was a key issue. Problems had arisen in the first quarter and this meant that it was difficult to put back on track despite the fact that performance had greatly improved. He highlighted that SMT were looking at staffing issues and these needed to be resolved to ensure that the first quarter next year did not have the same effect.
- **Sickness** – figures for sickness had increased to 8.1 days and if the trend continued could increase to over 10. The figures were broken down onto long term and short term sickness and of the 8.1 figure 3.35 days were due to staff on long-term sick leave. It was highlighted that the Personnel Committee had recently approved an updated Absence Management Policy which had been trialled in several services, but this would take a while to get established.
- **Development Control** – The targets set were not demanding this year to enable the department to undertake a Business Transformation process. However, they were set well above the minimum and targets were being achieved.
- **Corporate Targets** – It was highlighted that these included figures such as Top 5% earners women, Staff from Ethnic Minorities. These were not performing as well as the Audit Commission would like but as a small authority there was little that could be done to address this.

The Research and Performance Policy Manager stated that new indicators would be in place from April and all the current indicators would go. However, some of them may be retained as local indicators.

He then drew members' attention to the part of the report written by the Financial Services Manager and highlighted that at the end of the third quarter there was a projected surplus of £156,000 against budget.

Cllr Tanner questioned the figures for Development Control. He stated that members received a list each week detailing new planning applications and that this list was decreasing. If this was the case did the meeting of targets reflect an increase in efficiency or less applications being brought forward?

The Research and Performance Policy Manager stated that there appeared to be a reduction in the number of applications, especially for large developments. He stated that the Development Control Service was the most expensive in the area and the business transformation process was designed to reduce costs. He stated that the Pl's put attention on speed of processing rather than quality. Cllr Jeffery highlighted that although the service was more costly the quality of reporting to the Development Control Committee was improving.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that in order for members to get a better picture she would invite the Portfolio Holder and Development Control Manager to attend a future meeting to explain the figures. Cllr Jeffery advised the Committee that figures for new build etc were contained in the annual monitoring report.

The Research and Performance Policy Officer highlighted some additional areas in the report.

- **Investors in People** – He highlighted that the Investors in People had been retained. Following interviews with around 45 staff the report from the inspector stated that some of the work being undertaken in relation to training was innovative and cutting-edge.
- **Customer Management** –
Telephones: This area had been highlighted by the Audit Commission. Following this the Customer Contact Manager had been requested to attend meetings of SMT to discuss the issues.

It was highlighted that the number of abandoned calls was reducing but still appeared to be an issue within the Development Control Service. Steps were being put in place to try to rectify this.

Cllr Hitchings stated that whilst trying to reduce the number of abandoned calls was good, the quality of the information given could be an issue. He highlighted an incident that had occurred that day where a member of the public had been given the wrong information. The Research and Performance Policy Officer thanked Cllr Hitchings for the information and undertook to take this as an issue to SMT. He asked members that if any complaints/issues arose then they inform the Democratic Services Manager to ensure they are logged correctly.

	<p>Customers: Less customers were being dealt with in the reception area and a large number of transactions were now being carried out in post offices.</p> <p>Complaints: Most complaints related to refuse and re-cycling such as non-collection. One complaint had been received relating to an alleged racist incident regarding another agency. It was highlighted that no complaints were currently being investigated by the Ombudsman.</p> <p>The Chairman thanked the Research and Performance Policy Manager for his attendance.</p>
<p>40.</p>	<p>REVIEW OF THE NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL WEB SITE</p> <p>Due to the ICT Manager being unable to attend due to illness this item was delayed until the next meeting of the Committee to be held on 14th April.</p>
	<p>The meeting closed at 3.10 pm</p> <p style="text-align: right;">CHAIRMAN</p>