

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

15 JANUARY 2013

Present :- Councillor Kevin Bentley (Chairman)
Councillors Helen Chuah, Beverly Davies, Bill Frame,
Pauline Hazell, Peter Higgins, Kim Naish, Nigel Offen,
Gerard Oxford and Terry Sutton

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Tina Bourne
Councillor Martin Hunt
Councillor Paul Smith

20. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on **30 October 2012** was confirmed as a correct record.

21. Half Yearly Performance Report Including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan

The following Councillors declared non-pecuniary interests in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(5);

**Councillor Bentley in respect of being an Essex County Councillor
Councillor Frame in respect of being a Board Member of Colne Housing
Councillor Naish in respect of being a Director of the Anglian Trust**

Half Yearly Performance Report including progress on the Strategic Plan Action Plan

Councillors Paul Smith, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, Councillor Martin Hunt, Portfolio Holder for Street and Waste Services, Councillor Tina Bourne, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Ms. Lucie Breadman, Head of Life Opportunities attended the meeting for this item.

The Half Yearly Performance Report was to be presented to Cabinet on 23 January 2013, and provided a performance update for the period up to the end of September 2012, including an update of progress of the Strategic Plan Action Plan.

The Chairman invited questions from Members of the Panel.

In response to Councillor Chuah's enquiry about KSI H2 "The Number of Affordable Homes delivered", Councillor Bourne said the garage sites to be redeveloped for future affordable housing are not included in the 49 homes so far delivered in 2012-13. There was no certainty of these sites being developed in 2012-13, although they would be included in future monitoring once the developments are completed.

Councillor Bourne said the 49 homes delivered included 21 social rents, 5 intermediate rents and 23 (shared equity) Home buying Scheme properties. Councillor Bourne was hopeful that the indicator will achieve its target by year-end but the amber rating highlights some risks.

Councillor Bourne responded to Councillor Bentley by confirming the performance of the indicator KSI H5 "Average Number of Days to re-let Council Houses", 16.81 days against a target of 19 days was exceptional, and bringing void properties back into use at a faster rate provided more rental income that in turn provided a greater Housing Revenue Account surplus.

Councillor Bentley requested that the target and performance descriptions should all accurately reflect the indicator and unit of measure, to provide clarity when communicating to Councillors and Members of the Public.

In response to Councillor Naish in respect of indicator KSI H4 "Rent Collected", Councillor Bourne said the performance was again exceptional and she did not expect the performance to drop in 2012-13, though changes to welfare reform will provide new issues. Councillor Bourne said officers are addressing the impact of welfare reform and actions are being put in place to mitigate against the potential issues.

Councillor Smith responded to Councillor Oxford in respect of indicator KI R1 "% Council Tax Collected", saying there had been a change to the method of monitoring this indicator, now standardised to a nominal month rather than a complete calendar month. Councillor Smith said whilst the current performance was an improvement on previous years it was anticipated that the target will remain challenging due to welfare reform. These potential issues are being addressed and it was important that those who could not pay are identified as soon as possible, and those not paying are pursued vigorously.

Councillor Smith confirmed to Councillor Bentley that up to 8,000 households will in some way or another be affected by the council tax changes which are part of the welfare reforms.

Ms. Breadman responded to Councillor Offen in respect of indicator KI R3 "Sickness rate", reminding the panel that there had been much debate and discussion by the scrutiny panel last year on the target being set and if it was indeed too challenging. In respect of benchmarking against performance in both the public and private sector Ms. Breadman explained that this is difficult. In the past there was a set methodology for reporting and monitoring sickness for all Local Authorities, thus you knew comparisons were fair. This had changed, and its now harder to access comparisons and be sure that they are measured in the same way, including all long and short term absence. Whilst the current annual sickness rate of 8.15 days per FTE is higher than we want it to be, it is similar to the same time last year (8.49 days) and continues to be an improvement on historical performance which has been as high as 12-13 days in past years.

In relation to use of the Bradford Factor measurement tool and the suggestion by Cllr Offen that this is often not actioned effectively, Ms. Breadman explained that this was

taken into consideration with the review of the sickness policy. The new policy and procedure guidance has less discretion for managers and a much clearer stepped approach, ensuring managers are more proactive in identifying problems and managing the complete process. Following a number of comments from Panel members around sickness rates and monitoring, Ms. Breadman confirmed that the policy includes a return to work interview for all employees following sickness and performance is monitored at a number of different levels monthly. All staff involved in managing sickness have undergone management training and a recent training session on managing stress had been held. In response to specific questions about the Bradford Factor Ms Breadman confirmed that of the 90 cases currently being managed, 9% are not actively on step 1 or 2 of the process which is much fewer than in the past. There are cases of staff being dismissed due to absence, again confirming that the policy is followed through by managers.

Ms. Breadman confirmed that sickness absence was higher than we would want and indeed the challenging target set reflects the importance of continuous improvement in this area, whilst it had improved over the years every effort was being made to reduce the current levels further. Ms. Breadman confirmed that the Council does look to share information and benchmark with other similar organisations..

Councillor Offen whilst acknowledging the current policy and procedures said he remained uncomfortable with the current high level of sickness target and performance.

Responding to Councillor Bentley and Frame in relation to specific reasons for absence, Ms. Breadman acknowledged organisation change and pressure of work are contributory factors in stress related illness. Support is in place to minimise this and Fundamental Service Reviews (FSR) are individually supported by an HR Business Partner to provide guidance and help with the potential sickness issues. Engagement with staff takes place throughout the process but inevitably this level of change does increase workloads and anxiety for some which may result in stress related illness at all levels in the organisation.

Mrs. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director confirmed that the management of sickness absence was supported by a nurse-led Occupational Health Service.

The Panel agreed with Councillor Bentley's suggestion that a more detailed review of sickness procedures and levels was undertaken before the end of the year, given the persistently high sickness levels.

In response to Councillor Oxford in respect of indicator KSI W2 "Residual Household Waste per Household", Councillor Hunt said a DEFRA Grant was being used to provide research about the Food Waste Trial to determine how residents will recycle following the trial, useful information in shaping the future service. Councillor Hunt said officers in the Zone Teams are visiting residents from where large numbers of black sacks are collected on a regular basis, to provide help and advice in changing their waste recycling habits.

Mr. Matthew Young, Head of Street Services said the service was looking to take action to meet the target of 440kg for 2012-13. Mr. Young said during the years 2006-07 and

2011-12 the performance had improved from 635kg per household to 449kg per household and it was hoped this continuing trend will continue. Mr. Young said in 2006-07 45,000 tonnes of waste was collected from 71,000 households improving to a current situation where 81,000 households produce 36,000 – 37,000 tonnes of waste. It was the Council's intention to reduce the number of black sacks of waste sent to landfill and officers will be working during the next month to find ways to ensure the target is met by the end of the year.

Members acknowledged the problems associated with collecting recycled waste from blocks of flats and the problems faced by householders living in tiny houses, maisonettes and flats with limited space to store recycling waste in multiple containers. A common solution was needed and this issue was being considered at County level.

Councillor Peter Higgins said he had observed refuse collectors sorting cans and glass from single containers and believed supplying two containers to store tins and glass separately would save 100s of man hours and could be self financing.

Councillor Offen suggested that all Planning Committee Members should be briefed on the Council's Planning Guidance in respect of the provision of waste and recycling storage areas.

Councillor Bentley agreed to talk to Councillor Louis, Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation at Essex County Council to find out what progress is being made in respect of the Borough's Air Quality Management Areas and the introduction of Low Emission Zones.

Councillor Offen said he felt the details within the "Delivery of an efficient benefits service" within the Strategic Plan Action Plan should reflect the vast improvements in the performance of the service. Councillor Smith confirmed that benefit changes are now processed in 14 days, down from 22 days a year ago. Councillor Smith said that despite an increase in benefit claims due to the economic downturn, the success of on-line benefit claim processing had enabled performance to improve.

Councillor Offen also asked for the list of initiatives listed within Appendix 2 of the Action Plan to capture some of the major initiatives happening within the Garrison Area of Colchester.

Councillor Naish said he would like to see "Providing Sport and Leisure for all" include Angling for the disabled at the High Woods Country Park (HWCP) and Castle Park, something that is very much beneficial to health and wellbeing. Councillor Naish said disabled access and signage to these sites needed improving. Councillor Oxford said platforms to provide areas for the disabled anglers to fish is provided at the HWCP but there remained difficulty for these people getting to these specific areas.

Ms. Breadman understood members wishing to add more information about good things that were happening and activities that demonstrated that we are working to meet the Strategic Priorities, and apologised for not capturing everything in the half yearly update but explained that it would be impossible to balance a short and concise update (which had been called for) with a complete record of everything that had been

delivered, thus the aim was to update on “Key” activities or agreed specific outcomes through the period.

Given the level of detail within the performance report and the inevitable high number of questions asked, the Panel agreed to Councillor Bentley’s suggestion that to try to reduce the time spent reviewing performance at the Panel meeting, members would be invited to attend the Chairman’s briefing for future performance reviews to obtain clarity and iron out queries in advance of the meeting.

In response to Councillor Frame, Councillor Smith said in respect of “Improving opportunities for local business”, and the strategic aspiration to enable an increase in job creation, new businesses are being created. Councillor Smith also said that the Council’s new procurement rules meant the impact on the local economy was a consideration when determining the supplier.

Councillor Bentley acknowledged Councillor Oxford’s comments about the loss of the Network Colchester bus route(s) to High Woods and suggested this should be considered as part of an overall review of bus transportation in the Borough, and would be discussed in the following work programme item.

RESOLVED that the Panel:

- i) Considered and noted the Performance Report for the period up to the end of September 2012 that included a progress update on Strategic Plan Action Plan.
- ii) Requested that the target and performance descriptions should all accurately reflect the indicator and unit of measure, to provide clarity when communicating to Councillors and Members of the Public.
- iii) Agreed to a more detailed review of sickness procedures and levels at the meeting to be held on 12 February 2013.
- iv) Requested the Cabinet to consider for inclusion in the Strategic Plan Action Plan, angling for the disabled at the High Woods Country Park (HWCP) and Castle Park, an initiative that is beneficial to participant’s health and wellbeing.

22. Work Programme

Following discussions:

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Commented on and noted the Work Programme 2012/13.
- ii) Agreed to review Bus Transportation in the Borough, at an extra March meeting (date to be confirmed), to discuss all aspects of bus transportation, reliability and the new Bus Station, with the Managing Directors from all the leading bus operators invited to attend the meeting.