

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

25 OCTOBER 2011

Present :- Councillor Andrew Ellis (Chairman)
Councillors Nick Cope, Theresa Higgins, Kim Naish,
Gerard Oxford, Will Quince, Colin Sykes and
Dennis Willetts

Substitute Members :- Councillor Sonia Lewis for Councillor Nigel Chapman
Councillor Lesley Scott-Boutell for Councillor Bill Frame

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Beverley Oxford

Councillor Kim Naish (in respect of being a member of the Board of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

Councillor Colin Sykes (in respect of his spouse being a member of the Board of Colchester Borough Homes) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

18. Colchester Borough Homes Fundamental Service Review - Progress review of Customer Experience and Access

Mr. Greg Falvey, Chief Executive, Colchester Borough Homes, Ms. Karen Loweman, Director of Housing, Colchester Borough Homes, and Mr. Mark Wright, Director of Property Services, Colchester Borough Homes, all attended the meeting for this review.

Presentation

Mr. Falvey, Ms. Loweman and Mr. Wright gave a joint presentation on Colchester Borough Homes – Changes to the way we work.

Mr. Falvey thanked the Panel for inviting Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) to talk about their Fundamental Service Review, explaining that the model adopted by CBH was as that used by other service areas within the Council.

Ms. Loweman spoke about the key priorities of the review, being about a flexible and responsive customer service, an easy to access service, consistency in the customer experience, focus on skill and capability of staff, increase partnership with others, a streamlining of systems and processes, improvement in technology and the identification of efficiencies and savings. Ms. Loweman explained that CBH had consulted widely with customers and stakeholders and was using technology to move away from paper based systems to help improve its customer service.

The review was modelled around enabling technology and data, behaviours and processes. The actions and outcomes, as shown in the progress report to the end September 2011, were discussed. These included enabling the community and

tenants to do more for themselves, developing joint work with the communities, reprocessing the systems and ways of working to increase skills and allow greater flexibility and empowerment, and to join services to maximise productivity.

Mr. Wright explained that the planned savings included a £300,000 target saving in 2011/12, that officers were confident of achieving, to be followed by a further £110,000 per year for 2012/13 and 2013/14. It was anticipated that £10,000 of increased income would be achieved in 2011/12 through a variety of new initiatives.

The achievements as this stage included a new staff structure resulting from the review, in place since August 2011. A staff training programme in partnership with the Colchester Institute was in place to increase skills and empower staff to address customer enquiries at the first point of contact, a multi-skilled Customer Services Team was now based at the Greenstead Office, and a new tenant involvement structure was now in place.

Mr. Wright gave details of the key performance indicators for monitoring progress, showing that since the implementation of the changes resulting from the review, performance on rent collection (97% of rent collected), empty property re-let times (28 days and 20 days for general needs accommodation) and repairs satisfaction (92% and rising to 96% in the last three months) was evidence of improving service delivery.

In terms of continuation, the services provided are improving with empty property re-let times going down as well as a reduction in rent arrears. A family intervention project for Colchester has been developed and the first National Citizenship programme introduced. Work Experience and apprenticeships continue to be provided for young people and visible improvements are being delivered to the community.

Mr. Falvey spoke about the work in progress included the joining of the Anti Social Behaviour teams in Colchester Borough Council and Colchester Borough Homes, with additional training to provide greater enforcement powers, further development to make better use of the Greenstead Office, and the expansion of flexible working to provide evening and Saturday morning appointments for repairs and improved efficiency in repair planning.

Mr. Falvey said there had been ten redundancies as a result of the FSR, 7 voluntary and 3 compulsory, and projects are now in place to commence further work in achieving savings in the second and third years of the review, with further developments planned to provide smarter procurement (orders and invoices) processes, improved Human Resource strategies and marketing services to provide additional income.

General discussion

In response to Councillor Willetts concerning 'sensitive testing', given the difficulty in reconciling better services with a reduction in costs, Mr. Falvey said the new methodology, providing different workflows and new processes had enabled a

reduction in staffing levels. Whilst there is a fear that customer service or performance may falter, processes and performance are continually tracked and adjustments if needed will be made.

Ms. Loweman confirmed that performance monitoring measures are in place to be able to track processes. Overall performance levelled off at the initial stage of implementation before an increased expectation, helped by new efficiencies found during and after implementation. The situation remains fluid and can be adjusted, and officers are very aware that the customers are quick to tell them when something is not working well and needs changing. Mr. Wright said the most contact with customers is through housing repairs, and tenants are subsequently surveyed and the results tracked as part of an intensive monthly monitoring programme. Mr. Wright said customer service survey results are improving.

Mr. Falvey said in regards to Governance, periodical performance reports are presented to CBH Performance Sub-Committee. Tenants are used as mystery shoppers and 100 tenants are surveyed monthly to get valuable feedback on services.

In response to Councillor Willetts concerning zonal-working for housing services to mirror those zones adopted by Street Services, Ms. Loweman said both services have undergone their FSR at a similar time and are both keen to operate zones that mirror one another. Officers from both services work well together and Street Services Zone Managers and Housing Officers are meeting regularly to develop ideas together.

Responding to Councillor Scott-Boutell, Mr. Falvey said in respect to engaging with young people, CBH are involved in a variety of forms of youth engagement. A new Youth Forum, in its infancy stage, is being progressed, with involvement from a Board Member of CBH and a Housing Officer, and was very much an ambition of CBH. Ms. Loweman said officers try to get representation from all age groups on Tenant Groups, but to get proper representation cannot be guaranteed. CBH officers work towards the strategic ambition of proper and continual engagement with young people, especially those in the 18-25 years age group.

Mr. Falvey said the Greenstead Office was not just a base for Housing Officers, but a central hub to be used as a port of call for local people for public or quasi public services and a suitable location for youth services.

In respect of the use of the Gosbecks Road facilities by outside services, it was an opportunity to generate income, with parking spaces hired by the Library Services buses and other services. A significant number of parking spaces had been freed due to changes in respect of employees being able to retain their vehicles overnight. In response to Councillor T. Higgins concerned about a local problem of CBH vans parking in residents parking areas in New Town, Mr. Wright said if Councillors contacted CBH with the details they would where appropriate make alternative arrangements. In response to Councillor Ellis, Mr. Wright said company vans are fitted with trackers so usage can be monitored. Managers are generally flexible with staff using vans during the week, though vans cannot be used at weekends.

Ms. Loweman apologised to Councillor Scott-Boutell about the problems she had

experienced when recently contacting CBH. Ms. Loweman said improvements had now been made to the effectiveness of the telephony service, which had experienced teething problems when CBH had transferred to the CBC IT Telephony system when relocating to Rowan House and the original Wellington House system had been transferred to the Greenstead Office. Faults had been identified and are being ironed out e.g. picking up missed calls. Councillor Ellis said his telephone communication with CBH over the last two weeks had been positive.

Responding to Councillor T. Higgins, Ms. Loweman said the Equality Impact Assessment that considers the impact of the implementation of the FSR has begun, but is not complete. In regards to the I-Connect system to be used for all customer contacts, it was not a direct interface with the back office and had not yet been implemented due to a double handling (web and paper based) of information. It was however noticeable that communication with young people is predominantly through the mobile telephone route. Mr. Wright said CBH will be introducing a texting system (investigating whether to use a different telephone number) that enabled officers to text tenants to tell them “we are coming to visit you now, are you there or shall we come on another occasion?”

In response to Councillor Sykes in regards to the new staffing levels and resources following the FSR, a common theme running through the report(s) in various forms, Mr. Falvey said ‘shared resources’ was a common theme, for example, a new post share at a senior level with South Essex Homes, currently being piloted and that will bring additional savings and improve strategic financial thinking.

A recruitment freeze was introduced during the review. The review itself raised expectations and with changes to be made there was a natural turnover of staff during this period. Recruitment followed, as part of the implementation plan, and some redundancies were made as part of this process, shifting to an enabling function as identified on page 5 of the presentation.

Ms. Loweman said the staffing numbers changed but there was not an exact shift of personnel from one function to another. New roles were introduced and some roles disappeared. Managers also looked to increase opportunities for tenants, with 60 tenants and leaseholders used as quality assurance assessors, volunteering roles, to give direct feedback on the services provided. The responses are closely monitored, with feedback a key part of the service monitoring process.

The overall staff structure now had fewer management layers, with more generic team leaders managing in a more multi-skilled way.

Councillor Cope was supportive of the changes that embraced new technology, but was cautious about development of new ideas, and did not want it to result in older people feeling disengaged. This could be an issue if they felt out of the loop. Whilst acknowledging this concern, Councillor Lewis said the biggest waiting list for Age UK and activity centres for older people was to be involved in IT training and development, that many older people wished to embrace new technology and are taking the opportunity to learn these skills.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- i) Thanked Mr. Falvey. Ms. Loweman and Mr. Wright for an excellent presentation and resume, and for full and positive responses to questions from the Panel.
- ii) Noted the report on the progress made on the implementation of the Business Case for the Fundamental Service Review of Colchester Borough Homes.

19. Work Programme

Councillor Ellis took the opportunity to confirm to the Panel the letter received from the Care Quality Commission in response to the concerns expressed to them by the Panel in regards to the HX Care Serious Case Review.

A much fuller response, both Councillor Ellis and Offen noted that the new legislation appeared to be much tighter and was welcomed. In the circumstances they believed there was no reason to pursue the matter further at this time, though a letter of thanks would be sent to the CQC.

In regards to the deferment of the Sports and Leisure Fundamental Service Review and subsequent cancellation of the meeting on 1 November 2011, Mrs Pam Donnelly, Executive Director confirmed that an update (future date to be confirmed), as an interim measure, would be provided to the Panel, together with a reason for the original delay.

Mr. Robert Judd, Scrutiny Officer, in response to Panel, confirmed that the dates of all SOSP reviews were diarised for the respective Portfolio Holders, who were requested to attend the appropriate meetings so members of the panel could, if wishing to do so, ask questions about other aspects of work within the respective portfolio.

Mr. Judd confirmed he would check the availability of Portfolio Holders for all future meetings and would, for want of a better understanding, consider a way of noting the provision of this scrutiny within future agenda papers.

RESOLVED that the Panel considered and noted the Work Programme.