

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

13 OCTOBER 2009

Present :- Councillor Christopher Arnold (Chairman)
Councillors Nick Barlow, Mark Cory,
Jackie Maclean, Kim Naish, Gaye Pyman,
Laura Sykes, Nick Taylor, Dennis Willetts and
Julie Young

Substitute Member :- Councillor Ray Gamble for Councillor Mike Hogg

22. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minute of the meeting held on 29 September 2009 was confirmed as a correct record.

23. Responding to the Economic Downturn

Councillor Arnold (in respect of his wife being a Trustee of Age Concern), and Councillor Cory (in respect of being an 18 – 25 year old person, recently made unemployed) both declared a personal interest in the following item.

Ms. Pam Donnelly, Executive Director, and Councillor Hunt, Portfolio Holder for Communication, Customers and Leisure attended the meeting for this item.

Ms. Donnelly gave a presentation, focusing on how the Council was responding to the economic downturn. Ms. Donnelly explained that there was a central, critical role to be played by all local authorities. Government and the Audit Commission have stated what they expect from local authorities, and Ms. Donnelly was confident that Colchester was delivering on these expectations. The Council fully understood the local economy in terms of people, business and capital projects, had a strategy in place that was relevant to the community and was responding pro-actively to the effects of the local economic downturn.

Ms. Donnelly spoke of the impact on the economic downturn on Colchester. People claiming Job Seekers Allowance has increased but remained significantly below the East of England average. Homelessness figures remained resilient, with no increase in people declaring a state of homelessness. Local lenders are more sympathetic to those people with financial problems, and the courts have pro-actively suspended repossession orders. The activity of the Council's Benefits Service Area had increased significantly from a position of processing 500 claims in April 2008 to a position now of processing 1,630 claims per month, resulting in a 14 per cent increase in the overall caseload.

Ms. Donnelly said that unlike in previous recessions, the current recession was having an effect on new groups of people, now with many people being professionals, self employed, people from abroad and younger people. Ms. Donnelly spoke about the increased vulnerability of young people within the recession, with 25-34 year olds being the second most increase in benefit claims, a generation of people with many in debt and with little or no work skills, or skills to deal with the recession.

Ms. Donnelly explained what this meant for the Council. Workforce Planning was imperative, so as to meet the demands of the massive increase in customer enquiries at the Customer Service Centre, by telephone or on the web, with staff working longer hours to meet this demand. Feedback from the effected service areas suggests the problems are by no means over, with officers trying to get a better understanding of the changing needs of people so as to be able to respond more effectively.

In response to Councillor Arnold, Ms. Donnelly whilst appreciating that there are inevitably a significant number of vulnerable, over 60 year old people on fixed incomes, effected by the recession, by far the greatest group of people (over 70%) are people of working age. Ms. Donnelly said the SOS Bus had proved an effective means of communication with a significant number of people in the over 60 age group making enquiries.

Recognising the potential for lower Council revenues due to non payments, Ms. Donnelly said non payers generally fall either into the 'Can't' or 'Won't' categories, and officers are making a greater effort to understand people's situations, before categorising just as a non-payer. A change in the tone of letters and the action to be taken has received positive reactions from the recipients.

Ms. Donnelly said the service areas most greatly affected by the economic downturn are constantly reviewing and realigning resources accordingly, in some cases on a day to day basis, and for the Council as a whole, a constant ongoing process.

Councillor Young commended the work of all affected service areas, saying the work was impressive. Councillor Young said there was an opportunity for the voluntary services to help during these difficult times, with those affected and who are in the 18-34 year old age group, being a valuable resource to be utilised, an opportunity for them to gain work place experience and confidence, and thereby help towards future employment. It would be important to identify the areas of good practice and promote accordingly.

Ms. Donnelly said internal fundamental service reviews do look at whether the Council is best placed to deliver a service or as a community leader, whether

there was an opportunity to offer out to a voluntary or public organisation.

On the question of long term impact to the Council, Ms. Donnelly responded to Councillor Willetts, saying the changes within the authority needed to address current issues and had been implemented, but this would be ongoing, and her objective was to ensure this continued on into the future. Budgets continue to be constantly monitored, with an emphasis placed on trying to find new opportunities of generating income. There continues to be a willingness of staff to change roles to meet service demands, a response that warrants praise, but there continues to be a need for the Council to especially focus, where appropriate, on younger people, due to massive long term affect the downturn can have on their lives.

In terms of both the future Capital and Financial budgets, and in response to Councillor Arnold and Councillor Willetts, Councillor Hunt commented that he was pretty sure the Haven Gateway funding had been secured (Capital), and was confident that the process of continual fundamental service reviews would provide the impetus to present a balanced budget for the next financial year, that would include retaining all our current services. Councillor Hunt agreed to provide members with details of rents to tenants of commercial properties.

Councillor Taylor, commenting on the work so far undertaken, welcomed the work that has been done, and urged that as part of the 2010-11 budget process, all potential problems are identified, forward planned and targeted and this process becomes part of the embedded culture of the Council.

Councillor Gamble passed on his thanks to staff for their flexibility in working, and for what had been achieved. In response to Councillor Gamble, Ms. Donnelly said the downturn had thrown up a higher than normal number of new and complex cases to be dealt with by the Customer Services Centre and Benefits Service, that take a lot longer to process or deal with, though it was still the case that the majority of cases are straightforward, with customers and claimants dealt with in a reasonable period of time. In response to Councillor Naish, Ms. Donnelly said that in an effort to speed up process times, officers are now ensuring more emphasis is given to the customer at the first point of contact to avoid undue delay, and officers are meeting with the Department of work and Pensions to find a way of speeding up the claims process by requiring claimants to only provide information once for both organisations. Ms. Donnelly confirmed that she would provide members of the panel with the current average times to deal with benefit claims.

In response to Councillor Cory, Ms. Donnelly said in terms of providing practical and relevant work experience to people through an internship program, the Careers Academy had provided internships to the Council for

students from the Colchester Institute, and internships to the local Primary Care Trust. Ms. Donnelly was hoping for a financial contribution from Essex County Council to contribute to the financing of the provision of opportunities between local public organisations.

Councillor Arnold concluded the debate by thanking Ms. Donnelly for her presentation and depth of answers that provided a reassurance of the work being done. Councillor Arnold passed on his and the panel's thanks and appreciation to all the staff as they do all that can be done to respond to our customers' needs during the economic downturn, especially given the additional demands that have been placed on staff to absorb increased workloads and work differently and more flexibly.

RESOLVED that the panel thanked Ms. Donnelly for attending the meeting, giving a presentation on how the Council was responding to the economic downturn, and responding to questions from the panel.

24. Overview of the Environmental and Protective Services Review

Ms. Beverley Jones, Head of Environmental and Protective Services and Ms. Sally Harrington, Professional Support Unit Manager, attended the meeting, and gave a presentation on the progress made in regards to the fundamental service review for Environmental and Protective Services.

Ms. Jones said the review was necessary due to increased expectation from customers, an increase in the volume and breadth of workload, the lack of management capacity and the inconsistency in overall performance and quality. What was needed was for customers to be at the heart of the service delivery, services to be delivered efficiently and effectively, release capacity from within the group and the development of staff within the service.

Having identified ten key work strands to be considered within the review, these were considered during the review of each service area, and the high level findings recommended key changes for implementation. The end result was a new structure in place that increased management capacity, provided a new 'Professional Support Unit', the Customer Service Centre being at the front-end of all initial customer contact, a clear performance management framework and the ability to respond to external changes.

Ms. Harrington explained the purpose of the Professional Support Unit (PSU), to provide a central fully integrated resource dealing with all the service's systems, technical planning support and administration support, with multi-skilling staff, some with enhanced roles.

The PSU has had several processes automated, or streamlined to provide a consistent service delivery, the ability to resolve issues in a coordinated way and to provide cover across the group, plus an overall increase in capacity. The moral and team spirit of the staff had improved even though the review had resulted in a staffing level reduction.

The Chairman said he was reassured by this service review, that was a lot of the way to providing a service totally fit for purpose. In response to Councillor Arnold, Ms. Harrington confirmed that the launch of the web planning mapping system was a matter of weeks away.

Councillor Gamble said he was impressed by this review, and the positive reaction from staff to changing their roles and adapting to a new working environment was to be commended.

Ms. Jones said there was a clear focus on creating more revenue income streams to the Planning Service, given the consequence of the economic downturn, a massive drop in planning fees and charges. Colchester's internally developed S106 Development software was now a marketable product, nationally recognised, and providing a new income stream. Planning Officers are now actively encouraged to engage with developers on pre-application major developments, a more diverse role requiring a different mindset and an altruistic approach. In response to Councillor Arnold, Ms. Jones said the positive reaction from major developers to this new approach had been very encouraging.

In response to Councillor Barlow, Ms. Jones and Ms. Harrington said the analysis of customer complaints and surveys were fed into the reviews and subsequent outcomes. The current customer complaints tracking system monitors response times and officers now have a much better understanding of the need to be pro-active, when handling complaints. Ms. Harrington said since the new structure was in place the level of complaints had halved.

RESOLVED that the panel thanked Ms. Jones and Ms. Harrington for attending the meeting, giving a presentation on the progress made in regards to the fundamental service review for Environmental and Protective Services, and responding to questions from the panel.

25. Work Programme

Councillor Arnold confirmed that in regards to the item on the progress of the Greenways Care Home, provisionally scheduled for the 5 January 2010, he had during discussions with the County Portfolio Holder, asked for an update on the work to date, which he would share with the Panel's Group

Spokespersons, and then decide on whether or not to proceed with a progress review.

RESOLVED that the panel Considered and noted the 2009-10 Work Programme.