

## VALUE AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**Monday 26 March 2012**

**COUNCILLORS PRESENT:** Councillors Brown (Chair), Seamons (Vice-Chair), Abbasi, Humberstone, Keen, Malik, McCreedy and Rowley.

**OFFICERS PRESENT:** Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Simon Howick (Head of People and Equalities), Neil Lawrence (Performance Improvement Manager) and Jarlath Brine (Equalities and Diversity Business Partner)

### **43. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gotch and Van Nooijen.

### **44. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest made.

### **45. STANDING ITEM: WORK PROGRAMME**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated and now appended) updating the Committee on the work programme for the current year.

Councillor Seamons informed the Committee that the Finance and Performance Panel had made 18 recommendations to the City Executive Board (CEB), and was currently discussing targets for individual service areas.

He paid tribute to Councillor Brown for all his hard work as Chair of the Committee. Councillor Brown observed that the most successful work carried out had been by means of the panels and review groups, and he thanked Councillor Seamons for his support as Vice Chair.

Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) explained that the work programme was complete, apart from the following items:-

- Leisure Services – additional information concerning the home addresses of people using our leisure centres;
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) – some extra information has just been supplied.

Councillor Brown thought that the HMO information could be left for the next work programme, as the issue was still evolving, but it would be useful to examine the additional leisure information. However, to do so would require an active and interested panel to be established.

Resolved to

- (1) Carry forward the HMO work to the next work programme;
- (2) Leave the extra leisure information in abeyance.

#### **46. BENEFITS FUNDAMENTAL SERVICE REVIEW**

The Head of Business Improvement and Customer Services submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended). Councillor Val Smith and Neil Lawrence (Performance Improvement Manager) attended the meeting and presented the report to the Committee.

Neil Lawrence explained that the Service Review was a useful means to find out what customers thought of the benefits service. It had been observed that many Councils used IT to help improve their service; but the challenge was that any change must payback its cost quickly. Moving to Universal Credit would provide new challenges. He wished to push for improvements in gathering claimant information quickly, making decisions in a timely manner, offering different means of claiming (by telephone, online), and provision of information to the claimant as the claim progressed. It was proposed to obtain new software that offered a system known as Risk Based Verification (RBV).

The Council was making savings in this service area by not filling vacant posts, but at the same time it was recognised that some parts of the service needed additional support. The service remained expensive, and it would be useful to look at overall costs. The review had now closed, so no further review work would take place.

The Chair, Councillor Brown, observed that the Committee was concerned with the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the service.

Councillor Val Smith (Board Member for Regeneration and Customer Services) informed the Committee that she was not sure at this stage how the move to Universal Credit would progress – clear information from the Government was needed. It was anticipated that there would be a transition period, and she felt it was important to monitor this, as any transition period had implications for Oxford's citizens.

The Committee noted that the current cost to the Council per claim was £77.24, with an aspiration to reduce this to £59. Mr Lawrence indicated that at this stage there were no specific plans for the means by which this would be achieved, but he felt that the main issue was the productivity of the staff. At present, productivity was poor, but staffing restructure and additional investment in staff training might improve this. There was an intention to look for savings, a chunk of which might be delivered by RBV.

The Committee was disappointed that some targets had not been met. Mr Lawrence was asked how long customers expected claims to take from submission to final processing. In response, it was indicated that 11-15 days (new claim) and 6 to 10 days (change of circumstances) were felt acceptable. In

future it was intended to state that, at the end of each calendar month, claims would be assessed based on the information that the Council held. It was expected that RBV and e-claims could be moved on within a day or so. It was possible that targets could be met at the end of next year, as small improvements could add up and help improve matters overall.

Councillor Smith added that she felt that the mindset of the department had altered and that staff had embraced change. Her feeling was that there had been improvements, and that everyone was now working together to bring about more.

Resolved to -

- (1) Thank Neil Lawrence and Councillor Val Smith for their attendance and helpful comments;
- (2) Ask that a review report concerning the progress from a cost of £77 to £59 per claim be produced;
- (3) Suggest that a future scrutiny panel be established, or that this returns to a scrutiny committee, in order to monitor this issue.

#### **47. EQUALITIES**

The Head of People and Equalities submitted a report. Simon Howick (Head of People and Equalities) accompanied by Jarlath Brine (Equalities and Diversity Business Partner) attended the meeting and presented the report to the Committee.

Simon Howick explained that, although the Council now had “achieving” status through the Diversity Peer Challenge, it aspired to reach the “excellent” rank. This had been achieved by very few local authorities, most usually the larger metropolitan boroughs or unitary councils which controlled a large number of services. There were some targets that the Council wished to hit during 2012/13, but its main focus at present was increasing the diversity of the workforce. He would also like to see a more concise action plan which contained some targets. There was a need within the next month to draw up and action plan for the next year.

Jarlath Brine added that the Council could access a lot of data, but not all officers received the same data. It was hoped that the CRM system would help improve customer profiles; and there was work to be done on who gathers data, who uses it, and how it is used. The Council had an internal equalities group, but that had been found to be somewhat ineffective. Before any further changes could be effected, it had been decided to up skill the management team as a first step. Work on providing job skills and workshops had started with schools, and the Council was seeking to target some communities.

The Chair, Councillor Brown, commented that there were some questions about the efficiency of the customer “Talkback” scheme. Simon Howick reminded the Committee of the new initiative, “Good to Great”, which might be a useful starting point for improvement. Pat Jones was able to inform the Committee that she had spoken with the Consultation Officer about targeted

consultation, and specific groups were to be asked how they would prefer to be communicated and consulted with.

The Chair expressed the view that the Council was behind on objective 3 (homelessness), and that it was important that this was noted for the future. He and Pat Jones would look at the report together, and pass on some views informally to Simon Howick.

Resolved to:-

- (1) Congratulate People and Equalities for their achievements to date on the issue of equalities;
- (2) Note that more work was needed to produce an Action Plan for the next year;
- (3) Suggest that in the next Council year a scrutiny panel looks at some aspects of the equalities issue in a focussed way – the Committee was especially interested in the issue of workforce diversity – so that the important matter of equalities was not overlooked in the future.

#### **48. MINUTES**

Resolved to approve, as a correct record, the minutes of the meeting held on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

It was noted that Councillors Van Nooijen and Fooks had met and prepared a report about the Asset Management Plan, which would be presented at an appropriate single member meeting in due course.

Councillor Brown thanked the Committee members for their hard work and support over the past year, and he especially thanked Pat Jones for her tireless work and invaluable assistance.

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.20 pm**