

MINUTES OF THE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SELECT COMMITTEE
Thursday, 8th April 2004 at 8.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillor H B Patel (Vice-Chair in the Chair) and Councillors Bellia, Farrell and Gladbaum.

Also present were Councillors Kagan and Lyon.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Davies and Councillors Coughlin and Gillani.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

There were none.

2. Minutes of Previous Meetings

(a) 2nd March 2004

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 2nd March 2004 be received and approved as an accurate record.

(b) 18th February 2004 (Special)

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the special meeting held on 18th February 2004 be received and approved as an accurate record.

3. Matters Arising

There were none.

4. Deputations

There were none.

5. Update of the Current Performance within the Revenues and Benefits Service

The Select Committee had before them a report containing a detailed update of Capita's performance, Housing Benefits in-house

performance and outlining future plans and issues for the service. Margaret Read (Head of Taxation and Benefits) updated Members about the current Council Tax collection rates, outstanding work, arrears and projected targets for 2004/05. Members noted that the service was now in a more stable position and that in 2004/05 further improvements would be made. In response to a query from Councillor HB Patel concerning the current backlog of outstanding cases, Jenny Dunne (Hosing Benefit Manager) explained that there were a number of reasons for the existing backlog of 6,704 items. Members noted that that there were both tangible and non-tangible reasons for the backlog including fluctuations in the number of cases coming in to the service and the need to correct claim information in order to prepare end of year reports. In addition, since the last meeting a total of 9 hours of work time had been lost due to IT problems and year end calculations. Whilst the target of 5, 000 outstanding cases had not been reached, this was the lowest work position for some time and the year end processing had been successful.

Responding to a query from Councillor Gladbaum regarding the abolition of renewal claims and the threat of increased Housing Benefit fraud, Jenny Dunne (Hosing Benefit Manager) explained that targeted risk assessment should minimise fraud. Members noted that 12,000 in-house checks (HBMs Checks) would commence at the end of April in order to highlight any discrepancies in cases when compared to the Department of Work and Pension's (DWP) details concerning other Social Security entitlements. In-claim checks would then commence in May/June to determine whether claimant circumstances had changed. Members were advised that 27,000 cases were renewed in 2003/04 and under the risk based interventions it was anticipated that a maximum of 12,000 cases would be assessed per annum yet in more detail. Councillor Gladbaum went on to comment on service performance over the previous two years and enquired as to what improvements were expected in 2004/05 and how the CPA rating could be improved. Ms Dunne explained that a framework was now in place to enable delivery of the key elements of the benefits service. Members were advised that the local authority undertook self assessment against clearly specified standards and that whilst there was obvious room for improvement, Brent was compliant with 80% of the framework standards. Consequently, a fair CPA rating was anticipated in 2004/05 but Ms Dunne stressed the need to improve Best Value Performance Indicators in order to raise the CPA rating.

In response to a query concerning staffing, Ms Dunne confirmed that there were currently ten vacancies in the assessing area but that these positions were covered by agency staff. Members noted that a training scheme had taken place in 2003/04 whereupon ten trainees were recruited and subsequently nine of them offered permanent positions. In 2004/05, twenty trainees would be recruited over two phases. Ms Dunne explained that staffing and recruitment issues needed to be looked at further to ensure that long term capacity was developed and

turnover of staff was minimised. The Select Committee was advised that difficulties in the retention of Housing Benefit professionals was a London wide problem and the risk of losing staff remained relatively high. However, whilst a high turnover of staff was normal, very few staff had been lost to agencies.

Councillor Bellia commented the discussion at the last meeting and enquired about Capita's current position regarding usage of different bailiff companies. Ms Read explained that a Performance Board meeting had recently taken place at which representatives from Capita, the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive discussed the current situation. Members were advised that progress had been made and that in addition to collection being undertaken by Equita and Newlyn's, Capita would if necessary use additional bailiff firms.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the update report be noted;
- (ii) that the progress in stabilising the Housing Benefit service and planning for changes in 2004 be noted;
- (iii) that Capita's 2004/05 plan aimed at achieving contractual targets be noted.

6. **SEN Best Value Review**

The Select Committee received a report summarising the findings and recommendations of the recent SEN Best Value Review and setting out an action plan for their implementation. The Lead Member for Education, Arts and Libraries outlined the main issues arising from the SEN Best Value Review including gaps in the provision of SEN services and areas for improvement. He then commented on the change in trends, the implications of increasing numbers of children with differing SEN needs and the mounting pressures on the service to meet these needs. Members were advised about some of the pressures regarding SEN provision including the high number of children travelling out of borough to access SEN services, the cost implications of SEN provision and the need to make greater SEN provision within the Borough. Members were advised that early intervention and identification was very important but that this required greater funding. One of the recommendations arising from the Review was that a review of Brent's special schools be undertaken and Members noted that this was currently underway with the Policy Co-ordination Group (PCG) consulting informally with special schools to assess the spending of resources. Councillor Lyon explained that he had visited each of the schools as part of this secondary review.

The Director of Education, Arts and Libraries explained that a number of improvements had been made in recent years and in 2002/03 a satisfactory rating had been achieved. Following the Best Value Review it was anticipated that Brent would strive to achieve a “good” rating by 2005/06. Whilst commenting on some of the general responses contained in the Action Plan, Councillor Gladbaum expressed her support for the work that had resulted from the BVR and attempts that were being made to address those areas that had been identified for on-going improvement. The Lead Member confirmed that the Action Plan coincided with the Government’s own Action Plan, which was launched in March 2004. Responding to Councillor Gladbaum’s comments, the Director of Education, Arts and Libraries suggested that more detailed information about what was being done in relation to each of the action points and areas for improvement should be provided in future reports.

Councillor HB Patel queried the £5,000 cost of each statement and was advised that whilst this was the national average there was a national incentive to drive down the costs to each of the different partners that were involved in the process. Members noted that the costs could be even higher if the statement was challenged.

In response to a query the Director for Policy and Regeneration briefly outlined the Best Value Review process and how approaches were made to Members via the Group Offices. Select Committee Members confirmed that alternative ways should be identified to better engage Members in Best Value Reviews.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the findings of the Best Value Review Panel be noted;
- (ii) that the Action Plan be approved.

7. **SEN Performance Indicators**

The Director of Education, Arts and Libraries updated the Select Committee on the SEN performance indicators (October-December 2003). He explained that more psychologists had been recruited but that the expectation was now that the PI could be raised beyond 90%. Members noted that this figure took into account those cases that were not processed or were delayed. Whilst these targets were good it was acknowledged that more could be done. Councillor Gladbaum enquired as to what action had been taken in light of the Best Value Review recommendation for processing statements within 18 weeks and what improvements had been made. The Director explained that in 2002/03, performance indicators identified a deterioration in performance and that a variety of improvements were necessary. Subsequently, improvements had been made such as increasing the

number of psychologists. Members noted that this was now a clear performance indicator that could henceforth be monitored so that extra resources could be targeted as and when necessary.

RESOLVED:-

that the SEN performance indicators (October-December) be noted.

8. Collation of School Data

The Director of Education, Arts and Libraries updated the Select Committee regarding the collation of school data and clarified the position following concerns expressed by Members at a previous meeting of the Select Committee. The Director confirmed that the majority of data had now been collated although data for the January-March 2004 period was still expected, following a request from the Audit Commission that school information relate to the financial year rather than the calendar year. Once collated, all the information would be analysed and presented to Members for consideration.

RESOLVED:-

that the verbal response and clarification from the Director of Education, Arts and Libraries regarding the collation of school data be noted.

9. Best Value Performance Indicators 2002/03 – A Comparison of Brent's Performance

The Select Committee had before them a report providing information on the way the Council had performed by comparison with its audit family and neighbours and detailing Brent's comparative performance for Best Value Performance Indicators 2002/03. Members were advised that the Council was measured by the Audit Commission against the performance indicators and that these determined the CPA rating. Some Members commented on the decline in performance in some areas and acknowledged the Director's concerns about the need to improve performance indicators. Members discussed the format of the document and suggested that some narrative would be useful to explain the performance indicators, highlighting possible changes and differences in the figures and providing a more detailed analysis. Simon White (Policy and Projects Officer) confirmed that whilst the regime was set by the Government and the Audit Commission, the format of the document was not prescribed and therefore future reports could be adapted taking into account Members' comments.

RESOLVED:-

that the Best Value Performance Indicators 2002/03 – A Comparison of Brent's Performance be noted.

10. **Progress Report on Implementation of Key Issues within the 2002/03 Audit Letter**

The Select Committee received a letter providing Members with an initial progress report on the implementation of the key recommendations in the 2002/2003 Audit Letter issued by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), in the role of external auditor to Brent. Members noted that since the Audit Letter had been presented in January 2004, the response to the recommendations had been compiled and subsequently submitted to the Executive on 29th March 2004. Members were advised that to date progress had been made in meeting the issues raised by PwC.

RESOLVED:-

that the progress to date be noted.

11. **Vital Signs – Quarter 3**

The Select Committee had before them the Vital Signs document (Quarter 3) for the period October-December 2003, setting out the data on the Council's performance against the top twenty-five performance indicators. Some Members commented on the lack of data and queried the effectiveness of the document if some service areas failed to provide adequate data. Councillor Bellia suggested that the Select Committee draft its own list of vital signs based on the BVPI report, resulting in a list of issues the Select Committee wanted to look at on a quarterly basis. An alternative suggestion was that Members identify issues that they wanted to look at in more detail, following consideration of the Vital Signs document. Councillor Farrell commented on the incomplete data in the document and suggested that this reduced the effectiveness of the document. Consequently, Members requested that more emphasis be placed on the service areas to provide the relevant data and that a reason be stated when no information was provided, an explanation be given about what action was being taken and an indication as to when the information might be available. Simon White (Policy and Projects Officer) confirmed that he would provide Members with a report outlining the key issues in the Vital Signs document, how this data should be used by Members and explanations regarding missing data. Members of the Select Committee felt that this would be beneficial but also requested that a letter be sent to all service area directors requesting an explanation as to why Vital Signs information was missing and why the issue was

included as a vital sign when no quarterly performance information was available.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the summary table which provided a clear and concise indication of where performance had improved or fallen against the previous quarter, be noted;
- (ii) that it be noted for quarter three the annual comparative data had been updated and now covered the period 2002/03 as published by the ODPM;
- (iii) that a paper be prepared by Simon White (PRU) for Members of the Select Committee outlining the purpose of the Vital Signs document, how it can be used and what information is being presented to Members;
- (iii) that a letter be sent to all Service Area Directors asking for a written explanation as to why certain data was not circulated in the Vital Signs document; and
- (iv) that the written responses from the Service Area Directors be circulated to all Members of the Select Committee, alternates, Service Area Directors and Lead members.

12. Items requested onto the Scrutiny Agenda

There were none.

13. Recommendations from the Executive for Items to be Considered by the Performance and Finance Select Committee

There were none

14. Any Other Urgent Business

Councillor Gladbaum queried whether performance issues regarding the Onyx contract would feature on a future agenda so that issues that had previously been raised by Members could be addressed. The Director of Policy and Regeneration confirmed that this item would come back onto a future agenda as part of the 2004/05 work programme but that regularity regarding Onyx's attendance would need to be confirmed once the 2004/05 meeting dates had been agreed by full Council in May 2004.

RESOLVED:-

that a list of suggestions regarding the meeting structure and Onyx's attendance at future meetings be presented to the next meeting of the Performance and Finance Select Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

H B PATEL
Vice Chair in the Chair

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