

MINUTES OF THE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SELECT COMMITTEE
Tuesday, 22nd January 2008 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Dunn (Chair) and Councillors Bessong, Butt, Kansagra (alternate for Councillor Detre), Mendoza (part), Pagnamenta and Van Kalwala.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Detre.

Councillor Clues (Lead Member for Human Resources & Diversity, Local Democracy & Consultation) and Councillor Mistry (part) also attended the meeting.

1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None declared.

2. Deputations

None.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 28th November 2007

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 28th November 2007 be received and approved as an accurate record.

4. Matters Arising

None.

5. Revenue and Benefits Performance

Margaret Read (Head of Revenue and Benefits) began by stating that the report had been refined following feedback from the Select Committee and she welcomed any further suggestions from Members. Margaret Read then summarised performance to date, confirming that in year Council Tax collection was making good progress and was on schedule to exceed the target. However, achieving targets for Council Tax arrears collection for 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06 was problematic and it was unlikely that these targets would be met, whilst 2006/07 arrears collection was more encouraging and was forecast to meet the end of year target. The pre Capita contract arrears spanning 1993 to 2003 had seen a reduction in collection rates, however this was due to increasing difficulties in collecting older debts. National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) collection continued to perform well and was expected to exceed the in year target.

Margaret Read advised that emphasis was placed in ensuring customers remained on schedule with their in year Council Tax to prevent new arrears arising and then addressing any arrears from previous years that may be outstanding through more flexible repayment arrangements. The Select Committee noted that whilst prioritising in year collection benefitted performance in this area, it could affect arrears collection rates from previous years, With regard to non payers, flexible arrangements were available to those who had genuine difficulties in making payments, whilst a robust approach was being taken to those who refused to pay. In addition, long term measures, such as making bankruptcy or charging orders were being used to recoup long standing debts. Checks were also being undertaken to ensure that those receiving reductions in Council Tax payments were entitled to them.

Sue King (Capita) reaffirmed the strategy of prioritising in year Council Tax collection (in terms of payments made by customers). With regard to arrears, she highlighted some other measures, such as the increased use of attachment to earnings payments and a debt recovery campaign which had been launched in January 2007. Those in arrears were encouraged to pay these debts at the end of the collection year in February and March 2008 and the impact this would have on arrears would be known after this period. Neil Smith (Capita) added that the problem of collecting older arrears was acknowledged and advised that although charging orders could be used to secure debts, they would not necessarily be reflected in terms of repayments.

During discussion, Councillor J Moher enquired whether there were profiles of particular groups that were most likely to be in arrears and suggested that it would be useful for such information to be presented at a future meeting. Councillor Bessong enquired if there was a cut off point at which long standing arrears would be written off and sought details as to why pre-contract arrears were particularly difficult to collect. He also sought views on whether LOKTA, an information sharing system with other London boroughs, was useful in tracing customers who had outstanding payments. Councillor Kansagra asked whether it was possible to ascertain whether non-payers were receiving benefits, and if so, what proportion of those on benefits were not paying. Councillor Van Kalwala, in noting the transient nature of the Brent population, enquired what processes were in place to help track down non-payers. Councillor Butt sought an explanation of drive by valuations.

The Chair enquired whether properties that had defaulted on Council Tax payments in the past could be sent correspondence warning that action would be taken if this reoccurred. In acknowledging the improvement in collection rates, he commented that there were other London boroughs that had similar levels of deprivation to Brent but had better collection rates and he sought further details as to what were the specific problems that Brent faced. He enquired what incentives were

available for bailiffs to perform and why the length of time with which they could collect debts had been reduced from 6 to 4 months. The Chair also asked what arrangements had been made to account for the removal of exempt properties for NNDR payments from April 2008.

In response to the issues raised, Sue King stated that debts would continue to be pursued whilst they were considered collectable and would only be written off because of exceptional circumstances, as such cases were more likely to involve a determined non-payer and therefore more robust action would be required. Members heard that a write-off exercise had been undertaken last year. Sue King explained that initially arrears were easier to collect. However, long term outstanding arrears presented more challenging circumstances, as for example, the particular case could involve a determined non-payer and therefore more robust action would be required. The Select Committee noted that it was possible to identify non-payers who were on Council Benefits who were likely to have their Council Tax paid through Council Tax Benefit, and such customers would have difficulty in paying arrears. In order to keep track of customers, Sue King stated that where it was known that properties housed short term tenants, such as 6 month tenancy agreements, these accounts would be flagged and the tenants would be sent liability forms 1 month prior to the tenancy agreement ending. Where there were arrears, these debts would be passed to bailiffs after 5 months. It was explained that a “drive by” valuation was part of the process for issuing charging orders that would estimate the value of the property by making an assessment based on observation from outside the property. With regard to LOKTA, Sue King stated that this had only started to be used recently and that its effectiveness would be reported back to a future meeting of the Select Committee.

Sue King advised that the MOSAIC profiling system was being used to help focus on particular areas for encouraging payment campaigns, whilst data mapping also highlighted ‘hot spots’. Paula Buckley (Head of Client Team, Revenue and Benefits) added that the MOSAIC profiling system displayed areas where residents were more likely to be receiving benefits and other useful information that could be used to focus payment campaigns on specific areas. Margaret Read advised that Revenue and Benefits staff were being trained to use MOSAIC, whilst the Client Index, a new database, would be used to trace residents who moved addresses within the borough.

Neil Smith (Capita) advised Members that the collection performances of some other London boroughs had fallen and that it was hoped that combined with the improving performance in Brent that this would see the borough’s position in the collection rates improve at the end of the financial year. A particular issue in Brent was the need to re-educate people that non-payment of Council Tax would not be tolerated. Neil Smith continued that bailiffs’ incentive to collect Council Tax was motivated by the fact that residents were liable to an additional charge

to the bailiffs in addition to the Council Tax arrears. The collection period of a bailiff was reduced to 4 months to provide additional focus to each case, whilst also allowing the Council to consider alternative methods of collection at an earlier stage. Neil Smith advised the Select Committee that database checks would be needed and contact made with the relevant properties with regard to those whose exemption from NNDR payments was to be removed and it was likely that this would have some impact on collection rates.

RESOLVED:-

that the Capita's Council Tax and National Non Domestic Rate (NNDR) performance for the year to date and the current forecast which indicates that: contractual targets for in year Council Tax collection should be exceeded but arrears targets for 2003 to 2005/06 are unlikely to be achieved, be noted.

6. **Waste Contract Performance**

Chris Whyte (Head of Environmental Management) introduced the report, advising Members that the results of the audit inspection were still being compiled and the report was due for publication on 27th February 2008. Chris Whyte then drew Members' attention to performance in respect of Best Value Performance Indicators. It was noted that up to the end of October 2007, the overall percentage of materials recycled had fallen by just under 1% from the previous year. This was due to a drop in the amount of organic waste recycled because of increased contamination leading to rejected loads. Steps were being taken to reduce the level of contamination through raising awareness of residents with regard to this issue and contamination levels were now falling. The Select Committee was advised that dry recycling rates were consistently higher than the previous year's. The number of missed collections continued to fall following earlier increases caused by new collection schedules and the introduction of same day refuse, green box and green bin collections.

Turning to street cleanliness performance, Chris Whyte advised that there had been a quantifiable improvement, and the independent assessor, ENCAMS, had recorded a Trache 1 score of 23%, a 9 percentage point improvement on the previous year. The Tranche 2 score was expected soon and it was anticipated that it would be between 24 to 25%. The number of complaints received had fallen in Quarter 2 after the rise experienced in Quarter 1, whilst current figures for Quarter 3 indicated that numbers would continue to decrease.

Thomas Paris (Veolia) added that periods where missed collections had increased was attributable to refuse crews familiarising themselves to new routes. Whilst street cleanliness performance was good, Thomas Paris stated that efforts would continue to provide more consistent cleanliness levels across the borough. Members heard that

the borough was to be divided into several areas, each of which would be provided with satellite depots.

During discussion, Councillor J Moher, in noting that some areas had not been reported on, sought further details as to how the street cleanliness figures had been compiled. He also queried the 0% score for Fryent Ward. Councillor Kansagra sought views on why the number of complaints was falling. Councillor Kansagra suggested that private companies could be used to remove fly tipping, adding that this activity often occurred in the same locations and therefore installing cameras in these areas could be undertaken to identify the perpetrators. Councillor Butt enquired about the procedure for logging incidences of fly tipping and, feeling that charges for collecting bulky waste were excessive, he suggested that these fees be reviewed. He enquired whether it was possible to co-mingle waste collection and what was proposed for recycling facilities on estates and other high rise residential properties. Councillor Bessong requested that the next report include a section on recycling performance on estates and a breakdown on the type of complaints received. He also enquired where the Wembley refuse depot was located. Councillor Pagnamenta sought further explanation as to why there had been an increase in contamination of organic recycling waste and the steps that were being taken to address this. He enquired whether contaminated organic waste would be sent to landfill sites. Councillor Van Kalwala enquired about the extent to which Environmental Management worked with other areas of the Council.

The Chair felt that the suggestion that CCTV cameras be introduced to known fly tipping locations should be considered and details of the likely costs included in a future report. He commented that a number of options could be considered with regard to these costs, such as sharing costs with the police or receiving contributions from residents. The Chair sought views on the possibility of achieving the 30% recycling target by 2010/2011 and what additional measures would be in place to enable this to be achieved. He suggested that residents be encouraged to compost organic waste in their gardens to help reduce the amount of contaminated levels that were being collected. The Chair asked if consideration was being given to introducing 3 way split bins and labelling of bins and sought details on the educational and publicity materials to be sent to residents to boost recycling performance. He also asked when recycling provision would be available to North Circular residents and what plastic materials could be recycled.

In response to the issues raised by Members, Chris Whyte explained that the Tranche 1 2007/2008 0% score recorded for Fryent ward street cleanliness was likely to be attributable to the particular land use of the location that the assessment had taken place. The Select Committee heard that the reduction in complaints was due to a higher specification waste management contract to the previous one, whilst there had also

been an increase in the number of Council staff. Chris Whyte advised that the main reason for contamination of loads was due to plastics being put in green boxes and he stressed that a stronger message would be communicated to residents to ensure that plastics were placed in green bins. He confirmed that contaminated recycling waste would be sent to landfill sites. Members noted that Chris Whyte was responsible for directing Council officer teams in refuse and recycling and that prevention of contamination of recycled waste was one of their priorities. Chris Whyte advised that it was not possible to undertake co-mingled collection of dry and organic recycled waste, however co-mingling could be considered as a future option to increase recycling levels. He stated that it was important to reinforce the message to residents of the need to recycle and to understand the reasons and principles behind it. With regard to fly tipping, this would be logged if seen by Council officers, whilst if first seen by Veolia employees, action would be taken to swiftly remove it. It was possible that the idea of installing CCTVs at known fly tipping sites could be investigated and private companies approached with regard to possible involvement. Members heard that the increased charges in bulky items removal had not led to a rise in fly tipping.

With regard to recycling targets, Chris Whyte stated that it was anticipated that the introduction of compulsory recycling and a reduction in contamination levels should enable targets to be comfortably met. Self-composting by residents would be encouraged. Chris Whyte advised that split bins were being introduced near stations throughout the borough, whilst officers were working on developing a campaign to promote recycling and educate residents, especially in the areas identified as having lower recycling rates. There were also plans to introduce pictorial labels to bins, whilst green bins already displayed a logo stating what materials could be recycled. A programme of rolling out recycling facilities to estates was ongoing, whilst it was expected that recycling provision would be introduced to the North Circular within the next 2 weeks. Chris Whyte confirmed that the Wembley depot was located in Drury Way and that plastic bottles were recyclable.

Thomas Paris added that Veolia was considering the use of electronic images for reporting of fly tipping. Where fly tipping materials had been recovered, these would be recycled where possible after a contamination assessment had been undertaken. He stressed that each area of Brent would be studied to identify areas of low recycling participation which would subsequently be the focus of the communications campaign.

The Chair acknowledged the overall positive trends in performance to the new Waste Contract and reminded Members that this item would be considered at future meetings.

7. **Staff Survey 2006-07 – Action Plan**

Claire Gore (Strategic Human Resources Manager) introduced the report, advising Members that 6 areas had been identified to focus on following the 2006/2007 Staff Survey, these being:-

- (a) Working hours and pressure
- (b) Awareness and engagement of managers
- (c) Managing change
- (d) Individual, team and Council representatives
- (e) Council's response to feedback
- (f) Harassment and discrimination

Claire Gore stated that following this, a Corporate Action Plan had been drawn up which was currently in the process of being implemented. She then drew Members' attention to the various aspects of the Action Plan that had been implemented to date. With regard to working hours and pressure, Claire Gore highlighted the initiatives carried out by the work-life balance working group. The awareness and engagement of managers and staff theme had resulted in the launch of the Management Development Programme, the key aspects of which included a 360 degree feedback with staff, completion of an on-line behavioural style profile, a presentation on 'Improving the Management and Diversity in our department' and 1 to 1 coaching. Amongst initiatives under the managing change theme, workshops were being developed for staff as part of the corporate training offer, whilst a number of staff forums were being established with regard to individual, team and Council responsiveness. Various initiatives were being introduced to facilitate the Council's response to feedback, including corporate road shows, staff briefings and network events. With regard to discrimination and harassment, a new Fairness at Work policy and procedure was due to be launched in the spring of 2008.

During Members' discussion, Councillor Kansagra enquired whether staff presence at work was recorded and whether action was taken against staff who were absent without authority. Claire Gore confirmed that there were a number of different time recording systems in place and disciplinary action was taken when staff were found to be absent without authority. Councillor Kansagra suggested that a report be produced detailing the number of disciplinary cases that had taken place as a result of staff being absent without authority. He also sought details about the processes involved in preparing staff dismissals and appeals. Councillor J Moher sought details of the response to the Action Plan from employer representatives such as the unions. With regard to appeals, he noted that these had fallen in recent years and commented that of those that had occurred, some had been due to exceptional and unusual circumstances.

The Chair asked whether staff were able to work from home and was the necessary IT support available to undertake this. With regard to

staff morale, he enquired whether this was quantifiable. He asked if Human Resources made comparisons with other public and private sector organisations and also enquired what steps were taken with regard to staff turnover. Councillor Pagnamenta enquired whether there were staff turnover issues in particular service areas. Councillor Bessong sought comparisons with other London boroughs in respect of awareness and engagement with managers and staff initiatives such as the Management and Development Programme. He also enquired what childcare facilities were available for staff.

In response, Claire Gore confirmed that Human Resources had consulted closely with all the relevant unions and that a representative of GMB was on the worklife balance working group. A meeting with unions was to take place in the next week. With regard to the Management and Development Programme, this was still being developed although feedback to date had been positive and coaching sessions were under way. Members heard that a childcare voucher scheme offering savings to staff was available and an officer within Children and Families was seeking discounts at local nurseries for Brent staff. Staff turnover was closely monitored and staff who left undertook exit interviews, with career opportunities often given as the reason for leaving. Claire Gore advised that some positions were of limited duration due to funding arrangements and this had had an impact in the second quarter of 2007. Staff turnover had been higher over the summer months as a number of positions within Policy and Regeneration had come to the end of their funding cycles, however numbers had since stabilised.

With regard to issues regarding staff not performing to the standards required, Claire Gore stated that managers were being provided with greater support to develop their capability in relation to managing underperformance and this may account for some of the rise in a number of such cases. However, the number of tribunal cases had fallen in the previous 2 years. The Select Committee was advised that Legal Services would provide legal advice on employment law with regard to cases going to dismissal or appeal, and a position had been created within HR to develop an action plan with regard to disciplinary, dismissal and appeal issues. The Staff Survey had produced a number of positive responses with regard to staff morale and a number of officers had stated that they were proud to be working for the Council. Claire Gore confirmed that home working arrangements were in place with the necessary IT arrangements which allowed some employees to access work files from their home computer. Members noted that the Council studied other public and private organisations human resources policies when developing those for Brent.

The Chair stated that the Select Committee would consider further updates on this item at future meetings.

8. **Performance & Finance Select Committee Work Programme**

Section 106 Agreements

The Select Committee agreed to Councillor J Moher's suggestion that a report detailing how Section 106 Agreements were drawn up be considered at a future meeting.

Deprivation Index

Councillor Mendoza requested that a report providing information on the Deprivation Index be considered at a future meeting. In reply, Phil Newby (Director, Policy and Regeneration) advised that consideration of whether this item would be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or this Select Committee was being discussed. He added that a separate briefing note could be provided to the Select Committee if requested.

9. **Items Requested onto the Overview and Scrutiny Agenda**

None.

10. **Recommendations from the Executive to be considered by the Performance and Finance Select Committee**

None.

11. **Date of Next Meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled for Tuesday, 11th March 2008 at 7.30 pm.

13. **Any Other Urgent Business**

None.

The meeting ended at 9.35 pm

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Chair