

**MINUTES OF THE PERFORMANCE AND FINANCE SELECT COMMITTEE**  
**Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2004 at 7.30 pm**

PRESENT: Councillor J Long (Chair) and Councillors Crane, Gillani and Gladbaum.

Also present was Councillor Coughlin.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Moher and H B Patel.

**1. Declarations of Personal and Prejudicial Interests**

There were none.

**2. Deputations**

There were none.

**3. Change of Order of Business**

RESOLVED:-

that the order of business be changed to that as set out below.

**4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

RESOLVED:-

that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2004 be received and approved as an accurate record.

**5. Matters Arising**

*Update of the Current Performance within the Revenues and Benefits Service*

Councillor Coughlin advised the Select Committee that the backlog of work had been reduced to 4,700 items and that a day's work was now completed in a day.

*Vital Signs - Quarter 3*

Councillor Gladbaum commented on the recommendations that had been made by the Select Committee at an earlier meeting regarding this item and sought clarification as to whether the previous requests had been acted upon. Namely:-

- (i) whether a paper had been 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;
- (ii) whether a letter had been 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
- (iii) whether the written responses from the Service Area Directors had been received and circulated to all Members of the Select Committee, alternates, Service Area Directors and Lead Members.

Phil Newby (Director, Policy and Regeneration Unit) advised the Select Committee that the above requests had been superseded by a discussion at CMT and subsequent agreement that the Vital Signs document be released simultaneously. He explained that PRU were working closely with Lead Members and the Service Areas to ensure that accurate vital signs information was provided. Consequently, a written response had not been sought from the service areas. The Chair acknowledged the need for continuity and on-going monitoring and suggested that if vital signs indicators were missing henceforth, the relevant Lead Officer and Lead Member be asked to attend the meeting and explain the omission. Councillor Gillani highlighted the complexity of the document and stressed the need for the document to be user friendly.

## **6. Internal and External Audit Plans 2004/005**

The Select Committee received a report detailing the proposed Internal and External Audit Plans for 2004/05. Members received the Joint Audit Statement which detailed how the joint arrangements between the Council and PricewaterhouseCoopers would work in 2004/05. Simon Lane (Head of Audit and Investigations) advised the Select Committee that this report was produced annually on a three-year rolling basis. He confirmed that new Audit Regulations meant that the Council had to produce a statement of Internal Control which had to be signed off by the Leader and the Chief Executive. This is included in the Council's Statement of Accounts. Members noted that the regulations provided a renewed vigour and revised responsibilities on local authorities to ensure sound systems of control and management were in place.

Mike Robinson, Ian Clarke and Simon Davis (PricewaterhouseCoopers) referred to the Audit Plan for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005, which outlined the issues of risk and areas for improvement in 2004/05. Ian Clarke highlighted some of the key risks that should be addressed for the forthcoming year including the medium term financial strategy and the early closure of accounts. Simon Davis then went on to explain that consultation with Members and Officers ensured that the Plan was specific to Brent and the Council's priorities. He explained that risk management needed to be embedded in service delivery and that in 2004/05 value for money and best practice would be assessed whilst mandatory and follow up work would also be undertaken. Members were further advised that the Warden Service in Brent would be also be an issue for consideration in 2004/05, and that the overall arrangements in both the Council and Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) would be assessed.

In response to a question concerning staffing levels in Internal Audit, Simon Lane confirmed that there had been difficulties in the past regarding recruitment to permanent posts within the department and consequently, vacancies were generally advertised as temporary contracts. However, Members noted that four full time positions had recently been recruited to and staff would be in post in the near future, although the department remained under staffed. He then confirmed that the majority of staff remained with the Council between 6-18 months but that fixed term contracts were not a favoured approach as did not alleviate the problems associated with the shortage of skilled staff in London.

In response to a query concerning the early closure of accounts, Mike Robinson confirmed that the local timetable was dictated by a demand from central government for a central set of public body accounts, publishable by a specific date.

Regarding the publication of audit reports, Simon Lane confirmed that summary reports on those audits undertaken throughout the year would be produced for the Select Committee on a routine basis. Councillor Gillani expressed some concerns about the Select Committee's ability to accurately monitor the audit reports on the basis of a summary but acknowledged the difficulties in producing separate reports. Members noted that the summary reports would highlight any risk areas. The Director of Finance also highlighted the need to ensure confidentiality regarding certain reports and to minimise any unnecessary work burden for the Audit team. Councillor Gladbaum suggested that a timetable for production of individual audit reports would be beneficial as Members could then consider the outcomes of particular action plans. The Chair confirmed that the 6 monthly update would provide details on those reports that had been produced.

Commenting on the collation of schools information, an issue of concern that had been raised in 2003/04, Phil Newby confirmed that a more robust collection system of data regarding best value performance had since been developed by Education and HR to ensure that accurate information was collated on an annual basis. Simon Davis confirmed that the robustness of this system would be monitored. In response to a query regarding the Council's audit, Mike Robinson explained that this was set against a national fee scale. Commenting on the Schools Budget, Councillor Gladbaum asked that the Audit Plan state clearly that whilst schools within the Borough received outer London funding, teachers were paid in line with the inner London weighting scales.

The Chair confirmed that the following reports would be circulated over the course of the year:-

- Audit Report in 2005 following publication of the final accounts 2004/05 (to Committee in September 2005)
- Audit Letter 2003/04 (circulated in November 2004)
- Six-monthly update on the work undertaken by Internal/ External Audit

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the content of the report in its role as defined in the constitution: "To review and monitor the operation and effectiveness of, and compliance with, risk management, internal control and internal and external audit", be noted;
- (ii) that a timetable for production of Audit reports throughout 2004/05 be presented to Members of the Performance and Finance Select Committee; and
- (iii) that six-monthly updates and executive summaries on Audit reports be presented to the Select Committee.

**7. The Performance Agenda in Brent, the Improving Brent Action Plan 2004/06 and the Best Value Performance Plan 2004-05 (Draft)**

The Select Committee had before them the Improving Brent Action Plan 2004/06 highlighting improvement activity underway across the Council and setting out a programme of further actions until December 2006. Cathy Wellstead (Corporate Policy Manager) updated the Select Committee about the range of documents that would be used by the Select Committee to scrutinise Council performance throughout 2004/05. These included the Corporate Strategy, the Improving Brent Action Plan / The Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the Best Value Performance Plan.

Members were advised that priority areas for Improvement included Revenues and Benefits, Sports, Waste Management and Recycling, Social Services (star rating, CPA) and Education. Customer care, access to services, e-government and building capacity and driving improvements in HR were also areas targeted for improvement. Members noted that whilst comments about the Housing Service had been positive, it was important that the “good” CPA rating was maintained. Ms Wellstead explained that the overall target was to raise performance to at least the London average, assessing achievements against the Vital Signs document. Members noted that to achieve a 4-star rating (good-excellent), local authorities needed to ensure a robust approach to monitoring performance data. In the previous CPA assessment, the Council was awarded 2 out of 4 and since this assessment the scrutiny of performance issues had developed with an increased emphasis on the importance of the managerial response to data. The monthly Performance Board and other high level forums for monitoring risk areas ensured that robust action plans were formulated and the Select Committee would consider key areas as part of its work programme over the course of the year. Phil Newby explained that the CPA assessed the Select Committee and its scrutiny of performance issues. Consequently, the PFSC had an important role to investigate areas of concern through careful use of the performance indicators and to investigate performance issues in detail through task group activity.

The Select Committee received the draft Best Value Performance Plan containing details of the Council’s performance over the last year and the targets for improving services in future years. In response to a query concerning the Performance Plan, Simon White confirmed that this document would be agreed at Council on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004. Thereafter, the Plan would be published on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

In response to queries about the Plan, Mr White explained that whilst hard copies of the document would be circulated, the main medium for making the Plan widely available would be via the Council’s website. Members noted that the timescales for production of the document were very tight and whilst the main structure of the document could be prepared in advance, the input of outturn data for 2003/04 had to be undertaken in a short space of time. Members highlighted some issues for further clarification and were advised to notify Democratic Services of any particular queries so that these could be followed up individually. Regarding the format of the document, Mr White confirmed that there were a number of technical targets in the document and a prescribed format and method of reporting applied to some parts of the document. The Chair requested that each Member of the Select Committee be sent a copy of the final document for information.

Some Members referred to the Mori survey and suggested that some of the data was not sufficiently explained. Mr White confirmed that he would ensure that any errors or unclear entries were clarified and amended before the final report was published. Members noted that

comparative figures for London would be presented to the Select Committee later in the year although there were numerous delays in this information being collated.

In response to a query concerning satisfaction targets and how these were set, Simon White confirmed that target setting was specific to each service area. He explained that 1,194 residents were contacted during the MORI survey regardless of whether they had used Council service and that such surveys were known for the variable factors.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the written and verbal reports to the Select Committee be noted;
- (ii) that the format and content of the draft Best Value Performance Plan 2004/05, as presented at appendix 1 of the report, be agreed;
- (iii) that each Member of the Performance and Finance Select Committee be sent a copy of the final Performance Plan once approved by Council on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2004; and
- (iv) that Members' comments raised during the discussion on the Performance Plan be taken into account before publication of the final document.

## 8. **BVPI Satisfaction Survey 20045**

The Select Committee had before them a report outlining the main findings of the BVPI Satisfaction Survey 2004, which was undertaken between October 2003 and January 2004. Members noted that a full copy of MORI's findings were now available.

Cathy Wellstead (Corporate Policy Manager) outlined the key issues regarding the Best Value Performance Indicator Satisfaction Survey, which was undertaken every three years. The process was prescribed by the ODPM with a set questionnaire and methodology, with residents chosen randomly via their postcode. Following the postal questionnaire, the results were weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the Borough, as was the case throughout the country. The survey was conducted by MORI as Brent had bought into the consortium for London and consequently, London comparisons were available. Members noted that a key measure of the CPA was the satisfaction rating and that there had been a 3% improvement since the last survey, placing Brent 2% below the outer London average. With a 48% satisfaction rating, the Council ranked 17<sup>th</sup> out of 29 London boroughs and the notable improvements were very positive.

Members were advised that it was important to note that some residents who had completed the survey had not necessarily used particular Council services so satisfaction, on the whole, was dependent on how well informed people were about the Council. Members noted that more people were now less dissatisfied with services but that there was a higher level of dissatisfaction in areas such as sports and waste management. Ms Wellstead explained that copies of the full report on the survey were available from PRU and contained demographic details about the respondents. Members were advised that the next survey would be undertaken in 2006. In response, Councillor Crane suggested that it was very important to target the Council's communication policy towards promoting Council Services. Members felt therefore that officers from the Communications Team should be invited to attend the next meeting so that a discussion could take place on how best to prepare residents for the next survey in 2006.

In response to a query, Ms Wellstead confirmed that the survey could not include residents at ACFs as it was a random exercise. Some Members queried why Brent could not achieve a higher rating than 48% and were advised that it was hard for Brent to achieve in excess of 48% due to the Borough's deprivation and less homogenous areas compared to an authority like Kensington. Members noted that it was harder to provide services to a more diverse population and that consequently these issues had been taken into account in the poll results.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the Select Committee note the main findings of the BVPI satisfaction survey 2004, as summarised in the report.
- (ii) that it be noted the Consultation Team and PRU will be undertaking further analysis of the liveability issues covered by the survey and will report back to a future meeting of the Committee; and
- (iii) that officers from the Communications Team (Toni McConville) be invited to attend a future meeting to discuss improved communications with residents in advance of a further survey in 2006.

## 9. **PFSC Work Programme 2004/05**

Members considered the proposed Work Programme for 2004/05. The Chair confirmed that Social Service's budget would also be added to the work programme for consideration later in the year. The Director of Finance explained that quarterly reports on the budget would be considered but that specific budget issues could be scrutinised further

if necessary. Councillor Crane referred to the 2003/04 budget report and suggested that the report could be more user-friendly. The Director of Finance acknowledged that an Executive summary in the 204/05 report would assist Members and suggested that an outline report could be presented to the Select Committee for agreement over the style and format. He confirmed that the first reading of the budget report would take place on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004.

Councillor Galdbaum acknowledged the task group proposal to investigate Household Waste Collection and the Onyx Contract. However, she felt that it remained important for Onyx to attend meetings of the Select Committee on a regular basis to respond to questioning and comment on performance issues – an important management tool. The Chair suggested that since the Onyx contract was being monitored through a number of different forums, and with the establishment of a task group specifically looking at these issues, it was not necessary for Onyx to attend meetings of the Select Committee on such a regular basis. After some further discussion and clarification that the task group would conclude its investigations in September 2004, Members agreed that Onyx should be invited to attend the September and January meetings of the Select Committee.

Michael Royce (Policy and Performance Officer) commented on the proposed task group on Household Waste Collection and the Onyx Contract and advised Members that the scope was very small in order to ensure that the contract was assessed in a focussed way with completion of the investigations scheduled for 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2004. Members noted that four meetings were anticipated, with additional outings in the “hot spot” collection areas of Kilburn and Harlesden also expected. Michael Royce confirmed that he would provide support for the task group but that Irfan Malik (Assistant Director, Environment) was happy to provide Members with any information that they required. The meetings would be held in Brent House and the final report back to the Select Committee would reflect the productive dialogue between the task group, StreetCare and Onyx.

The Chair suggested that bulk collection be included in the scope due to the impact on residents and requested that an expert witness with knowledge of contract monitoring be involved in the work of the task group. The Chair acknowledged that this might have financial implications but stressed the importance of ensuring that the investigations were supported by a suitable expert.

Councillor Gladbaum referred to a previous request by some Members of the Select Committee for a copy of the Onyx contract and stressed the importance of Members on the task group being able to review a copy of this contract as part of their investigations.

Regarding the membership of the task group, it was noted that the membership should not exceed five Members. It was suggested that



Councillor Nerva might like to be involved in the time limited investigations and therefore an approach should be made to him. The Chair confirmed her interest in serving on the task group and suggested that all Members involved in scrutiny and also the ward councillors for the “hotspot” areas be invited to participate in the investigations.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that the proposed Work Programme 2004/05 and a scope for the proposed “Household Waste Collection and the Onyx Contract” Task Group be noted;
- (ii) that a task group on Household Waste Collection and the Onyx Contract be established;
- (iii) that Councillor Nerva be invited to participate in the time limited investigations;
- (iv) that all Members of Scrutiny and the relevant ward Councillors for the “hot spot” areas be invited to participate in the task group investigation; and
- (v) that officers from Communications be invited to the November meeting to discuss publicity and promotion of future Satisfaction Surveys, as part of the agreed work programme.

**10. Items requested onto the Scrutiny Agenda**

Members were advised that to date, no such requests had been considered by the Scrutiny Management Board.

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

There were none.

**12. Any Other Urgent Business**

There was none.

The meeting ended at 9.50pm

J LONG  
Chair

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