

# **POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

(Committee Rooms 1/2 - Port Talbot Civic Centre)

**Members Present:**

**27<sup>th</sup> November, 2014**

**Chairman:** Councillor A.Jenkins

**Councillors:** Mrs P.Bebell, A.Carter, M.Harvey, Mrs.L.H.James,  
A.Llewelyn, Mrs.S.M.Penry, J.Warman,  
I.D.Williams and Mrs.A.Wingrave

**Officers In Attendance** H.Jenkins, Mrs.K.Jones, D.Rees, Mrs.S.Rees,  
Ms.C.Furlow, Mrs.J.Hankins, Mrs.J.Banfield,  
Mrs.K.Holt, C.Cole, T.Owen and Mrs.S.Edge

**Cabinet Invitees:** Councillors A.H.Thomas and A.N.Woolcock

---

## 1. **MEMBERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor A. Jenkins - Re: Report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services, 'Miscellaneous Grant Applications' – as he is a Member of NPT Credit Union, but confirmed his dispensation to speak thereon.

Councillor Mrs P. Bebell - Re: Report of the Director of Finance and Corporate Services, 'Miscellaneous Grant Applications' – as she is a Member of ABMU Community Health Council, but confirmed her dispensation to speak thereon.

## 2. **MINUTES OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 16TH OCTOBER 2014**

Noted by the Committee.

3. **SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2014/15**

The Committee noted the Forward Work Programme.

4. **UPDATE IN RELATION TO SICKNESS ABSENCE DATA AND FEEDBACK FROM THE SICKNESS TASKFORCE**

Members received a report on Sickness Absence and feedback from the Sickness Taskforce. Officers gave an overview of the report, and circulated additional information tabled on the day, which detailed the actual costs of sickness absence broken down by cost centre.

Officers explained that the Sickness Taskforce had been examining long term sickness absence in the Environment Directorate, noting that they had considered training requirements, and support needed by managers and employees when they were returning to work from a long term sickness absence. Officers gave an overview of case studies and highlighted examples of good practice within the Local Authority, but noted that management capacity was a major constraint, and that managers had difficulties redeploying employees to lighter duties from roles which involved heavy physical work.

Officers explained that managers were happy with the flexibility that the current Policy allows them, but would benefit from additional guidance on the Policy, in particular around timescales, and some clarity, for example that decisions about employment can be made at stage one, two or three of the process. Officers noted that early intervention was key in reducing the length of time an employee was absent through sickness.

Officers from the Taskforce had spoken to managers regarding the trial of the new process in the Environment Directorate, and would be able to report back to this Committee on the results.

Members asked why officers were planning to visit Cardiff to inform the review, and officers explained that Cardiff had recently implemented a separate Policy for critical illness, and so were going to see how it was dealt with differently, and what the practical issues were.

Members asked why information was held in so many different places, and not all together in one system. Officers explained that not all managers had been feeding through information to Vision. This had been taken up with Heads of Service, who had been informed that information should be input via Vision. Officers further explained that there would always be additional information with the line manager, as they have contact with the employee,

and there would be additional information with Occupational Health; for example in relation to health and medical conditions. Officers were expecting to implement an online referral system for Occupational Health, which would allow more data to be collected. The new system would log phone calls made to the employee by the manager, referrals to Occupational Health and letters issued to employees regarding formal meetings, which should overcome some of the difficulties with dealing with so many different systems.

Members queried the inconsistency between the management of long term sickness absences, and noted that they should be given more training if necessary. Officers explained that the Policy introduced in 2010 had allowed managers more discretion on how they managed sickness absence, but managers felt that it did not provide enough guidance on dealing with long term sickness absence. This was why there had been inconsistency between managers.

Members noted that Occupational Health consisted of a team of five staff, who were dealing with over 500 appointments per month, and asked whether the staff would be able to manage this workload. Officers informed Members that staff were currently managing, but were at full capacity.

Members requested more information on why employees were off sick, and why there were so many people involved in interviews of staff who were absent due to sickness.

Members asked whether the new processes were going to be monitored, and officers explained that staff on the Sickness Taskforce would be monitoring this initially, and advising managers during the trial.

Members noted that Human Resources (HR) would be losing three members of staff in the next financial year, through the budget reductions, and asked whether this would impact on the support offered by HR in the management of sickness absence. Officers explained that the tools developed by the taskforce should help managers be more self-sufficient, and that the computer system would enable improvements in sharing information, which should release some capacity in HR. Officers noted that this would be trialled in the Environment Directorate, and the results reported back to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee.

Members suggested that Occupational Health should work more closely with General Practitioners and that staff should be seen by Occupational Health when they went sick. Members further suggested that Occupational Health should be involved in sickness absences in a more planned way when dealing with staff returning for work from sickness absence. Officers

explained that an Occupational Health referral would not be required in all cases, and that where it was required, the recommendations in the Sickness Taskforce's report would link in with the Members' suggestions.

Members were concerned that sickness absence was a recurring issue, and that the report had highlighted that there were problems with the system, and questioned how it had taken so long to identify the problems.

Officers explained that the system that had been put in place in 2010, had been implemented to improve the levels of sickness absence in the Local Authority, and had concentrated on short term sickness. The Policy had worked very well with short term sickness absence, and the figures had improved from an average of approximately twelve days per member of staff to approximately nine days per member of staff. Officers were now looking to improve this further by considering long term sickness absence. Officers further explained that sickness absence had been identified by the Local Authority as a priority, and that every Head of Service had an objective for 2014-15 to reduce sickness absence.

Officers further noted that if there was a business case to spend funds in HR, to save funds on sickness absence, then this would be considered in due course.

Officers also noted the need to ensure that any new processes worked, and to ensure that managing sickness absence had the resources it needed.

Members asked how long the waiting list to see Occupational Health was, and were informed by officers that it was around two to three weeks. Officers further explained that referrals could take anything from nine days to three months from the start of a sickness absence period, which highlighted that some managers do need assistance on getting referrals in sooner.

Members noted that from the cost breakdown, the cost of sickness absence for the Local Authority was over £5 million, but that £2 million of this was with schools. Members suggested that a letter be sent to schools regarding the levels of sickness absence, and that they be asked to improve it.

The Committee noted the recommendations in the report, and reiterated the importance of ensuring there were effective arrangements in place across the Council to minimise sickness absence. The Committee requested a further report once the work in the Social Services Directorate had been completed

## 5. **BLUE BADGE SCHEME IN WALES**

Members received a report on the Blue Badge Scheme in Wales.

Members asked what the verification toolkit mentioned in the report was, and where it could be found. Officers explained that the toolkit had only been released by Welsh Government in October, which was a hard copy not available as a public document, and had not been implemented in Neath Port Talbot yet. Officers expected the toolkit to be implemented in due course.

Officers noted that following a systems review three years ago, the sole reliance on a GP opinion had been removed and as the Customer Service staff were not medically qualified, the onus was now on individuals to provide medical evidence of their eligibility for a blue badge under the discretionary criteria. This medical evidence would have to also explain how the medical condition impacted on the individual's ability to walk. Blue Badges may have been previously issued for temporary reasons, therefore when individuals reapply for a badge after three years there has been an increase in refusals of Blue Badges which would also have led to an increase in complaints. Officers further explained that when the toolkit was implemented they would expect to see a further increase in refusals in relation to ensuring strict implementation of the eligibility criteria.

Members asked how they could assist their constituents in their applications for Blue Badges, and noted that some individuals were unable to park in a designated spot when attending an appointment to re-apply for a badge, as they had to return the expired badge. Officers explained that now badges were produced by a national organisation, it could take five days for a new badge to arrive. Officers further clarified that individuals need not bring their current badge with them when reapplying, but should return their old badge soon after receiving their new one. This would assist in reducing the misuse of blue badges. Officers explained that during a minimum 20 minute interview with staff, applicants had the opportunity to explain face to face why they needed a blue badge, and also had the opportunity to bring back any evidence of that need at a later date. Officers emphasised that in discretionary cases, there needed to be a medical reason limiting mobility for an individual to be eligible for a blue badge. Officers also added that Customer Service staff were able to liaise with Social Services to ascertain what help applicants had to remain in their own homes to help make a decision on eligibility.

Members suggested that better communication on the criteria being used would be helpful.

## 6. CUSTOMER SERVICES, CONTACT CENTRE PERFORMANCE

Members received a report on Customer Services, Contact Centre performance. Officers explained that the report had been submitted to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee to highlight issues with performance that the Committee had revised previously. The report explained the problems that the Contact Centre had, the reasons for them and what was being done to alleviate them.

Officers also noted that the report was the first time Members would have seen the new performance scorecard, and that all Directorates would have them by the end of the financial year.

Officers highlighted the trial of an interactive voice recognition system, which had assisted with the increased demand during the introduction of Recycle Plus. Staff morale had also been improved, as all refuse queries were directed to one dedicated line, and the member of staff dealing with those queries knew that it was for a short period of time. This also relieved pressure on other calls coming through to the Contact Centre, with shorter waiting times, and fewer abandoned calls. Officers also emphasised the importance of the communications with the Waste Team throughout this period.

Members were advised of a new coaching tool for staff that had been introduced, where calls were recorded, and staff could listen back to their calls to assist them in identifying their own training needs. Some Members noted that they had been to sit in on some calls at the Contact Centre, to get a better idea of the service, and to hear for themselves what customers were saying. Members also noted that the recording system could also serve to protect staff, for example in the event of a complaint being made.

Members noted that the quality of information provided to them by the Contact Centre staff was consistently good, and that where there were changes of policy in the Council, the Contact Centre staff got a good sense of the impact of this with their direct contact with Neath Port Talbot citizens.

Members also noted that performance would be impacted by different issues at different times of the year, for example due to the weather, and understood that sometimes would be busier than others.

Members queried whether Customer Services officers were identifying to callers when no Welsh speaker was available on the Welsh Language Line. Officers clarified that this should already be happening, but agreed that it would be reinforced with the staff.

Members noted the high volume of calls that were dealt with by the Contact Centre, and suggested that if this information was reported in the press, then the public may appreciate the service a little more.

Members asked about the level of calls received by the Contact Centre for NPT Homes, and were informed that this was no longer a cause for concern, as it had reduced substantially from the 3000 plus calls per month that had previously been received to around 300 per month.

Members noted the new recorded message heard when calling the Contact Centre, regarding the self service options, and asked whether there was information available on the impact of this. Officers explained that a report would be brought to the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee showing the usage of the self service options, which would cover a much broader picture, including new policies.

7. **QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2014-15  
QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE (1ST APRIL - 30TH SEPTEMBER  
2014)**

Members received the quarterly Performance Monitoring Report 2014-15 Quarter 2.

Members expected that there would be fewer improvements, and that there would be fewer again in future, with the current budget situation.

Officers noted that the relevant sections of the report would filter through to the other Committees as appropriate.

Members commented on the quality of the report which was found to be very user-friendly.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

8. **COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMMENTS - ANNUAL  
REPORT 2013-14**

Members received an annual report on Complaints, Compliments and Comments.

Officers noted that there were no systemic corporate issues arising from the report. Service Issues would be identified through reports going through to the other Committees.

Members queried whether the biannual reports were being reported to the individual Committees. Officers suggested to Members, and Members agreed that complaints, compliments and comments could be reported quarterly along with the performance management reports, with an annual report across the board.

## 9. **PRE-SCRUTINY**

The Committee considered the following matters:-

### Cabinet Board Proposals

#### (a) Governance Group 6 Month Progress Report

Members received a report on the progress of the Annual Governance Statement. Officers noted the delay in reviewing risk management arrangements, and explained that this was due to prioritising the work required for the budget. Officers explained that resources had been identified to take this forward in the New Year, and highlighted the importance of this, especially under the current budget restraints.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

#### (b) Corporate Improvement Plan - Six Month Progress Report 2014/2015 and Outcome Agreement Grant Payment Letter 2013/14

Members received a six month progress report on the Corporate Improvement Plan. Officers explained that the report indicated most objectives were progressing and highlighted those that were not. Officers then suggested that individual Scrutiny Committees could take up the areas within their remit that were not progressing in the New Year, as appropriate.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

#### (c) Strategic Equality Plan Annual Report 2013-2014

Officers noted the historical nature of the report, and the intention to include the information with the Corporate Improvement Plan update reports in future. For future updates, officers intended to revise the plan to bring it into line with the Forward Financial Plan, and the current priorities.



Members noted the importance of using Equality Impact Assessments (EIA's) when developing or changing policies, as even though policies may need to be followed through, the EIA was helpful in identifying how to mitigate any disproportionate impact on protected groups, and could lead to better policy making. Members also noted the training that had recently been provided to them by WLGA on EIA's.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(d) Welsh Language Standards And Other Matters - Update

Officers informed Members that no decision had been made on the Welsh Language Standards yet, and so the intention of the report was to update Members on the current situation. Officers noted that there would be legislation in due course.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(e) Welfare Reform - Advice Line Evaluation

Members received a report on the Welfare Reform – Advice Line Evaluation.

Members noted the high percentage of people interviewed where the Local Authority was the first place they thought to contact. This highlighted that people were aware of the services that the Local Authority provided, and the good partnership working that went into the project.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

(f) Welfare Reform - Benefit Changes

Members received a report on Welfare Reform – Benefit Changes. Officers explained that council officers had worked very hard with their partners and with each other, and informed Members that Neath Port Talbot would be in the next tranche of the roll out of Universal Credit. Officers highlighted that the impact of Welfare Benefit changes on Neath Port Talbot would be the third highest in Wales.

Officers explained that there had been no major changes this year, but that most of the impact had been those affected by the 'bedroom tax'. Discretionary Housing Payment had been used to alleviate this in some cases, and was also used for others struggling to pay their rent. Of the

approximately 2000 adversely affected by the bedroom tax, approximately 1800 were NPT Homes tenants, so officers had been working closely with NPT Homes to assist with this.

Officers noted that there had been better than expected results so far with the introduction of Employment Support Allowance.

Officers noted that since the report was submitted, the Port Talbot food bank was now in operation, and highlighted the high numbers of people accessing food banks across the borough. Members noted that this was a high number, and that it was not just those who were out of work accessing the services, but those in employment who were also struggling.

Officers expected the first Universal Credit claims to come through in February, and noted that these would go through the Job Centre, not the Local Authority. There would be greater detail available nearer the time, and this would be reported back to Members.

Members were concerned about the requirement for an e-mail address to access Universal Credit, and noted that if people were having to use a food bank as they were struggling to provide food, then affording equipment to access e-mail would not be a priority. Members were also concerned that the rent would be included in a payment for everyone in a household, and to only one person, and the temptation this could be to those who were struggling. Members were also concerned that the money would be paid to individuals monthly, and the likelihood of families finding that the money had run out mid-month.

Officers agreed that rents were a concern, and this had been highlighted at the Local Service Board (LSB), though they also noted that there was an opt out for vulnerable clients. NPT Homes and other social landlords were concerned about the impact on their business model, and through the LSB a piece of work looking at 50 cases where payments would be made to individuals would be carried out. Officers suggested that the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee may wish to request a report from the LSB on the progress of this work.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposals to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

**CHAIRMAN**