

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Scrutiny Committee

HELD AT 6.00 PM ON WEDNESDAY 2 OCTOBER 2013

COUNCIL CHAMBER, SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
OFFICES

Present:

Mrs Celia Collett, MBE (Chairman)

Ms Joan Bland, Mr Steve Connel, Mr John Cotton, Ms Kristina Crabbe,
Mrs Eleanor Hards, Mr Paul Harrison, Ms Elizabeth Hodgkin, Mr Alan Rooke,
Mrs Margaret Turner and Mr Roger Bell (as substitute for Mr David Turner)

Apologies:

Mrs Pat Dawe, Mr Will Hall and Mr David Turner tendered apologies.

Officers:

Ms Yvonne Cutler-Greaves, Mr Paul Howden, Mrs Clare Kingston, Mr Matt Prosser,
and Mrs Jennifer Thompson.

Also present:

Mr David Dodds, Cabinet Member for Finance, Waste and Parks
Mr Darren Keen, Capita contract manager

12 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 3 September
2013 as a correct record and to agree that the Chairman sign them as such.

13 Performance review of Capita (Financial Services Contract)

The committee considered the report of the Head of Finance setting out Capita's
performance in delivering the elements of the financial services contract from 1 April
2012 to 31 March 2013.

Mr Paul Howden, Revenues and Benefits Manager, Mr Darren Keen, Capita contract
manager, and Mr David Dodds, Cabinet member, introduced the report and
answered questions from the committee as follows:

- The Cabinet member was pleased to see for the first time ever a full set of excellent ratings. He congratulated Capita on their performance particularly on improving performance in processing benefits.
- The take-up of council tax e-billing was higher than in other councils, but still only ten per cent. The reasons were not known, but there had been no campaign to encourage people to switch.
- The revenues and benefits service customer satisfaction survey was underway. Customer satisfaction had been rated good because there was not enough evidence to award a higher rating. The council's main residents' survey had not been undertaken in 2012/13 because of a lack of capacity.
- The revenues and benefits call-centre was pro-actively managed to move staff from quieter to busier areas and have enough staff available to handle calls. However it was always hard to manage the inevitable peaks in calls on Mondays and around the times when all councils issued bills and central changes were introduced. It was not possible simply to hire ad-hoc temporary staff as training was required before they could be effective, and there was eventually a lack of space to put staff. Providing a better service at peak times had a cost attached.
- There were several stages in detecting and stopping fraudulent claims. Data matching between agencies picked up discrepancies; national initiatives and calls from the public identified fraud; and Capita staff referred cases which seemed suspicious for checking. A range of sanctions up to jail sentences were used as well as requiring the money to be paid back.
- Of those who had been over-paid, about 60 per cent had arrangements to pay this back in small weekly amounts; 20 per cent were in the process of setting up arrangements; and the remainder of debts were written off or dealt with by legal means.
- Fewer reminders for unpaid debts had been issued because of the transfer of the garden waste service to payment by direct debit; residents and customers paying quickly for services; and reasonably good payment times from larger organisations.
- The different figures for the percentages of calls answered in 20 seconds referred to the revenues and benefits call centre (81 per cent) and the central switchboard (87per cent).
- The switchboard had been upgraded to offer automated call options to direct callers, an option to connect to a named officer, and pointers to the website. The time to answer calls was measured after the automatic options section finished.
- The savings from moving to one switchboard for both councils had been passed on to the council.
- KPT2 measured the time taken to see everyone who came to reception, with or without an appointment.

- The council's accountants had visited other authorities to learn from their best practice. Mr Keen said that Capita would be more pro-active at sharing best practice between councils who used their services.
- While Capita should not get involved in influencing council policy, officers would find it helpful if Capita contributed to policy discussions at an early stage to advise on the implications for their systems.

Councillors commented:

- What would the collection rate be without any intervention or effort to collect from non-payers? Was additional effort involved cost-effective?
- They noted the target for council tax collection was set in 2006. Although it had been left as a target, it was not realistically achievable in-year given the changed economic climate.
- Targets which were achievable but stretching should be set for all areas.
- They would like to see data for the time taken to answer all calls to revenues and benefits call centre and the switchboard and any information on how many calls to the switchboard were because the caller could not find information on the website.

RESOLVED: to recommend that the Cabinet member for Finance makes a final assessment of Capita's performance in delivering the elements of the financial services contract from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013 as:

Revenues - excellent
 Benefits - excellent
 Exchequer - excellent
 Financial management system - excellent
 Payroll - excellent
 Customer contact - excellent

14 Corporate Plan review

The committee considered the report of the Head of Corporate Strategy reviewing the first year of the corporate plan from April 2012 to March 2013.

Mrs Clare Kingston, Head of Corporate Strategy, and Ms Yvonne Cutler Greaves, Corporate Projects Officer, introduced the report and answered questions as follows:

- The drop in the recycling rate in real terms reflected the national trend. The Environment Agency had stopped councils from composting street sweepings which reduced the recycling rate by about three percent. Officers were working on alternatives. An information campaign to improve the household recycling rate is starting this month.
- Residents were informed about the council's work through Outlook three times a year and through the website and new apps for smartphones.
- Phase 2 of the Orchard Centre development in Didcot had been repeatedly delayed due to economic constraints, in common with many other large retail projects across the country.

- Staff had focussed on reducing business mileage by scheduling their visits and working days carefully. The overall reduction in staff numbers also reduced the total mileage.
- Businesses reaching the VAT registration threshold tended to be either expanding established small businesses or larger start-ups.
- The audit of community-led plans would produce a comprehensive list of actions, some of which the district council could assist in delivering. Councillors noted that the community plan review group at the county council also periodically collated common actions from plans.

Councillors commented:

- the increase in the visitor economy was disappointing and the council should consider withdrawing support altogether;
- there was no clear link between reducing the number of councillors and supporting communities.

Councillors asked for more information about:

- progress with the community infrastructure levy;
- the role and remit of planning champions and how this complemented the roles of district councillors and planning officers;
- the annual housing supply statement; and
- the proposals for the Enterprise Zone budget.

The committee agreed to note the report and the progress made.

The meeting closed at 7.35 pm

Chairman

Date