

Corporate Services Standing Sub Committee
1 October 2003

Irvine, 1 October 2003 - At a Meeting of the Corporate Services Standing Sub Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

Present

Tom Barr, Margaret McDougall, David Munn, Robert Rae and Ian Richardson.

In Attendance

B Devine, Chief Executive; A Herbert, Assistant Chief Executive and S Humphries, Benefits Manager (Finance); M Macfarlane, Assistant Chief Executive (Personnel); J Montgomery, Principal Performance Review Officer; S Bale and C Graham, Corporate & Democratic Support Officers (Chief Executive's).

Chair

Councillor Barr in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Gordon Clarkson, Elizabeth McLardy and John Moffat.

1. Welcome and Introduction

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Corporate Services Standing Sub Committee.

The Chair advised that the Sub Committee will provide Members with an opportunity to (a) seek in-depth information on the Performance Indicators on behalf of the Corporate Services of the Council; and (b) consider the delivery of those services.

Noted.

2. Terms of Reference

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on the Terms of Reference for Standing Sub Committees.

The Chief Executive explained the Sub Committee's Terms of Reference as agreed by the Council at its Adjourned Statutory Meeting held on 19 May 2003.

The Sub Committee will consider and scrutinise items under the four undernoted headings:

Performance

- Internal Performance Reports; and
- Performance, Inspection and Best Value reports by external bodies and inspectorates.

Customer Care and Consultation

- Public/Partner Consultation;
- Customer Comments Scheme; and
- Public Services Ombudsman.

Policy

- Service Specific Policies;
- External Policy Development (UK and Scottish Parliament legislation); and
- External Influences (initiatives from the Scottish Executive and other bodies).

The Operation of Delegated Powers

- Reports on matters which have been dealt with by officers under delegated powers.

In addition the Sub Committee will consider other general matters, referred by either the Corporate Services Committee or the Committee Chair.

Noted.

3. Public Performance Reporting: Statutory Performance Indicators 2002/03

Submitted report by the Chief Executive on the Statutory Performance Indicators for Corporate Services for the year ended 31 March 2003.

The Accounts Commission requires Councils to collate and publish a range of Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) in each financial year to provide a comparison between Councils and within Council Services over time. The figures are subject to external audit and to national publication by the Accounts Commission.

The Assistant Chief Executives (Finance) and (Personnel) reported on statutory indicators 1 - 5 as detailed in the report. Details of these, together with the question and answer sessions which followed are attached at Appendix 1 to this Minute.

The Sub Committee agreed to adjourn to 2 October 2003 at 2.00 p.m. to consider the remaining statutory indicators 6 - 11.

The meeting ended at 3.30 p.m.

Corporate Services Standing Sub Committee
01/10/2003

Appendix No **1**

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Corporate Services: Statutory Performance Indicators 2002/03

A Herbert, Assistant Chief Executive (Finance)

S Humphries, Benefits Manager (Finance)

M Macfarlane, Assistant Chief Executive (Personnel)

Benefits Administration

The Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) confirmed the dual role of Finance in providing services to the Council and a direct service to members of the public. Prior to 2002 the principal involvement in direct service to the public had been in the collection of Council Tax. Following reports from consultants and the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, the Benefits Service was restructured in 2002 and became the responsibility of Finance from July of that year. All staff involved were centralised within Cunninghame House from November 2002. At that time additional resources were dedicated to the training of staff.

An overview was provided of the steps that have been and which will continue to be taken to reduce the current backlog, reduce the waiting time for the processing of claims and improve on the level of service overall.

Q Are the calls to the benefits office directed through the Call Centre?

A No

Q How considerable is the backlog and when do you expect to have this cleared?

A The target for July claims is mid October to bring the backlog down to 2.5 months with a view to reducing this further over November and December, but this is dependent on the take-up of Pension Credits being handled automatically by the software.

Q In terms of the extra resources which are allocated to reducing the backlog, what will happen when this is cleared? Will the additional resources still be required?

A In this case the term 'resources' relates to overtime costs. These costs will therefore reduce through time.

Q Does the additional subsidy from the Department of Work and Pensions meet the costs?

A We submit a bid if there is any change in circumstances. We claim for any new initiative, but may not receive the full amount.

Q Has the Capital cost for furniture and equipment been included?

A Yes. As staff were centralised within Cunninghame House, costs were required to be allocated to the purchase of furniture and equipment. These costs were built into Year 1 as a one-off cost. In future years costs will only be required for 'replacement' and will be met from the revenue budget.

Q On what basis was decision taken to target the backlog rather than the processing of new claims in the first instance?

A Having considered all the factors it became apparent that there were insufficient resources to undertake both at the same time. The inherited backlog required to be cleared. This will result in a worsening of the PI for some time as the PI measures new claims and does not take into account backlogs or workload. It is expected, however, that post April 2004 an improvement will be shown.

Q With regard to new claims, if when forms are processed after being in the backlog for 3 months and are found to be incomplete in some way, do they then re-enter the system in the same way and take longer to be considered?

A Yes, it could take another month to obtain the information and therefore the application will take longer.

Q This then will create problems for Tenants, particularly where their circumstances may have changed 2 or 3 times during this period?

A Yes. Benefit claims may be more complicated to process if addresses have changed a few times, where private lets are involved or where a greater number of people are sharing accommodation. However, it is the responsibility of the tenant to notify the Council of *all* changes.

Q In relation to partnership working, how is this working? Is there adequate co-operation?

A The Benefits Service works closely with the Support Division of the

Department for Work and Pensions and consults and liaises closely with the Private Landlords, the Council's Housing Services and Housing Associations. We will continue to ensure that such meetings take place, at a lower level, at the frontline, with meaningful dialogue. At a higher level, meetings will continue to focus on the administration of benefits and the introduction of appropriate systems to ensure continuing improvement. There are also tranches of funding available to assist.

Q When a tenant hands in an application from is there a checklist of information required?

A Yes, there is a checklist the tenant requires to complete. The form itself is complex and is being examined.

Q How significant is benefit fraud and how is this being handled?

A It is very significant. The Council has a dedicated Benefit Fraud Team with a remit to investigate any suspicious claims. All officers of the Team are accredited investigation officers. Referrals to the Team in the main come from Council staff dealing with claims, but telephone lines are also available for members of the public to call anonymously. False claimants can be reported to the Procurator Fiscal. To date the Council has had 1 successful prosecution.

Q How does the Council rate against other authorities in terms of its level of advice/guidance available? What improvements have been made in this area?

A An enquiry desk has been established on the ground floor of Cunninghame House. Assistance can be provided when submitting a form. Telephone assistance is available and the Council employs a 'Visiting Officer' who will go out to people's houses. We will continue to work with our housing partners to improve the advice available.

It is difficult to make a comparison with other authorities as different structures exist. However continual improvements will be sought through customer liaison.

Litigation Claims

The indicators show the extent to which legal liability is established against the Council following the raising of court actions. Actions taken against the Council increased from 5 in 2001/02 to 17 in 2002/03. There is the possibility that this is due to firms encouraging clients to take action against the Council, working on a 'no win, no fee' basis.

Claims relate mainly to missing paving stones, broken pavements, flooding from an empty flat, pot holes, etc.

Q The year 2001/02 indicates zero litigation claims against Housing Services, compared to £40,622 (per 10,000 dwellings) in 2002/03. Could this be due to claims carrying over to the next year before reaching a conclusion?

A Yes.

Q Is there an indication of the number of total claims against the Council, whether successful or not?

A Not at this time. However, the Indicator upon which this is based was revised with effect from 1 April this year and future reports will provide the actual claims lodged.

Q If we get a high number of claims in relation to a particular subject, would we examine the cause behind it?

A Yes, as part of risk management.

Q Is it the insurance company which pays out to successful claims?

A Yes, subject to certain excesses.

Collection of Council Tax and Invoice Payment
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This indicator looks at the efficiency of the council in collecting its Council Tax. This could be impacted upon by the ability and the willingness of the taxpayers to pay. The Council is more active in the pursuit of debt and continues to improve in this area, although will get to a level where it will peak.

The Council also has a responsibility to ensure payment of its invoices on time and thereby avoid conflict with its suppliers. As well as meeting the target for 2002/03 the Council continues to perform above the Scottish average in this area.

Q "The Scottish average cost of collection of £12.91 in 2001/02 reflects

differing practices with regard to the collection of statutory additions and the Agency Agreements in place between Councils and Scottish Water for the billing and recovery of water service charges." Can you explain this statement?

A Some authorities may have different practices of recording income and expenditure which may in turn show a downward expenditure or an inflated income. Scottish Water may offer preferential rates to an authority where the collection rate is higher.

Q Does the Council receive a fee from Scottish Water for the collection of these charges on its behalf?

A A fee of approximately £4 per bill is paid for the collection of the water charges.

Q Is there any indication of when Scottish Water will assume this responsibility?

A No change has yet been suggested.

Q Does the Council forward only the amounts of money it collects from each individual?

A Yes, there is no advance payment agreement.

Q In relation to the percentage of Council Tax due that was received, can you confirm the meaning of the term 'Family Average'?

A This is a comparison with a "family of Councils" which are supposed to be similar to North Ayrshire.

Q What impact will the Call Centre have?

A There may be a drop in performance for a year and a slight decline in collection, but it should improve again.

Sickness Absence

The Assistant Chief Executive (Personnel) confirmed that various actions have been taken by the Council and will continue to be taken to reduce sickness absence. Policies and procedures have been reviewed and all managers have received training on these. Enhanced support has been introduced for employees. The role of

occupational health in the managing of sickness absence has also been expanded.

Targets have been set of 3.5% for white collar and 4% for blue collar employees.

During 2002/03 the overall rates of sickness absence within the Council dropped from 6.1% to 5.3%.

Q Can you provide current reduction figures?

A The figures to June of this year represents a reduction of 7.1% to 5.9% for Manual workers and a reduction to 5% for all staff. Reports are compiled quarterly with the next report available in October.

Q What is the cost of absence to the council as a whole?

A An estimate of the total cost would be £4m payroll costs.. In addition there will be costs of replacement staff where required which may amount to another £0.5m.

Equal Opportunities

The delivery of quality services depends on a trained and motivated workforce and the Council's employment policy does reflect its commitment to equal opportunities. The indicator provides a picture of the current gender balance in employment in order to gauge under/over representation in the varying salary bands.

The indicator for equal opportunities does not deal with equalities relating to ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation.

The Assistant Chief Executive (Personnel) considered that this Performance Indicator is of little value as a measure of performance, as it is an area which cannot be 'improved' upon as such. It depends on the volume and type of people who choose to apply for posts. The Council also has a responsibility to appoint its employees on merit.

Q What percentage of disabled personnel is the Council required to appoint?

A Previously there was a requirement for employers to ensure a percentage of their employees were disabled. This is no longer the case.