

Property Services Standing Sub Committee
17 September 2003

Irvine, 17 September 2003 - At a Meeting of the Property Services Standing Sub Committee of North Ayrshire Council at 2.00 p.m.

Present

John Bell, Jane Gorman, Margaret McDougall, Samuel Taylor and Nan Wallace

In Attendance

T. Orr, Corporate Director, O. Clayton, Head of Housing, J. Currie, Head of Cleansing, Grounds Maintenance and Transport, J. Paul, Head of Technical Services and J. Mason, Principal Engineer (Property Services); J Montgomery, Principal Performance Review Officer, A Osborne and A. Little, Corporate & Democratic Support Officers (Chief Executive's).

Chair

Councillor Bell in the Chair.

Apologies for Absence

Stewart Dewar, Elizabeth McLardy, David O'Neill and Richard Wilkinson.

1. Welcome and Introduction

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

The Chair explained that the role of the Sub Committee is to scrutinise in detail, proposed policy developments and performance reports and to make recommendations back to the Property Services Committee. The purpose of this is:-

- i. to allow members an opportunity to obtain a greater awareness and in-depth understanding of the specific issues affecting Property Services;
- ii. to allow more detailed discussion on proposed new developments so that members are fully engaged in contributing to and approving proposals, and to have a greater ownership of them; and
- iii. to review in closer detail reports on existing performance and recommend possible service improvements.

2. Terms of Reference

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

The Corporate and Democratic Support Officer 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 four headings as follows: -

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 the Property Services Committee or the Committee Chair.

Noted.

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

Submitted report by the Corporate Director (Property Services) on the Statutory Performance Indicators for Property Services for the year ended 31 March 2003.

The Local Government Act 1992 requires the Accounts Commission to direct Local Authorities to publish information on their activities within any financial year. This is done through Statutory Performance Indicators. This information facilitates comparisons of cost, economy, efficiency and effectiveness between Councils and in different financial years. Audit Scotland, on behalf of the Accounts Commission, ensures that these requirements are met.

Property Services is required to report on 14 performance indicators within the areas of Cleansing, Housing and Roads and Lighting.

The Corporate Director (Property Services) reported on each of the statutory indicators as detailed in the report, highlighting that these figures are a snapshot in time. Details of this and the question and answer session which followed are attached at Appendix 1.

The Sub Committee agreed to note the content of the performance report;

The meeting ended at 4.05 p.m.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Property Services: Statutory Performance Indicators 2002/2003

T. Orr, Corporate Director

O. Clayton, Head of Housing

J. Currie, Head of Cleansing, Grounds Maintenance & Transport)

J. Paul, Head of Technical Services

J. Mason, Principal Roads Engineer

Cleansing, Grounds Maintenance & Transport

Cost of Refuse Collection

The performance information shows how much it costs the Council to collect refuse from 66,130 premises in North Ayrshire. Refuse collection is utilised by almost every householder and a majority of commercial undertakings on a weekly basis. Three separate collections are provided for householders: - a weekly collection of normal household waste from wheeled bins, a weekly collection of garden refuse during a 30 week period and free uplift of bulky household items on request. The cost of refuse collection is reasonably stable with ongoing efficiencies being tested against the current performance.

Q: Which Councils are North Ayrshire compared with?

A: The Account Commission determined family groupings and placement of similar sized authorities within these to ensure comparison of like with like. North Ayrshire has been placed in the mixed authority group (rural and urban) which includes similar sized authorities such as Falkirk.

Q: Have new collection vehicles been purchased?

A: Three new vehicles have been ordered for existing replacement and will be operational within the year. There is a requirement for an additional vehicle to

the fleet for additional special uplifts and this is presently being reviewed.

Cost of Refuse Disposal

North Ayrshire Council is one of the few remaining authorities to benefit from operating its own waste disposal facilities. Operating according to the principles of proximity and self-sufficiency, whereby waste is disposed of within the Council area close to the point of origin, produces significant cost benefits. The Council to date has one of the lowest disposal costs in Scotland.

The impact of SEPA regulations on future environmental controls which relate to waste disposal and their notice of intention to close the landfill sites at Irvine and Brodick by 2006 will influence disposal costs.

Q: Has the increase in recycling pushed up disposal costs?

A: There is an annual Landfill Tax of £1.00 per tonne and this reflects on an annual increase in disposal costs of approximately £70,000 per year at present. The more refuse recycled the less cost is incurred in landfill. It is anticipated that it will take 5 years for these costs to level.

Q: Is there an impact on the level of Council Tax?

A: If targets are not achieved financial penalties may be incurred. Any surplus profits however from the disposal facility come back to the Council's corporate budget.

Q: Are there any initiatives or proposals to reduce the amount of waste?

A: The British Business Federation has an initiative in which packaging is returned to the manufacturer (e.g. packaging of white goods) and encourages producers to use lighter packaging. The decreasing weight of packaging however impacts on the tonnage of recyclable aluminium gathered by the Council.

Special Uplifts

The performance indicator shows that 98.96% of special uplifts were completed within 5 days, meeting the North Ayrshire Council target of 98.64%. The Corporate Call Centre is now taking special uplift requests and during this introductory period back up vehicles have been introduced to reduce the impact on the public. Proposals are being considered to uplift abnormal loads e.g. DIY and building waste, at a small charge to the resident.

Q: Can old furniture be recycled, or re-used?

A: A local project is able to utilise specific items. However all materials require to be fire resistant.

Q: Is there a cost for the Property Services' Contact Centre?

A: As well as the Contact Centre run by Property Services, the Council operates a Corporate Call Centre based in Bridgegate. The Call Centre has been in operation for 8 weeks as might have been expected has experienced some initial problems. It is proposed to expand the Call Centre, absorbing the Property Services' Contact Centre and ultimately receiving all calls to the Council. A review of operations, including resource and staff transfers, will take place shortly.

Resource and staff transfers from Property Services could seriously impact on the HRA.

Missed Collections

This indicator shows the recorded incidence of missed household waste collections. The service has been steadily improving over the last 2 years and resulted in only 11 missed collections per 100,000 in the summer period and 17 in the winter period for 2002/03. The variance between the figures is a result of adverse weather conditions during the latter part of the year. All calls reporting missed collections are now routed to the Corporate Call Centre and this information takes some time to be relayed back to the collection vehicle. Previously calls were made directly to the Cleansing office who radioed the vehicle enabling a quick return to pick up the missed collection.

This indicator has now been removed and replaced by an indicator which measures complaints regarding missed collections.

Refuse Recycling, Composting

The performance information shows the methods adopted by Councils for disposing of household, commercial and industrial premises waste. A reduction in recycling from 8% in 2000/01 to 6.75% in 2002/03 was due to transitional arrangements during the introduction of the brown bin system, excepting Arran. This system is now in place in the majority of households and has produced an outturn of 13.9% recycled in 2003/04. North Ayrshire is 1 of only 4 Scottish authorities with composting facilities.

Q: Does further recycling mean another bin for households?

A: Households will be provided with a box for white, green and brown glass (e.g. jam jars) and a plastic sack for paper. The procurement of a new vehicle will enable a pilot to be run in April 2004, concentrating on highly populated areas such as flats. If the pilot is successful it is anticipated a further 15 vehicles for recycling could be required resulting in the provision of up to 40 new jobs within the service.

Q: Is the 25% target set for 2005/06 for domestic waste only?

A: A small commercial element is included in this target and it is envisaged that North Ayrshire could meet the target. The Scottish Executive is aware of the inclusion of commercial waste within this target.

Q: Is there a market for the recycling of paper and glass?

A: There is already an arrangement in place with a local company for the recycling of paper and discussions are underway with a company for recycling glass. Two vehicles have been purchased to improve the current collection arrangements for white goods and consideration is being given to including the recycling of TVs and computers. The recycling of scrap material is also being investigated via high tech scrap merchants.

Housing

Homelessness

The first indicator shows the total number of households in “priority need” under the homelessness legislation, for whom the Council has a responsibility to secure temporary accommodation. The second indicator shows the percentage of all households in each type of temporary accommodation provided by the Council and the third shows the average number of days each household remained in each type of temporary accommodation. These indicators are changing and in future will show the length of time a household is homeless from presentation to being permanently housed.

Q: Are the Scottish average figures now available?

A: The Scottish figures are now available and show a number of anomalies. North Ayrshire shows a 46% increase, East Ayrshire a 35% increase, but South Ayrshire shows a 5% decrease. North Ayrshire encourages staff to record presentations, even if no service can be offered at that time. An analysis of the figures is currently being carried out.

The Corporate Director (Property Services) added: The Homelessness lobby at the Scottish Executive has been overwhelming and this is impacting heavily on local authorities. The stigma of being homeless has been removed and this has resulted in an increase in the numbers presenting as homeless.

Rent Arrears

This indicator shows the Council's performance in collecting rent that is due but unpaid by current tenants. The figures show that progress made in the last few years has slipped back to the levels of 1999/2000 and published figures will show North Ayrshire as second bottom in Scotland. There are currently 7,000 tenants with rent arrears in North Ayrshire. Housing Benefit contributes 66 % of all rental income and delays in the processing of Housing Benefit claims impact heavily on rent arrears. Processing rates have risen steadily from 59 days in 2001/02, to 138 days in 2002/03 and now to 148 days within the first quarter of 2003/04. Almost £500,000 was outstanding in Housing Benefit at the end of March 2003. It is therefore unlikely the Council will meet the target of 7% set by Audit Scotland for 2005/06

Q: What are the priorities?

A: Improvement of the Housing Benefit service to levels of that at the time of transfer in 2002 is crucial. A small dip in the rate of processing applications was expected around the point of transfer but the continued increase in the length of time to process claims has had considerable impact on the HRA.

Service improvements within Housing have continued with information on rent payment included in the sign-up process and at new tenant visits, ;publicising the profile of rent payments by mail drops and leaflets, the introduction of area targets, more choice in payment methods including debit and credit card payments as well improved communication/information to tenants by newsletters, tenants handbook, Navigate and tenant consultation meetings. Staff development has included training, in liaison with Social Services, on arrears recovery, welfare benefits, debt counselling and mediation skills. Also, jointly with Social Services, a Welfare Rights Officer was introduced into Housing to assist with benefit claims. Housing Officers continue to assist Housing Benefit by following up benefit forms and returning forms to Housing Benefits.

Q: What else can Housing do?

A: A Rent Arrears Efficiency Review is currently being undertaken.

The Corporate Director (Property Services) added: The Housing Benefits Service was transferred to Finance in July 2002 following the recommendations of a Consultant's report. Since then there has been a gradual decline in performance. The planned performance improvements by Financial Services will require to take effect by March 2004 if an added burden on rents is to be avoided.

Rent Loss Due to Voids

The Rent Loss Due to Voids indicators measure the total annual rent loss due to houses remaining empty when they could be available for letting. Over the last 2 years performance improved and the percentage is below the Scottish average.

Housing Response Repairs

This indicator measures how far repairs are completed within the target times set. Performance has continued to improve and is now averaging 93.8% across the four response categories. Improvements to the service continue and include the provision of a 24 hour reporting repairs service from 1 October 2003, a new module for gas maintenance and also for general housing repairs. The Accounts Commission is however concerned at the lack of comparability between authorities and is keen to establish comparative factors.

Q: How do you measure customer satisfaction?

A: Customers are provided with a card which they complete and return indicating their appraisal of the service. Consultants were commissioned and their findings indicated that satisfaction rates were high.

Q: How do you train staff in the Contact Centre?

A: Staff are provided with thorough training in various areas including customer services, computer and IT skills.

The Corporate Director (Property Services) added: A high level of performance has been maintained and improvements to the service have been made as a result of the operation of the in-house Contact Centre. The Centre benefits from its specialist knowledge and training. There are concerns that this may not be provided by a Corporate Call Centre.

Time Taken to Re-let Houses

The indicator reports the efficiency of the Council in managing tenancy changes which involves identifying new tenants, having new tenants sign the tenancy agreement for a house and identifying and carrying out any repairs necessary before the new tenant can move in. Improvements to the service have included removing steps in the process which wasted time e.g. contacting tenants by phone rather than letter, Building Services using a Voids Van (equipped with necessary materials to undertake repairs), accompanying tenants to houses and answering any questions which may, if not answered, have resulted in a refusal of the property, and also allowing Officers a degree of discretion in agreeing to repairs. These improvements have resulted in both North Ayrshire and Scottish targets being met in all four categories.

Q: Why do transfers take longer?

A: Transfers tend to be more specific and often aspirational. Once these specifics are known offering a tenant a house in an area you know they do not want to move to is pointless .

Roads

Cost and Replacement of Street Lighting

This relatively new indicator measures the gross cost of street lighting per lantern which includes the renewal of columns, reactive and routine maintenance and energy consumption as well as planned lighting columns replaced expressed as a percentage of the total number of columns. No allocation was made for column replacements in the capital programme in 2002/03.

Q: Steel lampposts get vandalised by shaking and breaking the lantern. This doesn't happen with concrete lamp posts. Why can't we continue with concrete lamp posts?

A: The industry is now geared towards steel lampposts which are easier to move/remove and will last around 30 years. Concrete lampposts are more difficult to maintain and locate.

Q: Why does it take so long to remove old columns?

A: Scottish Power require to remove the old cabling before the Council can proceed with the removal of the posts.

The Corporate Director (Property Services) added: There has been substantial under-investment in roads infrastructure and built environment in recent years and it is hoped that the Council will increase future budgets.

Carriageway Surface Treatments

This performance information is concerned with the re-surfacing or surface dressing of the carriageway. The percentage of the carriageways treated in North Ayrshire exceeded the North Ayrshire Council target due to a one off additional revenue grant from the Scottish Executive and the Quality of Life funding.

This indicator has been dropped by the Scottish Executive for the year 2003/04 and a new indicator 'The percentage of the road network that should be considered for maintenance treatment' has been introduced for the year 2003/04.

Percentage of Street Lighting Repairs Completed within 7 days

The indicators reflects the percentage of street lighting repairs completed within 7 days. 'Elapsed time' is the total period between the time and date on which a report of the failure was made to the Council and the completion of the repair. Every effort will be made to sustain the satisfactory performance of recent years.

Percentage of Traffic Light Repairs Completed within 48 hours

The indicator measures the percentage of traffic light repairs completed within 48 hours. 'Elapsed time' is the total period between the time and date on which a report of the failure was received by the Council and completion of the report. The repair of power supply faults to signals is the responsibility of Scottish Power and as such out with the control of Roads Services. The target of 90% for 2002/03 proved unachievable given the small number of repair reports received and targets for 2003/04 have therefore been reduced to a more realistic level of 86%.