

SCRUTINY BOARD (CENTRAL AND CORPORATE)

MONDAY, 2ND MARCH, 2009

PRESENT: Councillor M Dobson in the Chair

Councillors B Atha, J Bale, S Bentley,
J Dowson, P Ewens, M Hamilton, A Lowe,
B Selby and P Wadsworth

78 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made at this point (see later Minute No 81).

79 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors Chastney, Davey and Kendall.

80 Minutes - 2nd February 2009

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd February 2009 be confirmed as a correct record.

81 Scrutiny Inquiry - Sickness Absence Management - Session 4 - Final Session

Further to the Board's previous sessions relating to this particular Inquiry (Minute Nos 18, 40 and 69 refer), the Board received evidence from Andrew Mason, Chief Environmental Services Officer. Mr Mason had joined Leeds City Council approximately 12 months ago, from Tameside Council near Manchester, and the Board requested Mr Mason to relate his experiences of the absence management system in Leeds in comparison to his previous experience of other systems.

In brief summary, the following main points were discussed:-

- Mr Mason explained that he managed a workforce which included a large element of manual works, such as refuse collectors and street cleaners. He had been surprised at the relatively high levels of sickness absence at Leeds compared to his previous authority. He felt that the sickness absence management system which Leeds City Council had in place was perfectly satisfactory – it was its application which might be deficient in some cases;

- The key to successfully operating the system and reducing sickness absence levels was for line managers to accept their responsibility for proactively monitoring absences for staff under their supervision, and applying the system in a fair, consistent and proactive manner;
- HR was there to support line managers in this task, e.g. occupational health referrals, but the prime responsibility rested with the line managers;
- At his instigation, all line managers had been trained or re-trained in the absence management system, and positively encouraged to assume an active role in the process, including making regular contact with the staff they supervised, including peripatetic staff and those on long-term sickness. He would shortly be following this up with all line managers, to ascertain how it was working in reality;
- In addition to dealing with absences, management also needed to manage attendance, and to encourage an attendance culture. There needed to be flexibility, say in terms of allowing staff to make up lost hours to account for time off for a domestic crisis, as an alternative to that member of staff simply taking a day off 'sick'. Shift swaps might also be a way to achieve similar results. Staff with a good attendance record needed that to be acknowledged, even if it was just a letter from their manager. It was helpful to try to enlist the support of the trade unions in respect of establishing an attendance culture, as often they shared managements' concerns regarding the effects of absent workers on their colleagues' workloads;
- Reference was made to two pilot projects under the 'Vielife' scheme, whereby individual staff could volunteer for an individual health and lifestyle assessment, which would produce a report tailored to their needs. This report was private to the individual, but the overall survey results were made known to the employer, and might be used to assist the employer to devise or encourage the use of healthy living practices, such as smoking cessation classes, or to identify a need for more training e.g. manual lifting techniques;
- Reference was also made to work/life balance issues, and whether the Council could perhaps do more in this regard e.g. offering, say, three 12 hour shifts to staff, which would then enable them to engage in other activities on days off?
- The Chair thanked Andrew Mason for his candid evidence to the Board. The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development, in consultation with the Chair, would now produce and circulate for comment a draft Final Report of the Inquiry for proposed submission and adoption at the April Board meeting.

It was commented that the draft Final Report should reflect the Board's concern regarding the current levels of staff absences, should include reference to the costs of sickness absence at a time when the Council is facing particular budgetary pressures and should also pick up a recurring theme referred to during most of the sessions regarding the importance of line managers in managing attendance levels. As identified, in some areas of the Council this might require a cultural change.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That Andrew Mason be thanked for his attendance and the manner in which he has responded to Members' queries and comments;
- (b) That the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development, in consultation with the Chair, prepare and circulate for comment a draft Final Report of the Inquiry, for submission to the April Board meeting.

(NB1 Councillor Hamilton joined the meeting at 10.13 am, during the consideration of this item.

- 2 Councillor Wadsworth declared a personal interest in this item, in his capacity as a Deputy Executive Member (Environmental Services))

82 Financial Health Monitoring 2008/09 - Third Quarter

The Director of Resources submitted a report, first considered by the Executive Board at its meeting on 13th February 2009, informing Members of the financial position of the Council after 9 months of the 2008/09 financial year.

Alan Gay, Director of Resources, and Doug Meeson and Helen Mylan, Resources Directorate, attended the meeting and responded to Members' queries and comments. In brief summary, the main discussion points were;-

- Overall, a balanced budget was projected for the end of the financial year, with a surplus of £2m in respect of the Housing Revenue Account;
- The current low interest rates were a mixed blessing. Whilst it meant that the Council received less for the monies it had got invested, it had enabled the Council to take advantage of low rates for short-term borrowing requirements;
- The Council was not quite hitting its target of paying all invoices within 30 days of receipt for a variety of reasons – often because no order number was quoted on the invoice. Leeds did operate a small suppliers scheme, which generally meant that small suppliers, who are part of the scheme, were paid within 20 days or less;
- The value of Housing Benefit overpayments had continued to reduce, in line with a national trend, which resulted in an additional cost pressure. Less subsidy was paid on overpayments, but if the Council was subsequently able to recover the overpayment, then this mitigated the reduction;
- Outside Placement costs, projected to be overspent by £1.4m, was a recurring problem for a lot of local authorities, and there was an argument that this was a national service. It should certainly be properly funded nationally;
- Reference was made to school balances, and the problem which could occur when a secondary school converted to an academy. If that school had a deficit balance on conversion, this was effectively written-off, and the cost of the write-off had to be met from overall school

reserves – in other words, schools with surplus balances were effectively subsidising these schools in these circumstances;

- The effect of the economic downturn on the City Development directorate was commented on, with proposed staff savings via voluntary early retirements and the non-filling of vacancies. Following past difficulties with recruiting qualified planners, Members expressed the hope that this fact was being taken into account when dealing with staffing issues, in order that City Development was in a good position when the current recession eased. Reference was also made to the possibility of redeploying staff, or short-time working, as alternatives to redundancy.

RESOLVED – That, subject to the above comments, the report be noted.

83 Performance Report - Quarter 3 2008/09

Further to Minute No 33, 6th October 2008 and Minute No 62, 5th January 2009, the Head of Policy, Performance and Improvement submitted a report regarding the Quarter 3 performance indicators (PI) in respect of Central and Corporate Functions. The report charted progress against targets across a raft of individual PI's in this area, and highlighted areas of under-performance and actions being taken to remedy matters.

Alan Gay, Director of Resources, Helena Phillips and Peter Hutchinson, Resources Directorate, and Paddy Clarke, Chief Customer Services Officer, were present at the meeting and responded to Members' queries and comments. In brief summary, the main points of discussion were:-

- Council Call Centre – customer satisfaction – Councillor Bentley related the extremely frustrating experience she had encountered last Friday whilst acting as a 'mystery shopper' seeking assistance with a noise nuisance complaint, which she had already reported to the Chief Customer Services Officer. Other Members related similar experiences of members of the public having to contact them to get matters addressed after suffering similar frustration trying to get through to the service they required and then the delay in actually getting the problem solved.

Paddy Clarke indicated that he understood this frustration, and had investigated the specific problem referred to him by Councillor Bentley. The 0845 numbers were being phased out, and transferred to service specific so-called 'silver' numbers, and this should improve customer services;

- Councillor Atha related problems he and a constituent had experienced in trying to solve a noise nuisance complaint. To date, it had taken over 12 months, and the problem was still not resolved, in spite of the ALMO being aware, and this level of service was unacceptable;
- Concerns were expressed relating to PI's NI 66 – looked-after-children cases which were reviewed within the timescale, LSP-HW2bi – number of children look after and rate per 10,000 and NI 132 – timeliness of adult social care assessments. It was explained that although the Board had been provided with a summary of all the PI's, for

completeness, it was only the Central and Corporate suite of indicators set out on agenda pages 44-48 that fell within the remit of this particular Board. However, the PI's referred to would be subject to scrutiny by the relevant Boards;

- BP-09 - % of complaints to the Council that receive a substantive response within 15 working days or less – Members requested to be supplied with further, more detailed information, as soon as possible, regarding below target Departments and the reasons for under performance, including the apparent difficulties experienced with the Siebel recording system;
- Concern was expressed regarding the high number of blue indicators on the overall summary chart, indicating that currently the Council was unable to measure its performance in these areas. This did seem surprising, especially in regard to something like NI 152 – the number of working age people on out of work benefits;
- Comment was also made in respect of BP 31 – the number of major projects independently assessed by the Project Assurance Unit. It was explained that 'O' was the end of year target i.e. no major projects at risk of failing, and it was fully expected that the target would be met this year – hence the green traffic light indicator.

RESOLVED – That subject to the above comments and requests for further information, the report be received and noted.

84 Fair Play Partnership Diversity Champion Project

Further to Minute No 20, 8th September 2008, the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report advising the Board of the outcome of the equality and diversity assessment undertaken by the Fair Play Partnership.

Liz Bavidge, Fair Play Partnership, and Geoff Turnbull, of the Council's Equalities Unit, were present at the meeting and responded to Members' queries and comments. In brief summary, the main points of discussion were:-

- The results of the assessment exercise, appended to the report, highlighted the Council's strengths as well as identifying those areas where improvements could be made;
- The use of appropriate or inappropriate language might seem to be a superficial matter, but could reflect underlying attitudes;
- The potential for Leeds City Council, as one of the major organisations in the region, to be a catalyst for change and a major example of good practice by signing up for Member training in the areas identified in the report;
- The need for all Members to sign up to the training programme. Councillors were the leaders of the community and needed to be proactive in ensuring that the Council was at the forefront of championing equality, diversity and inclusion and tackling prejudice and discrimination in all its forms.

RESOLVED –

- (a) That the Board endorses the need for the development of an action plan to address the issues identified in the conclusions to the report;
- (b) That this be relayed to the Executive Member (Central and Corporate) by the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development.

(NB Councillors Lowe and Wadsworth left the meeting at 11.47 and 11.50 respectively, towards the end or at the conclusion of this item).

85 Sustainable Communities Act

The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a report regarding an invitation from the Central Government for local authorities to consider proposals for possible inclusion in a proposed Sustainable Communities Act. This wide ranging proposal provided an opportunity for local authorities to consider changes which would involve a change in legislation or the transfer of a function from one kind of authority to another, and possible examples were referred to in the report. The closing date for the submission of proposals was 31st July 2009.

Dylan Griffiths, Chief Executive's Department, attended the meeting and responded to Members' queries and comments. In brief summary, the main points of discussion were:-

- Reference was made to the need for sustainable funding streams for voluntary organisations, with minimum 3 year funding agreements. This might fall into the category of something which the Council already had control over locally, but Dylan Griffiths undertook to pursue this further individually with the Member who had raised it;
- The remit of Planning Inspectors, and the need to take into account local views, experience and expertise when reaching conclusions on planning inquiries. Again, Dylan Griffiths undertook to pursue this further with the Member who had raised it;
- The need for guidance from Council Officers on the areas which they felt the Council could most usefully make representations on;
- The proposed consultation process, and whether or not it included Area Committees – the view was expressed that it should;
- Other points discussed included the possibility of extending local authority powers in planning matters and traffic management issues, working with local volunteers (say on traffic speed reduction issues), 20mph zones around schools (and the time taken to introduce them) and lack of consultation/information exchange between Council Departments. It was acknowledged that not all these issues necessarily fell within the scope of the current consultation on a 'Sustainable Communities Act'.

RESOLVED – That subject to the above comments, the report be noted.

86 Work Programme

The Head of Scrutiny and Member Development submitted a copy of the Board's work programme, updated to reflect decisions taken at previous meetings, together with a relevant extract of the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the period 1st February to 31st May 2009 and the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Board held on 13th February 2009.

A Member raised the question of a possible future agenda item relating to the EASEL Project, and the scrutiny of contract lettings. Reference was made to this also being under consideration by the Corporate Governance and Audit Committee, and the need to avoid duplication of effort.

RESOLVED – That the report and the updated work programme be received and noted.

87 Date and Time of Next Meeting

Monday 6th April 2009, at 10.00 am (Pre-meeting 9.30 am).