

MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 1 June 2016 at 7.00 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Jamie Milne (Chair), Brenda Dacres, Amanda De Ryk, Ami Ibitson, Roy Kennedy and Crada Onuegbu

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Kevin Bonavia, Councillor Joe Dromey and Councillor Simon Hooks, Emma Aye-Kumi (Scrutiny Manger), Mark Humphreys (Group Finance Manager, Customer Services), John Johnstone (Group Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration), Robert Mellors (Group Finance Manager, Community Services), Selwyn Thompson (Head of Financial Services), Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Services), Lee Rankin (Complaints and Casework Review Officer).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Chris Barnham, Councillor Mark Ingleby and Councillor Jim Mallory

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2016

RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting held on 20 April 2016 be signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Final Outturn 2015/16

Selwyn Thompson, Head of Financial Services, presented the report. He flagged the Dedicated Schools Grant as an area for concern with potential further applications for licensed overspends from up to 9 other schools with deficit budgets.

He commented that where directorates had underspent, in many cases this was owing to managers holding vacancies in anticipation of further cuts in the offing.

The committee heard that the statement of accounts would be finalised shortly whereupon it would be audited and taken to the next meeting of Audit Panel.

The following key points were noted in discussion:

- Taxi costs were high and a review of transport for Adult Social Care and children with special educational needs was being carried out. In some cases taxis were necessary due to the needs of the individual child, or because of the location of the child, but the cost of provision and also demand management were being reviewed.

- Officers were confident that the shared IT service with Brent would improve the IT offering and that the benefits would be felt very soon, if not already.
- Officers gave assurances that although the rules governing S17 payments had been tightened, funds were being allocated where necessary and appropriate.
- In some areas holding onto vacancies was having a negative impact on service delivery and officers were having to work smarter and prioritise more rigorously.
- Secure remands came in under budget, however there was a risk of higher spend in 2016/17 as this was known to be a volatile area from a budget perspective.
- Spending was high for No Recourse to Public Funds cases as although the flow of new applicants had been curtailed, it would take time to process those already in the system.
- The Housing Revenue Account was ring-fenced and any surplus was reinvested. Less had been spent on repairs and maintenance than had been budgeted for since the majority of properties had by now been brought up to Decent Homes standard.
- New builds had been included in the projection of Council Tax collection rates

4. Complaints and Casework Review - Update

Ralph Wilkinson, Head of Public Services, gave a presentation outlining the reasons for and key aims of the review. He sought feedback from the Committee on the proposed timescales, in particular the proposal to keep the 10 day deadline for a response at the first stage in the revised complaints process.

A discussion followed in which the following key points were noted:

- One of the Councillors had experienced difficulties getting through to Envirocall. Officers responded that offering online complaints would help as it would remove the need to queue or complain only during opening hours.
- There was concern that the complaints process was being abused by call handlers dealing with parking issues, which should be dealt with through the statutory route after any informal representations are made to the council.
- The vexatious complainants policy needed to be properly implemented to free up time to devote to legitimate complaints. This should also cover re-complaining about an issue that has been resolved appropriately but not to the customer's satisfaction.
- In addition to a new policy, a new mindset was needed to ensure that all staff aimed to resolve complaints rather than process a complaint. An example was given of a man whose complaint didn't 'fit' any of the standard processes and he was left without an appropriate resolution that could have resulted in him being evicted. A revised process alone would not resolve

such a situation, it would require staff to think of solutions and fit the process to the solution rather than rigidly following process without reaching an acceptable solution.

- Bodies such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau, charities and pro bono legal centres generally help the complaints process, unless a complainant approaches multiple bodies in which case the response needs to be consistent and coordinated.
- The Committee did not reach a consensus on the appropriate response time for dealing with informal complaints. One member of the Committee felt that 10 days was the right for a response to a first stage complaint. Another member felt that 5 days would be more appropriate, and commented that time-sensitive issues should be fast-tracked.
- It was commented that the review did not look at customer services skills and that in some cases there was work to be done to ensure that responses were provided in an appropriate tone and with sensitivity.

5. Select Committee Work Programme

Officers reported that Lisa Bibbey had been appointed to support income generation work and that the Committee would receive a report back on her work.

6. Referrals to Mayor and Cabinet

None.

The meeting ended at 8:27pm.