

MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 26 October 2016 at 7:00pm

PRESENT: Councillors Jamie Milne (Chair), Brenda Dacres, Skip Amrani, Sue Hordijkenko, Jim Mallory.

APOLOGIES: Cllrs Chris Barnham and Mark Ingleby.

PRESENT: Janet Senior (Executive Director for Resources and Regeneration), Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Services), Robert Mellors (Group finance manager, Community Services) to introduce the report. Mark Humphreys (Group finance manager, Customer Services), Dave Richards (Group finance manager, CYP) and John Johnstone (Group finance manager, R&R), Barrie Neil (Head of Policy and Governance), and John Bardens (Scrutiny Manger).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2016

Resolved: that the minutes of the last meeting be signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

3. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

4. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

The Committee noted that saving L9 (local assemblies) had not been taken.

Resolved: the Committee noted the response

5. Annual complaints report

Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Service) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- 4,503 complaints and enquiries were received in 2015/16 – 14% fewer than the year before.
- Only the Community Services directorate received more complaints than last year. This is not too surprising given the high levels of customer interaction in this directorate.
- The top three complained about issues were highways, housing and council tax benefit, and housing advice and reviews.
- The Independent Adjudicator (IA) received 91 complaints in 2015/16 – 8 more than the year before. Given the size of the organisation and the number of services it provides, the IA did not consider the numbers to be extreme.
- Compensation was awarded in 18 cases in 2015/16 – totalling £26,523.

- The Local Government Ombudsman carried out 33 “detailed enquiries” in 2015/16 – upholding 17.

Ralph Wilkinson (Head of Public Service) answered questions from the committee. The following key points were noted:

- The significant reduction in complaints received by Lewisham Homes is down to the extra effort Lewisham Homes has put into customer service and complaint resolution. They’re no longer simply trying to justify their decision, they’re acknowledging any mistakes and focusing on how to put things right.
- The cost of complaints management in Lewisham is comparable to neighbouring boroughs.
- Around 95% of complaints received are recorded on i-casework – even with direct contact complaints the response gets logged on i-casework.
- The council monitors complaints by reason as opposed to geographic location or ward. Analysis of complaints by ward hasn’t identified any particular trends so far.

The committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- The committee praised the relatively low level of complaints received and the commented that the council are doing exceptionally well given the cuts in staff in recent years.

Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

6. Financial forecasts 2016/17

Robert Mellors (Group Finance Manager, Community Services) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- There is a forecast overspend of £9.6m against the directorates’ net general fund in 2016/17. This compares to an overspend of £6.3m the year before.
- There’s been more volatility and pressure in demand-led areas including, for example, in children’s and adults’ social care and temporary accommodation.
- The Dedicated School Grant is expected to be overspent by £0.7m.
- There’s a small surplus in the Housing Revenue Account of £0.2m, which will be reinvested to maintain a balanced budget position.
- The capital programme is being reviewed to produce a more realistic target – this will result in a reduced budget for this year.

Robert Mellors (Group Finance Manager, Community Services) and colleagues answered questions from the committee and the committee made a number of comments. The following key points were noted:

- Officers are concerned about the increasing number of schools in deficit this year. There are various reasons for this including reduced government funding and increased staffing costs.
- Schools in Lewisham are likely to lose a further £17m following the government’s introduction of a national funding formula for schools in April 2018.

- When a school overspends it has to come up with a budget plan showing how they will recover their budget position within three years – five years for a secondary school.
- There are trigger points in place for schools' budgets now. There are a number of stages that allow the council to identify and work with the school to identify any potential overspends early on.
- The collection levels for business rates are around 99.5% - this is of the money due, not the number of businesses.
- Some extra funding was made available when the home care contracts were being re-let – so that travel time and living wage could be covered. But this was at 2015 rates and no more has been put in for 2016. In previous years, there's been slack in the budget to cover increases like this, but there's no slack this year. There is no plan to reduce levels of care, however. Savings will be found from underspends elsewhere.
- Extra spending has been necessary in adult social care and the customer services directorate. For example, more waste collections have been needed for the increasing number of properties in the borough. This is something officers were aware of but are monitoring before budgeting for it.
- Income is project to be below budget for the newly establish enforcement services. But this is mainly because it's a new service and the business model and growth forecasts are still being refined.

Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

7. Select Committee Work Programme

Resolved: the committee agreed the work programme.

8. Referrals to Mayor and Cabinet

There were no referrals.

The meeting ended at 8:05pm.