

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 4 July 2013 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT: Councillor Roger Hickford – Chairman
Councillor Sue Ellington – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:	Alison Elcox	Jose Hales
	Lynda Harford	Bunty Waters
	Aidan Van de Weyer	Val Barrett

Councillors Val Barrett and Aidan Van De Weyer were in attendance as substitutes for Councillors David Bard and Bridget Smith respectfully.

Councillors Tumi Hawkins, Mark Howell, Cicely Murfitt and David Whiteman-Downes were in attendance, by invitation.

Also in attendance was Steve Wilson, Regional Director of Mears Group PLC.

Officers:	Graham Aisthorpe-Watts	Democratic Services Team Leader
	Gareth Bell	Communications Manager
	Alex Colyer	Executive Director, Corporate Services
	Mike Hill	Health and Environmental Services Director
	Stephen Hills	Affordable Homes Director

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors David Bard, Douglas de Lacey and Bridget Smith.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2013 were **AGREED** and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

Update on the Mechanical Biological Treatment Processing Plant

Councillor Roger Hickford, Chairman, reported that a letter had been received by the County Council, further to minute number 61 of the previous meeting, explaining the current circumstances with regard to the Mechanical Biological Treatment Processing Plant. Members agreed that the committee had done all it could in respect of this issue, particularly in view of the fact that the Plant operated in accordance with a contractual arrangement between AmeyCespa and the County Council.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received.

4. YOUTH COUNCIL REPORT

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **NOTED** a report by the South Cambridgeshire Youth Council, which updated Members on the Youth Council's progress to date.

Councillor Sue Ellington, Vice-Chairman, sought clarification as to how well the Youth Council was functioning from the perspective of Youth Councillors and whether they felt they had enough access to information, officers and meetings of the Council. Graham Aisthorpe-Watts, Democratic Services Team Leader, agreed to investigate this issue further and provide an update to the next meeting. Councillor Ellington also indicated that she would meet with the Chairman of the Youth Council.

5. MEARS ANNUAL REPORT

Mr Steve Wilson, Regional Director of Mears Group PLC, was welcomed to the meeting by the Chairman and commenced by providing Members with a brief background of the company, stating that Mears was the biggest social housing maintenance and repairs company in the country. He then took the committee through the performance review document for April 2012 to March 2013, a copy of which had been circulated.

Mr Wilson reported that 100% of the Council's staff had been transferred to Mears when it was initially awarded the contract in 2012. A change in culture for those staff and necessary up-skilling in certain areas of expertise, together with a number of sickness absences and disciplinary cases, he claimed, fundamentally led to challenges for Mears which impacted its performance in South Cambridgeshire at the early stage of the contract.

Mears had undertaken more than 13,000 repairs in the first year of its contract and refurbished 189 homes. Most of the Council's targets had been exceeded, with the following key performance indicators falling short of target: -

- emergency repairs completed on time (99.70% performance against 100% target);
- urgent repairs completed on time (94.92% target against 95% target);
- voids – completion on time (94.86% against 95% target);
- quality inspections – repairs (81.71% against 95% target).

The committee was satisfied that the first three key performance indicators listed above were short of target by a very fine margin, but sought an explanation as to why the fourth indicator had more significantly underperformed. Mr Wilson explained that Mears had not carried out enough inspections, which he apologised for, but would be looking to improve performance in this area in 2013/14.

Members noted that one of the main challenges facing Mears both nationally and in relation to South Cambridgeshire was the number of void or empty properties, which were on the increase. If the rate of voids accelerated then this would be even more of a challenge going forward, although it was emphasised that additional resources could be brought in if necessary. In answer to a question about resources and demand in other parts of the country, the committee was reassured that each Mears branch operated as an independent business unit responding to local needs and did not redistribute resources to or from other branches.

Members highlighted that the performance report did not include reference to complaints and questioned the volume of complaints for the reporting period, together with the process that Mears followed for complaints. Mr Wilson reported that there were two main categories for complaints, namely service requests and formal complaints. Service requests would be dealt with and resolved at the time they were reported. Formal complaints were logged on a Formal Complaints Register and reported to the Council. A supervisor or manager would then be assigned to investigate the complaint. Mears had a dedicated person at the South Cambridgeshire branch dealing with complaints,

with calls handled on a 24 hour basis, and a low level of formal complaints had been received in the reporting period.

A further question was asked about quality control and the risk of reported faults or requests for maintenance works being ignored. Staff at Mears' contact centre were able to diagnose any reported problems and correctly categorise them in the first instance to ensure that necessary works could take place. Mr Wilson made it clear that it would not be in Mears' commercial interest to turn down a request for repair if it was necessary, but at the same time had an obligation to safeguard the Council's resources. An example was cited of mould in a resident's bathroom, which in many cases was preventable. Mears would offer advice and guidance on how to prevent the reoccurrence of mould, such as introducing more ventilation into the room, rather than undertake unnecessary repairs.

Discussion also ensued on the suppliers used by the Council for kitchens and other such products, in comparison to those used nationally by Mears and some of the problems this sometimes caused. It was noted that the Council could review its supplier at any time, but the products it bought from the current supplier were of a superior quality for a competitive price.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **NOTED** the report.

6. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered the Council's Communications Strategy for 2013/14, a copy of which was attached to the agenda.

Councillor David Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, presented the Strategy and outlined its vision, together with the Council's key methods of communication.

In answer to a range of questions by Members, the following points were noted: -

- the Local Plan was a good example of how well the Council consulted and engaged with people in the district. In excess of 35,000 responses to the Local Plan had been received as part of the consultation, either via the formal consultation process, participation at public meetings, through direct discussion with officers at workshops or by letter, telephone or email;
- acknowledging that not everyone would be happy with the outcomes of some of the Council's big decisions, such as the Local Plan, it was important to be clear about and explain why certain decisions were taken. The Council's in-house magazine was a very good way of achieving this due to the fact that it was distributed to all residents in the district;
- residents would be asked in the next edition of the Council's magazine for their input and ideas to assist the shaping of future editions, so that it continued to include information that they would find of use and interest;
- the Council's magazine was produced on a quarterly basis, which was in keeping with Government guidance to prevent unfair competition for local media;
- the use of acronyms and jargon was something that the Communications Team would be discouraging as much as possible across all of its key methods of communication;
- a business case was currently being developed to make use of information screens at South Cambridgeshire Hall, rather than spend time and resources on design work for posters and other promotional materials;
- media training for Members would be offered around their availability, but it was

- noted that these sessions worked better in smaller groups;
- the Communications Team monitored and responded to any messages sent to the Council's Twitter feed. A future model for social media was currently being developed;
 - the Council had systems in place to enable it to respond to any urgent issue, from a media perspective, 24 hours of the day, seven days a week.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **NOTED** the Communications Strategy for 2013/14.

7. AMENDMENTS TO THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

Consideration was given to a report which suggested a number of amendments to the Council's Constitution further to the decision by the Council at its Annual General Meeting on 23 May 2013 to abolish the Sustainable Energy Committee and introduce a second scrutiny and overview committee called the Partnerships Review Committee.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **RECOMMENDED** that the Council: -

- (a) Approves the revised version of Article 6 of the Constitution, as set out in Appendix A of the report.
- (b) Approves the revised version of the Scrutiny and Overview Procedure Rules, as set out in Appendix B of the report.
- (c) Approves the amendment of those sections of the Constitution referred to in paragraph 10.1 of the report to reflect the establishment of the Partnerships Review Committee as a second scrutiny and overview committee.
- (d) Amends the Member role descriptions under Part 5 of the Constitution relating to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee so that they apply to both the Partnerships Review Committee and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.
- (e) Allocates the Partnerships Review Committee as the authority's Crime and Disorder Committee.

8. CORPORATE FORWARD PLAN

A copy of the Council's Corporate Forward Plan was considered, which gave notice of key decisions scheduled to be taken by the authority between 27 June 2013 and 23 January 2014.

Members were keen to consider an item on the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme at a future meeting. A review of the 2013/14 Scheme was due for review by Cabinet on 12 September 2013 and the Scheme for 2014/15 was scheduled to be considered by Cabinet on 14 November 2013 and Full Council on 23 January 2014. It was noted that a workshop and information session was being arranged for all Members of the Council around welfare reform, which would include the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme. Members agreed, therefore, that it was not necessary at this stage to add an item to its work programme on the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **AGREED** to consider an item on the 'Community Infrastructure Levy: Charging Schedule' at its next meeting prior to consideration of this issue by Full Council on 28 November 2013.

9. WORK PROGRAMME 2013/14

Consideration was given to a report which provided the Scrutiny and Overview Committee with an opportunity to plan its work programme for 2013/14.

Discussion ensued on the Customer Contact Centre, a twelve month review of which was currently scheduled as an item for the committee's meeting on 16 January 2014. It was reported that monthly performance information on the Customer Contact Centre was available and that the latest report would be sent to all Members of this committee in due course. Members agreed that it may not be necessary to consider a twelve month review if the monthly reports showed that the Contact Centre was performing well.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **AGREED**: -

- (a) To establish an Informal Working Group to consider Performance Indicators in advance of the submission of the quarterly performance monitoring report to the meeting of the Committee on 5 September 2013, taking into consideration the recommendations of a previous Scrutiny Review into performance management.
- (b) To request a report for consideration at the meeting of the Committee on 5 September 2013 on the current situation with regard to shared equity schemes in South Cambridgeshire from the perspective of difficulties experienced by residents when seeking to leave such schemes, to ascertain whether any in depth scrutiny or overview is necessary at this stage.
- (c) To request an update from Mears in six months on its performance, including information on complaints.

10. MONITORING THE EXECUTIVE

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee **APPOINTED** Scrutiny Monitors to Cabinet Portfolios, as follows: -

Cabinet Portfolio	Scrutiny Monitor
Leader of the Council	Lynda Harford
Corporate and Customer Services	Alison Elcox
Environmental Services	David Bard
Finance and Staffing	Roger Hickford
Housing	Bunty Waters
Northstowe	Sue Ellington
Planning and Economic Development	Bridget Smith
Planning Policy Localism	Bridget Smith

11. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The following dates for future meetings of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee were **NOTED**: -

- 5 September 2013
- 7 November 2013
- 16 January 2014
- 11 February 2014
- 3 April 2014

In discussing the start time of meetings, it was **AGREED** that meetings should not always be held at the usual time of 6pm. Members would be consulted in due course on their preferred start time for future meetings.

The Meeting ended at 8.30 p.m.
