Scrutiny Review of Performance Management

November 2010

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The scrutiny and overview committee (SOC) acts as a local watchdog for the people of South Cambridgeshire, looking at how to improve local services, whether or not they are provided by the Council. This work is designed to complement the work done by the council's cabinet. It provides a forum for non-cabinet councillors to use their knowledge and skills to benefit residents.

The committee can also challenge decisions made by cabinet members, or help them to develop new policies. This work demonstrates the council's commitment to openness and accountability.

SOC often sets up small task and finish groups to look at an issue in depth. These groups are usually cross-party and often involve other participants, such as residents or representatives of partner organisations.

In July 2010 a cross-party task and finish group was set up to examine how performance is managed at the council and how it could be managed more effectively.

The following Members made up the task and finish group:

Cllr Richard Barrett

Cllr John Batchelor (chair)

Cllr Jose Hales

Cllr Lynda Harford

The Policy and Performance Portfolio Holder was copied on all documentation and had an open invitation to meetings.

Scrutiny review of performance management

In the Summer of 2010, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee agreed that it was time to review the usefulness of CorVu, the performance management software that had been introduced two years earlier. They had concerns about the quantity and quality of data on CorVu, and about whether it was being used to drive improvement.

They also felt that a review of performance management more generally at the council would be timely in view of the changing national economic picture, the reduction of national performance targets and external inspection and the arrival of a new chief executive at South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC).

The review was conducted by a small, cross-party task and finish group.

They found that many aspects of performance management systems were working extremely well at SCDC. As a result many services were performing in the top quartile, despite a comparatively lean workforce and low rate of council tax. They found that there was some scope for building on this good practice and put forward twelve recommendations which the Cabinet accepted in November 2010.

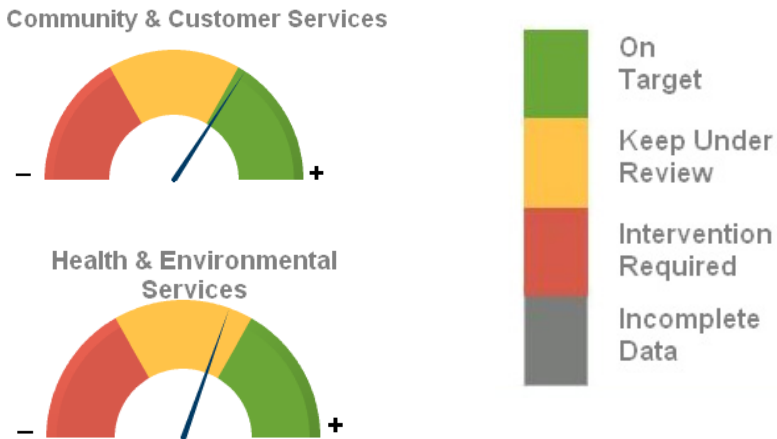The Scrutiny and Overview Committee will monitor progress on the recommendation during 2011/12.

CorVu and performance indicators

Visiting other councils, the task and finish group found that SCDC is regarded as having achieved more with CorVu than most. Officers from around the county respected the expertise built up at SCDC and were seeking to learn from it.

The task and finish group was impressed by CorVu as a powerful information tool and yet concerned about its complexity. They felt that, due to the volume of data recorded on CorVu, it may be difficult to 'see the wood for the trees'. Staff found inputting time-consuming, leaving little capacity for target-setting, profiling targets, setting intervention points or identifying redundant performance indicators.

However, plans were already underway to reduce the number of performance indicators locally and nationally which would free up capacity for more than inputting.

Community & Customer Services

Health & Environmental Services

On Target

Keep Under Review

Intervention Required

Incomplete Data

Recommendation 1: that staff be trained in the importance of profiling and SMART* target-setting to ensure that CorVu reports contain accurate, concise information

*Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound

The group saw no evidence of data quality controls, such as the system at Huntingdonshire DC whose process for verifying data quality had been praised in an Audit Commission inspection. The County Council also had a workflow system for this.

Recommendation 2: that a process be developed for ensuring the quality of data recorded in CorVu

Performance monitoring and reporting

At the councils visited by the task and finish group, indicators were reported to portfolio holders by exception and at one, only the most strategic indicators were reported. At SCDC the group found that some portfolio holders received quarterly reports on all indicators in their service area while others looked at only strategic issues and

those causing concern.

Recommendation 3: that portfolio holders give consideration to reducing the number of indicators they monitor, focusing on strategic issues, outcomes (not outputs) that matter to residents and areas of under-performance

The incoming Chief Executive said that she would like to see performance information being expressed more clearly. For example on the website and in reception there could be a record of performance in the top five issues of concern to residents. This would also help to recognise staff achievements and contribute to a strong performance culture.

Recommendation 4: that residents and partners be regularly consulted on which services matter most to them, so that performance information can be provided on those services

Celebrating excellent performance

The Chief Executive said that, while the Council had won some awards, there may be scope for more actively entering for awards in priority areas and for ensuring that they are better publicised. There was also a need for portfolio holders to help in recognising and

celebrating successful performance as well as providing constructive challenge.

The staff appraisal system was seen as an opportunity to recognise good performance and motivate staff. However, while SCDC had achieved Investor in People status, records showed that only 69% of staff had received appraisals by 31 May 2010.

Recommendation 5: that mechanisms be developed for recognising staff achievements, placing an emphasis on timely staff appraisals and the role of portfolio holders in celebrating success

Addressing poor performance

At the councils visited by the task and finish group, under-performance was addressed through various collaborative, no-blame forums where the objective was to identify the reasons and develop solutions. At SCDC, poor performance was addressed by a Performance Improvement Group (PIG), an officer-based forum chaired by the Corporate Manager for Community and Customer Services. The task and finish group was very impressed by the potential presented by the PIG and wanted to see it being used more effectively to champion success and share learning.

They agreed that every corporate area should be represented at a senior level with substitutes sent if necessary. The PIG's position within the management and decision-making structure was thought to be unclear; and communication into and out of the group appeared to rely on informal channels. The Chief Executive was considering whether minutes and recommendations could be reported to the Executive Management Team.

Recommendation 6: that the status, role and reporting lines of the Performance Information Group be clarified and expanded to more actively champion excellent performance and to collaboratively address poor performance

Service Planning

The task and finish group discussed the service planning cycle on all three of the visits to other councils and found a broadly similar picture to that at SCDC, but with two notable differences. Other councils placed more emphasis on public consultation, involving residents in setting priorities at the outset and/or at the draft corporate plan stage. At SCDC this consultation seemed to be later and less extensive.

Recommendation 7: that the Council develops a robust process for consulting residents regarding service and spending priorities in the service planning process, and identifying residents' top five issues of concern

Secondly the input of front-line staff was in September/October at SCDC, whereas other councils found it more constructive to involve front-line staff later on, once priorities had been shaped by residents' views and the financial settlement. SCDC's

incoming Chief Executive was very much in favour of involving all staff throughout the process.

Recommendation 8: that front-line staff are involved throughout the service planning process so that they can help develop ways to respond to residents' feedback and the financial situation

Performance Culture

The task and finish group was very interested in the strong performance culture at Fenland District Council. They heard about

a culture of 'one team' rather than silo-working; an atmosphere of trust, collaboration and no-blame. Silos had been broken down through a number of factors, such as cross-council project working, and allocating portfolios to corporate priorities, not departments. Successful performance was very actively celebrated and staff motivation was high according to staff surveys.

While some of Fenland District Council's techniques were used at SCDC, the group wanted to see more being used to develop an even stronger performance culture. They were pleased that the incoming Chief Executive intended to place a high priority on this.

Project Management

On visits to other councils, the group had observed that project work had the potential for bringing together staff from across the council on corporate initiatives. This drew together the widest expertise, exposed ideas to greater challenge, improved cross-council learning and motivated and developed ambitious staff. The task and finish group wanted to see SCDC making use of project teams in the same way.

Recommendation 9: that the project management manual be amended to recommend the use of cross-council project teams

South Cambridgeshire District Council

Performance Management Manual

July 2010

Performance Manual

SCDC's performance manual, launched in July 2010, was found to be a comprehensive document setting out the performance management tools, techniques and approaches available to officers and members.

Other councils had much shorter versions which covered the basic elements such as the service planning cycle, target-setting and staff appraisals in an accessible format for staff and contractors.

Recommendation 10: that the performance manual be presented on Insite and via CorVu in a hyperlinked format that aids navigation

Recommendation 11: that consideration be given to producing a summary performance manual for staff, members and contractors

Systems Thinking

The task and finish group researched systems thinking - an approach to performance improvement which debunks the traditional top-down, command-and-control approach. It brings together many of the techniques set out in SCDC's performance manual such as process mapping, consultation, stakeholder analysis and business process re-engineering. It also reflects the basic tenet of Customer Service Excellence: taking the service user as the starting point for (re)designing services.

The group heard that a small pilot exercise in the Planning Service had led to an improvement in the planning application registration process; and the work would continue alongside the work involved in achieving Customer Service Excellence accreditation.

Recommendation 12: that the success of the systems thinking pilot in the Planning service be evaluated and that consideration be given to promoting the use of this and other performance management tools throughout the Counci

Acknowledgements and Thanks

The task and finish group offers sincere thanks to officers and councillors at Fenland, Huntingdonshire and Welwyn Hatfield district councils. Thanks also to the many SCDC officers and members whose views and experiences also helped to shape this review.

How to get involved

The process of scrutiny is strengthened by involving partners, residents, service users and so on. They bring expertise, local knowledge, fresh ideas and an element of external challenge.

If you would like to know more, please ring the Scrutiny Development Officer, Jackie Sayers on 01954 713451 or email scrutiny@scambs.gov.uk