



South Cambridgeshire District Council

Scrutiny and Overview Annual Report 2013/14

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FOREWORD

Foreword to be inserted by the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and the Chairman of the Partnerships Review Committee.

What is Scrutiny and Overview?

The aim of the Council's scrutiny and overview function is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to investigate whether South Cambridgeshire District Council's policies and services are meeting the needs of local people.

Scrutiny and overview committees do not have any decision-making powers, but they do have the power to influence and make evidence-based recommendations to decision-takers. Such recommendations could be informed via performance monitoring, best practice, expert advice, or liaison with stakeholders, partners, service users or members of the public. Scrutiny and overview committees are often described as a Council's 'critical friend'.

Scrutiny and overview committees can also challenge executive decisions, taken by Cabinet, individual Portfolio Holders and occasionally Chief Officers. The Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee or any five Councillors can, in certain circumstances, 'call-in' a decision that has been made but not yet implemented in accordance with the Council's Scrutiny and Overview Committee Procedure Rules. The Committee is then able to interview the relevant member of Cabinet or officers, examine the evidence and suggest improvements to the decision, or refer it to Full Council for further consideration.

Effective scrutiny provides an additional, independent resource for reviewing decisions and policies without being divisive or confrontational. Councillors on scrutiny and overview committees are in a unique position to influence policy and contribute to the decision-making process.

When working well, scrutiny and overview can help to:

- get to the heart of issues
- develop new ideas
- engage and provide a voice for service users
- improve decision-making
- strengthen accountability
- contribute to policy development
- monitor and improve services

Scrutiny and Overview at South Cambridgeshire District Council

South Cambridgeshire District Council has two scrutiny and overview committees; the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and the Partnerships Review Committee, both of which consist of nine non-executive District Councillors drawn from the political groups in the same proportion as they are represented on the Council as a whole.

The Partnerships Review Committee was introduced to the Council's committee structure on 23 May 2013 at the Annual General Meeting of the Council, where the size of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee was reduced from thirteen to nine. The Partnerships Review Committee has a specific remit to scrutinise, challenge and hold decision takers to account on issues relating to the work of those organisations in the area of South Cambridgeshire, which may or may not involve formal partnerships. Whilst the Partnerships Review Committee's work is mainly externally focussed, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee retains its role of holding executive decision takers to account and centres on those issues considered as 'internal'.

The following Councillors served on the respective committees for the 2013/14 municipal year:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Chairman: Councillor Roger Hickford
Vice-Chairman: Councillor Sue Ellington
Councillors:
David Bard
Alison Elcox
Jose Hales
Lynda Harford
Douglas de Lacey
Bridget Smith
Bunty Waters

The following Councillors were available as substitutes during the year:

Councillors:
Val Barrett (Substitute until 28 November 2014)
Kevin Cuffley (Substitute from 28 November 2013)
Neil Davies
Andrew Fraser
Roger Hall
Tumi Hawkins
Robin Page
Deborah Roberts
Neil Scarr
Edd Stonham
Aidan Van De Weyer

Partnerships Review Committee

Chairman: Councillor Ben Shelton
Vice-Chairman: Councillor James Hockney
Councillors:
Alison Elcox
Andrew Fraser
Jose Hales
Roger Hall
Janet Lockwood
Neil Scarr
Tim Scott (Member from 28 November 2013)
Aidan Van De Weyer (Member until 28 November 2013)

The following Councillors were available as substitutes during the year:

Councillors:
David Bard
Neil Davies
Tumi Hawkins
Douglas de Lacey
Deborah Roberts
Edd Stonham
Bunty Waters
Aidan Van De Weyer (Substitute from 28 November 2013)
Susan van der Ven

How do the scrutiny and overview committees decide what to scrutinise?

The scrutiny and overview committees set their own work programmes and topic suggestions can be gained from numerous sources, including: -

- individual Councillors
- local petitions
- partner organisations
- officers
- residents
- Portfolio Holder Scrutiny Monitors
- the Council's Forward Plan of key decisions

Programme planning takes place at the start of the municipal year and the committee's work programmes are considered as standing items at every meeting of each committee. Additional items for consideration will usually be added during the year as and when they arise, which can be a mixture of one-off topics and items that may require more in-depth review.

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the two scrutiny and overview committees usually meet with officers from Democratic Services to agree upon the agenda content and running order prior to each of their meetings.

The Partnerships Review Committee and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee have both recently adopted a new work programme prioritisation tool, attached at Appendix A to this report. This enables both committees to assess those items that have been suggested or put forward and ascertain whether they should be included in their work programmes, as well as determine their level of priority.

Items included in the work programme usually go through an initial scoping process. This provides an opportunity to consider the rationale behind the Partnerships Review Committee or the Scrutiny and Overview Committee looking into the particular issue, the purpose or objective of scrutiny involvement and a methodology or approach that will be followed for the piece of work.

Scrutiny Reviews

Scrutiny Reviews provide the Partnerships Review Committee and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee with opportunities to consider specific issues in more detail, sometimes outside of formal meetings involving a small group of Councillors with experience, expertise or an interest in the subject being reviewed. The Partnerships Review Committee or Scrutiny and Overview Committee will ultimately agree whether or not a Scrutiny Review on a particular issue will be undertaken. Any initial requests for Scrutiny Reviews will go through a scoping process to outline terms of reference for the review and identify how the piece of work should be conducted. Reviews could be undertaken through one of the following options:

Scrutiny Review by the Full Committee

A Scrutiny Review by the full Partnerships Review Committee or Scrutiny and Overview Committee could take place when all Councillors on the relevant committee express an interest in scrutinising a specific issue. These meetings would normally be held in public with the review culminating in formal recommendations to a decision taker.

Scrutiny Review by a Task and Finish Group

Task and Finish Groups are typically established when significant research and evidence gathering is necessary to assist in the production of a comprehensive report substantiating a set of recommendations to decision takers. An appropriate timetable would be agreed at the commencement of the Scrutiny Review, with most Task and Finish Groups aiming to have completed their reviews by six months. These meetings are usually not held in public.

Scrutiny Review by an Informal Working Group

Informal Working Groups with relevant officers, Portfolio Holders or external parties are an effective means of undertaking Scrutiny Reviews that do not require significant research or evidence and can be completed in a much shorter timescale. Formal recommendations can still come out of a review carried out by Informal Working Groups, but a comprehensive report is usually unnecessary. The informal format of these meetings would mean that they are not held in public.

Scrutiny Review by a Focus Group

A Focus Group could carry out a Scrutiny Review on any issue that requires an urgent response. It would take the shape of a significant fact-finding exercise, taking up one or two full days in an intensive session with very little research required and report its outcomes to relevant officers or decision takers.

Work of the Partnerships Review Committee during 2013/14

The Partnerships Review Committee met as a full committee on five occasions in the 2013/14 Municipal Year, as follows:

11 July 2013

Local Neighbourhood Policing Panel

Chris Savage, Inspector from Cambridgeshire Police, and Mike Hill, the Council's Director of Health and Environmental Services were in attendance for this item and outlined the current situation regarding the Local Neighbourhood Policing Panel meetings. The Committee put forward its views on proposals for re-formatting the meetings in order to inspire those members of the community who did not engage in the Panel meetings and encourage both District and County Councillors to attend.

Inspector Savage reported that engagement with young people in Histon and Impington had been particularly successful, with 250 responses received to a Panel survey. Students at Cottenham Village College had requested that communications be made to them via their Twitter accounts, rather than face-to-face dialogue with Police Community Support Officers. Dedicated youth workers also engaged with the students to gain wider views on issues that might affect them.

The Partnerships Review Committee asked Inspector Savage and Mr Hill to:

- (a) review the Social Media Strategy to include Facebook as a means of communication between the Police and public;
- (b) rotate the times and venues of Panel meetings;
- (c) share best practice between the individual Panels;
- (d) invite the Youth Council to become involved in future Panel meetings
- (e) use the experience gained from the Waterbeach and Landbeach Action for Youth meetings to set up similar opportunities for young people in other areas of the district;
- (f) Include an item on Neighbourhood Panels in the next available *South Cambs Magazine*;
- (g) Encourage further engagement with District and County Councillors.

11 October 2013

Health and Wellbeing – 11 October 2013

Mike Hill, the Council's Director of Health and Environmental Services, presented a briefing note to the Committee which provided background information on the following aspects of the health and wellbeing agenda:

- national health structures including Clinical Commissioning Groups, Local Commissioning Groups and Healthwatch;
- Health and Wellbeing Boards;
- Local Health Partnerships.

Mr Hill also explained the roles of the numerous bodies established locally following changes to national health structures as a result of the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

The Committee was provided with a health profile of South Cambridgeshire for 2013, which stated that the health of people in South Cambridgeshire was generally better than the national average. A significant amount of data on a range of issues relating to health and wellbeing in the district was available via the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, but the following were highlighted as the main issues for South Cambridgeshire:

- an increased demand for services from older people due to an increase in population for that particular demographic;
- approximately 33% of people over the age of 65 lived in homes that were considered as not meeting decent homes standards. A key issue for South Cambridgeshire was that some people were capital rich, but revenue poor;
- the district was currently below the county average for people over 65 getting flu vaccinations;
- fuel poverty was an issue for people generally within the district;
- the travelling community were reluctant to access health services and as a result had a relatively low life expectancy;
- migrant workers were involved in more road traffic accidents than the settled population;
- the relatively high number of road deaths;
- the relatively high incidences of malignant melanoma.

Members were asked to engage with their local residents to establish main issues of concern regarding health and wellbeing in their areas.

Equalities Partnership Working

The Committee considered a report from Paul Williams, the Council's Equality and Diversity Officer, which set out how South Cambridgeshire District Council was sharing equality and diversity services, and best practice, with other local authorities.

The Council's Equality and Diversity Officer had been providing consultancy and support services to Uttlesford District Council and Cambridge City Council. Feedback from both local authorities was positive and the current arrangements worked well for all concerned as Uttlesford District Council and Cambridge City Council received a good level of service with tangible outcomes and South Cambridgeshire District Council generated an income. Approximately 25% of the Equality and Diversity Officer's time was taken up by the other two local authorities and this was reviewed in line with local commitments and projects.

Andrew Lansley MP

Andrew Lansley, Member of Parliament for Cambridgeshire South, attended a question and answer session with the Committee on a range of issues, including:

- the cost of living and the gap between those less and better well-off;
- Doctor waiting times and changes to public health provision;
- the government's 'help to buy' scheme;
- the Greater Cambridge City Deal;
- affordable housing in small villages and larger developments;
- the A14 improvement scheme;
- the rollout of superfast broadband.

20 November 2013

Greater Cambridge City Deal

Councillors Tim Bick, Leader of Cambridge City Council, Martin Curtis, Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council and Ray Manning, Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council, gave the Committee a presentation on the proposed Greater Cambridge City Deal.

During discussion Members made a number of points, including:

- the opportunity to borrow more money to accelerate the building of additional council houses would be welcomed;
- the Greater Cambridge City Deal was the largest proposal of its type to be considered by the Government;
- local Members of Parliament were in favour of the proposal;
- all three Councils had been involved in the proposal, together with representatives from Cambridge University and the Local Enterprise Partnership;
- part of the Deal was to enable the lifting of the Housing Revenue Account cap to enable funds to be raised to meet housing need;
- there was real concern that businesses would move out of the area if infrastructure was not improved;
- if the Greater Cambridge City Deal was to proceed, an announcement would be made in the Autumn Statement. Shared governance arrangements would also have to be created, consisting of members from the three participating authorities plus the Local Enterprise Partnership and Cambridge University.

The Committee outlined its support of the Greater Cambridge City Deal proposals.

21 January 2014

Youth Issues

The Committee facilitated a discussion item on youth issues and the services provided to young people in South Cambridgeshire. Attendees included Sarah Ferguson, Service Director for Enhanced and Preventative Services at Cambridgeshire County Council, who reported that the County Council had been reviewing the way it provided Children's Centre services, in order to make savings of £1.5 million in 2014-15 and deliver services more efficiently. A formal public consultation had taken place between 25 November 2013 and 13 January 2014, focussing on services for children aged 0-5 years. Proposals were to move from 40 individually managed Children's Centres to a more flexible and targeted model based around 12 clusters. In addition, it was noted that the County Council was looking at integrating the planning and commissioning of services, and was working closely with the new health commissioners regarding the commissioning and integration of relevant services.

Representatives from Swavesey Village College, Romsey Mill and the Shelford and Stapleford Youth Initiative also attended the meeting and provided the Committee with brief presentations on the role of their organisations and how they provided services to young people in the district.

Outside Bodies

The Council's Civic Affairs Committee agreed on 5 December 2013 agreed that update reports from those Members appointed to outside bodies should provide written update reports to the Partnerships Review Committee. Updates on the following outside bodies were received by the Committee:

- Cambridge Airport Consultative Committee;
- Linton Community Sports Committee, now known as the Linton Voluntary Community Business and Premises Group;
- County Advisory Group on Archives and Local Studies.

11 April 2014

(Information to be added following the meeting of the Committee on 11 April 2014)

Work of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee during 2013/14

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee met as a full committee on six occasions in the 2013/14 Municipal Year, as follows:

4 July 2013

Youth Council

The Committee considered an update report from the South Cambridgeshire Youth Council, which included updates on the following:

- local schools had been surveyed to capture best practice from across the district. A final report would be produced for submission to the providers of the new school for Northstowe;
- preparation for the Park Life event in August had begun, together with the launch of its health and wellbeing campaign;
- the '10 sofas, 10 minutes' initiative had been launched by four Youth Councillors attending the fourth Cambridge Conversations event at Emmanuel College;
- the Youth Council would attend the Summer Business Forum in Cambourne in early July to discuss employment opportunities for young people as well as help young people understand what employers need from them;
- work on next year's election had begun as it needed to be timed with the South Cambs Magazine to ensure that all young people across the district had the opportunity to volunteer to be a Youth Councillor.

Mears Annual Report

Steve Wilson, Regional Director of Mears Group PLC, attended the meeting and presented an annual report of performance for April 2012 – March 2013.

Mears Group PLC was the biggest social housing maintenance and repairs company in the country and Mr Wilson reported that 100% of the Council's respective staff had been transferred to Mears when it was initially awarded the contract in 2012. 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 and would be looking to improve performance in this area in 2013/14.

In terms of complaints monitoring the Committee noted 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.

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.

Communications Strategy

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

The Committee noted the following points:

- 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;
- 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;
- the Communications Team monitored and responded to any messages sent to the Council's Twitter feed;
- 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.

5 September 2013

Youth Council update

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee considered a briefing note on South Cambridgeshire Youth Council's progress to date, which included updates on its involvement with the following:

- the Park Life event;
- the Summer Business Forum;
- next year's Youth Council elections;
- a schools survey report.

It was also noted that two Youth Councillors had spent two weeks at the Council during July as part of their work experience, which provided them with a valuable insight into the work and responsibilities of the Council within the Northstowe team and Housing team.

Position Statement: Finance, Performance and Risk

Councillor Simon Edwards, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Staffing presented a report which provided a statement on the Council's position with regard to its General Fund, Housing Revenue Account and capital budgets, corporate objectives, performance indicators and strategic risks.

Councillor Edwards highlighted one area of concern which related to Non-Domestic Rates and the number of appeals that were with the Valuation Officer awaiting resolution. He reported that the Council's Executive Director, Corporate Services, had conveyed the Council's concerns to the Valuation Officer about the length of time it took to resolve these appeals.

Councillor Roger Hickford, Chairman, reported that he had attended an informal meeting with the Vice-Chairman and the Council's Policy and Performance Manager to discuss the current Corvu performance management system and the number of indicators that were monitored. The Committee was reminded that the Corvu system was introduced approximately five years ago when over 200 statutory national performance indicators had to be monitored and reported, together with some additional local indicators, and had been purposely set up to manage that. Over the last three years the national performance indicators had been abolished and the authority now had far fewer performance indicators in place, following the deletion of many which did not add value to the Council's activities.

Community Infrastructure Levy

Councillor Nick Wright, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development, presented a report on the Council's latest position with regard to the Community Infrastructure Levy. He highlighted work undertaken to date and next steps towards the adoption of the Levy, including a Preliminary Draft Charging Schedule which had been approved by Cabinet on 27 June 2013 for consultation under the emerging Local Plan.

A report outlining responses to the Preliminary Draft Charging Schedule consultation would be reported to Cabinet at its meeting on 14 November 2013, which would also be asked to recommend the following for approval: -

- the terms of the Draft Charging Schedule for consultation;
- a draft 'high level' infrastructure list for public consultation;
- a draft Community Infrastructure Levy payment instalment policy for public consultation.

Councillor Wright and officers would work with local Members to understand what they wanted to see delivered in their respective areas by Community Infrastructure Levy receipts over the short, medium and longer term. In discussing this part of the process, Members felt as though they should have been consulted at an earlier stage.

The Committee:

- (a) requested more clarity on the support provided by the District Council to Parish Councils with regard to Neighbourhood Plans;
- (b) suggested that engagement with District Councillors should have taken place at a much earlier stage with regard to the Council's Community Infrastructure Levy proposals.

Redundant ICT Equipment

The Committee considered the notes of an informal scrutiny working group meeting held on 15 August 2013 which looked into how the Council dealt with its redundant ICT equipment. Councillor Bridget Smith chaired the informal working group and took Members through four recommendations that had been agreed, having taken account of evidence gathered at the meeting.

Endorsing these recommendations, the Committee recommended to Cabinet:

- (a) the production of a documented policy on the disposal of ICT equipment, removing any ambiguity around the Council's processes and setting out its responsibilities with regard to the appropriate disposal of ICT equipment and the protection of data and information;
- (b) the provision of dedicated on-site storage for obsolete ICT equipment, ensuring that the ICT workshop is cleared and can be used by ICT staff;
- (c) that it considers offering laptops previously used and no longer required by District Councillors to Parish Councils or to a community use endorsed by a Parish Council or a District Councillor, free of charge;
- (d) that it considers offering monitors surplus to requirements as a result of the rollout of Thin Client to Parish Councils or to a community use endorsed by a Parish Council or a District Councillor, free of charge.

Shared Equity Schemes

Councillor Mark Howell, Portfolio Holder for Housing, presented a briefing note on Shared Equity Schemes, specifically with regard to the equity share properties that had leases dated after January 2006. He emphasised that any delays in a person selling their property or seeking to leave a Shared Equity Scheme did not occur because of anything the Council was responsible for. Councillor Howell added that it would not be in the Council's business interests to delay any part of this process.

A suggestion was put forward for the Council to buy back a Shared Equity Scheme and then rent the property back to the same occupier. Councillor Howell was of the opinion that, from a business perspective, there was little or no benefit to the Council in doing this. A further suggestion was made that shared equity houses that had been on the market for a long period of time should be considered for purchase by the Council in accordance with the Empty Home Strategy.

7 November 2013

Conservation Service Review

Councillor Nick Wright, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Economic Development, provided the Committee with an update on a review of the Council's conservation service. The main drivers identified for the review were noted as being the way in which the service responded to the Planning Policy Framework, the imminent Local Plan and an emerging growth agenda as well as the perception of internal and external service users.

Councillor Wright explained that he had been exploring a number of options for delivery of the service in relation to the project objectives, which were to:

- conserve and enhance the quality of the environment in South Cambridgeshire;
- deliver a service that was agile, customer focused and able to meet new demands;
- be as cost effective as possible.

It was noted that urban design had subsequently been included in the scope for the review of the conservation service. This was in response to comments received as part of the informal staff consultation exercise when it was requested that urban design be included because of its relationship with conservation, particularly the link between design of buildings, development schemes and landscapes.

An in-house model had also been strongly supported by the teams across the service area as well as by customers, largely because it could be designed to be more responsive and provide advice based on local knowledge. Feedback received internally and externally identified that a significant change in culture was necessary to provide a fit for purpose in-house solution.

The Committee noted that formal consultation had commenced with staff, which would inform final recommendations in December 2013 for implementation from January 2014.

Members sought an opportunity to discuss service priorities during the transitional period and suggest ways in which to move the service forward following implementation of the Portfolio Holder's final recommendations.

Enforcement and Inspection Review

The Committee considered a briefing note which provided an update on the Council's Enforcement and Inspection Policy consultation.

On 12 September 2013 Cabinet had agreed to commence consultation with residents, businesses and parishes in South Cambridgeshire on the Council's draft Enforcement and Inspection Policy. The Committee learned how this consultation would be undertaken over the coming months and made reference to providing the 200 businesses already on the new South Cambridgeshire District Council Business Register with a link to the consultation survey, in addition to a selection of licensing and food businesses. A comment was made that the survey should be circulated to as many businesses as possible, noting that an article encouraging responses from residents and businesses would be included in the Council's magazine.

It was agreed that Members should encourage the Parish Councils they represented to respond to the survey.

Position Statement: Finance, Performance and Risk

Councillor David Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, provided the Committee with a statement on the Council's position with regard to its General Fund, Housing Revenue Account, capital budgets, corporate objectives, performance indicators and strategic risks.

The Committee was informed that the Customer Contact Centre was working hard to resolve issues at the first point of contact, rather than refer calls onto back office staff. It was noted that targets had been exceeded for first time resolutions which were now performing at 86% against a target of 80%. One of the negative aspects of this approach in the interim was that calls were taking longer than usual to deal with, meaning that call waiting times had increased. The Contact Centre was looking to address peak call times, which was another contributing factor to increased call waiting times. The Committee suggested that the number of instances where a caller ended their call before it was answered, known as drop-off rates, should be monitored.

Considering other aspects of the performance information contained within the report, the following comments were noted:

- targets for Planning and Economic Development were not very aspirational and should be reviewed. These materialised from the former Government's national

indicator set, but for Planning and Economic Development were still published by the Government and used as national benchmarks;

- the target for the percentage of undisputed invoices paid in 30 days was set very high. This had been done purposely to chase high performance, ensuring that the Council was not charged in accordance with new rules relating to the late payment of invoices.

With regard to the Council's financial report, concerns were expressed regarding the predicted overspend relating to refunds on bills issued to non-domestic ratepayers resulting from revaluations agreed by the Valuation Office. The new rules regarding non-domestic rate collection were noted, together with the fact that the Council now had to reimburse such refunds, even if an original appeal pre-dated the new arrangements.

16 January 2014

Mears – update on performance and complaints

Councillor Mark Howell, Portfolio Holder for Housing, provided the Committee with an update on Mears' performance and complaints. Warren Gannaway, Regional Manager at Mears, was also in attendance and answered questions from Councillors, explaining Mears' definition of complaints and the process for dealing with them.

A number of concerns were expressed regarding the requirement for complaints to be submitted in writing, which the Committee thought would deter some clients from complaining. The reasoning behind this policy was explained and the Committee was assured that complaints could be submitted verbally to South Cambridgeshire District Council's Housing Team, who would submit the complaint in writing to Mears on the complainant's behalf. The Committee suggested that a more prescriptive process in dealing with repeat calls regarding the same issues was needed, as well as a procedure to highlight these calls to Mears and the Council's Housing Team.

Update on waste and recycling

Councillor Mick Martin, Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services, provided the Committee with an update on a draft Memorandum of Understanding between South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridge City Council, for the development of joint working in the provision of waste and recycling services at cross border developments.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee requested that in future, documents such as this be brought to the Committee much further in advance, to allow Members the opportunity to influence their development. The Committee also requested early sight of the Service Level Agreements that would underwrite this Memorandum of Understanding at each development.

Empty Council Properties

The Committee discussed empty council properties in terms of why the Council could not purchase equity share properties that had not been sold. Councillor Howell, Portfolio Holder for Housing, explained that this was something South Cambridgeshire District Council was considering, with the Housing department looking at developing a business case.

Derelict properties were discussed and Councillor Howell was asked why some properties were considered too derelict for extensive works to be undertaken to make them habitable. Councillor Howell explained that the amount of investment required in order to make such properties habitable, could be such that it made more sense to sell the property and use the proceeds from the sale to purchase other smaller properties.

Annual Review of the Customer Contact Centre

Councillor David Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, presented the Contact Centre's annual performance review.

Whilst it was recognised that the Contact Centre had been successful since its launch in December 2012, achieving predicted annual cost savings of £250,000 and 82% of calls resolved at first point of contact, it was recognised that there had been some problems which were discussed. Concern was raised that the percentage of 'calls not answered' was worsening. Councillor Whiteman-Downes acknowledged this and advised that the policy of resolution at first point of contact would continue to be followed. The Committee was informed that short-staffing had been experienced. This was a result of recruitment of good quality staff to the centre who had then taken career opportunities within other Council departments. The Customer Contact Manager explained the Contact Centre staffing, which consisted of 19 members of staff. Since the Centre launched in December 2012, seven members of staff had been lost to internal and external moves.

The call abandonment rate was discussed and Councillor Whiteman-Downes explained there could be a number of reasons for this and that BT would be able to provide some data to investigate the reasons for call abandonment further.

The Customer Contact Manager explained that there had been problems recruiting staff to fill posts within the Contact Centre, and that the option of recruiting apprentices was being considered.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee requested an update on the Customer Contact Centre in six months.

Website

Councillor David Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, presented the annual review of South Cambridgeshire District Council's website. The Head of ICT/Facilities Management explained that a project plan was being developed, to review the full functionality of the website. Members were informed that discussions were taking place with partners regarding the identification of areas where resources could be shared. It was anticipated the review would be completed after six months (July 2014).

Discussion ensued around the situation which occurred when the Council's former web provider was bought by another company and notice was served to the Council of the new company's intention to cease service provision within 8 weeks. The Committee was assured that this situation would not occur again as the website was now provided in-house.

It was noted that more people were visiting the website from mobile devices, from which the old website had not been easily accessible.

11 February 2014

Corporate Plan

Councillor Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, presented a report on the Council's revised Corporate Plan.

The Committee was concerned regarding the delivery of community transport, and how County Council cuts may have affected the achievement of this objective. It was noted that this had been introduced at the request of the Portfolio Holder for Planning Policy and Localism, and that the Council participated in 25 community transport initiatives.

The inclusion of Key Performance Indicators against each objective within the draft Corporate Plan was discussed. Members were informed that these would be included in the plan, in order to provide a measurement for success. Project milestones were for relevant Portfolio Holders to add to the Plan, and there would be detailed business cases and project plans for each element of the Corporate Plan.

Medium Term Financial Strategy and budget

Councillor Simon Edwards, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Staffing, presented the proposed Medium Term Financial Strategy and budget, prior to consideration by Cabinet and Full Council. In taking Members through the proposals set out in the report, the Committee supported all of the recommendations.

Position Statement on finance, performance and risk

Councillor David Whiteman-Downes, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services, and Councillor Simon Edwards, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Staffing, presented the position statement on finance, performance and risk.

The Committee was informed that the 10 days average time taken to process new benefit claims was a significant achievement, and was largely attributable to the Council's Contact Centre.

Invoice processing performance was highlighted as an area of concern. The Committee was informed that staff absence and staff turnover were contributing factors to this.

3 April 2014

(Information to be added following the meeting of the Committee on 3 April 2014)

Monitoring Cabinet Portfolio Holders

Portfolio Holders at South Cambridgeshire District Council in 2013/14 took the majority of their decisions at public Portfolio Holder Meetings. Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee were allocated as Scrutiny Monitors for specific Portfolios and attended these meetings to develop greater knowledge in an area of the Council's work, as well as offering well informed challenge and influence. Scrutiny Monitors for 2013/14 were allocated 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

Call-in

Call-in is usually a last resort, when other means of influencing decision-making have failed. Any Call-in would be considered by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, but this procedure was not used during the 2013/14 municipal year.

Training and development

Training sessions facilitated by the Centre for Public Scrutiny were held in January 2014 for the Partnerships Review Committee and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee. This provided basic training on the principles of scrutiny, but also focussed on the specific remit of each Committee. The Centre for Public Scrutiny works towards four principles of effective scrutiny, these being:

- to provide 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers;
- to enable the voice and concerns of the public and its communities;
- that scrutiny be carried out by 'independent minded governors' who lead and own the scrutiny process;
- to drive improvement in public services.

Further development opportunities for Members of both Committees will be offered over 2014/15.

Contact us

If you would like to know more about the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at South Cambridgeshire District Council please contact the Democratic Services Team Leader, Graham Aisthorpe-Watts, on (01954) 713030 or democratic.services@scambs.gov.uk.