

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
(SPECIAL)

2nd February 2004

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair) and Councillors Mulgrew and Stone.

Conservative Group

Councillors Atkin and Mrs. Hood.

COS/46. **BUDGET ISSUES**

Further to Minute No. COS/45 of 26th January 2004, the Committee gave further consideration to budget issues. The Chair advised that the remaining items concerned Members' training and the budget consultation process. It was felt that some Members would benefit from training on finance issues. The Council's Employee Development Officer spoke of courses available through the Modern Members Programme and Councillors Atkin and Hood would be attending such a course in February. Arrangements could be made to host a course at the Civic Offices and information was given on the comparative costs of organising such a training event or sending delegates on courses. The Chair confirmed that he had attended a similar course some three years ago and had found it of great use. As the Committee had no budget to arrange such courses, a recommendation would need to be submitted to the Finance and Management Committee on this subject.

As an alternative, the Chief Finance Officer suggested that an internal training course could be arranged. This could be tailored to suit Members' needs and give a general understanding of finance issues. The Chair recalled that the last training session included internal support from Officers. It was agreed to pursue the training issues and to submit a further report to the next meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Atkin questioned whether Parish Councils could be included within the training session. It was noted that guidance for parish councils was usually provided through the Derbyshire Association of Local Councils. However, the Legal and Democratic Services Manager had been involved in training to Parish Councils on Standards and it was agreed to research this issue and to report back to a future meeting of the Committee.

Consideration was given to the budget consultation process. To date, three Area Meetings had been held, together with a meeting for representatives of the business and voluntary sectors. Comments had been made about the projected Council Tax increase and residents had been reminded of the cost of securing service improvements. Issues around service reductions had been raised and it had been questioned whether these services would be reinstated. No adverse comments had been made about the service development proposals and it seemed that residents appreciated the step change in refuse costs. The Citizens Advice Bureau had commented on the Community Partnership Officer post and felt that with greater consultation, a

more integrated approach could have been taken. The maintenance of cemeteries had been identified as a particular issue by one respondent.

Following a comment by the Chair, the Chief Finance Officer reminded of the consultation held the previous summer to identify residents' key priorities. The Finance Services Manager advised that at some Area Meetings, details had been sought about specific projects. At the Swadlincote Area Meeting, a resident had enquired about an elderly persons' Council Tax discount. This issue was discussed and there was some uncertainty over whether such a scheme could be introduced.

Councillor Atkin referred to the National Non-Domestic Rates. The Chief Finance Officer explained how the level of such rates were set nationally, they were collected by the District Council and then re-distributed by Government to local authorities. Councillor Stone asked how business rates were calculated and an explanation was provided. It was confirmed that the District Council had no power to influence the level of such rates, but they only usually increased in line with inflation, unlike the Council Tax. The Chief Finance Officer spoke of the possibility of business rates administration transferring to the District Council. It had also been predicted that the level of business rates would then increase in a manner similar to that for Council Tax. He spoke about the current level of business rates income, the positive effect of an increasing population and other issues which influenced the level of non-domestic rates re-distributed to the Council. Councillor Atkin suggested that information be gathered in preparation for the possible transfer of business rates administration, but it was noted that statistics were already held by the Authority. The re-valuation of business premises for NNDR would have an impact on individual business rates, but it was likely there would be a scheme of transitional relief. Councillor Stone enquired about the revaluation of properties for Council Tax purposes. It was expected that this would take place in 2007/08 and that additional bands might be introduced at each end of the spectrum.

The Policy and Best Value Manager summarised the budget issues discussed over the two meetings. She felt that the information provided by the Finance Services Manager had been particularly helpful. A report was due to be submitted to the Finance and Management Committee at its meeting on 17th February 2004. The Chair suggested that he work with the Officer to prepare a draft report and that this be considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee at its Meeting on 9th February.

COS/47. **SPECIAL PROJECT – CUSTOMER CARE**

The Chair introduced this item, commenting about the visits to individual departments. He considered customer care from a quality management viewpoint and gave a brief presentation to Members, given his background in quality management. Information was circulated to provide some background and this gave definitions of quality. The paper posed the question "how do we achieve quality?" and identified the various issues involved. The Chair referred to a process map and stressed the need to ensure inputs were controlled by a defined system, in order to achieve the required outputs. Further information was circulated to provide more information about quality management systems. The Chair applied this theory to service provision within the District Council. He explained how the approach could be used to aid visits to individual departments and gain an

understanding of service delivery issues. He suggested the preparation of checklists to give some structure to the visits.

The Customer Services Manager gave an update on the Customer First initiative and commented on how many of the issues raised would be addressed by this initiative. Reference was made to the “front office” computer system and for an authority the size of South Derbyshire it was considered there were some 500 service types. The software for this computer system was pre-loaded with information about some 300 services and she explained how the system made use of business process engineering to ensure efficiency. This was the basis of the customer relationship system and she felt it was quality driven.

The Chair emphasised that the Committee’s review was not seeking to duplicate work already being undertaken, but to provide an understanding of service delivery issues. The Customer Services Manager offered to supply process mapping information for specific service areas, if it would be useful. The Chief Finance Officer suggested that Customer Services be the first Division visited. Officers could explain how they were approaching this issue and it might provide useful information for subsequent visits. He also spoke of the benefits of a complementary approach.

Comment was made about service standards and these needed to be achievable and realistic. As part of the review, the Council was comparing with other local authorities on how services were delivered. Where possible, service delivery would be streamlined. Feedback from the Corporate Scrutiny Committee would also be of use. The Chair agreed that the findings of each review group could be compared and it might help to identify any service areas that required improvement. A key aspect for Members was understanding how services were delivered. The Chief Finance Officer felt it would be helpful to have an input into the questionnaire used by Members in order to gain feedback from the Customer First perspective also.

The Chair confirmed that a visit had been arranged to the Council’s Depot for Wednesday. The Deputy Chief Executive spoke about the Customer First initiative but noted that not all complaints were received by telephone. He also requested that prior knowledge be given to Unit Managers before undertaking visits. The Chief Finance Officer suggested that the Customer Services Manager attend the visits with Members.

Councillor Atkin questioned the “customer first” response timescale for issues raised. Under the revised arrangements, it was ultimately expected that 80% of calls would be dealt with at the first point of contact, but it was accepted that it would take some years to achieve this. The Deputy Chief Executive commented that service standards could be more clearly explained to customers. Following a question from Councillor Atkin, further information was provided on how the Customer First initiative would be delivered and customers would be made aware of service timescales.

The Committee discussed the visit to the Council’s Depot and the Chair offered to give some thought to some areas for questions. He expected that the visit would last approximately two hours. The Policy and Best Value Manager offered to supply copies of the Technical Services Service Plan, to assist Members. The Customer Services Manager recognised the value of asking staff who were delivering the service about current problem areas and

possible solutions. In response to a question from Councillor Atkin, there was a discussion about staff consultation, the feedback received and the availability of information to assist Members in their research. The Chair felt that Members could undertake their own customer survey. The Deputy Chief Executive clarified the services to be visited at the Depot and he compared service delivery issues for refuse collection and the bulky refuse collection service.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.35 p.m.