

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (SPECIAL)

17th November 2003

PRESENT:-

Labour Group

Councillor Bell (Chair), Councillor Murphy (Vice-Chair) and Councillor Stone.

Conservative Group

Councillors Ford and Mrs. Hood.

In Attendance

Councillor Harrington (Labour Group).

COS/35. **CORPORATE PLAN**

The Chair informed Members of changes to the arrangements for developing the Corporate Plan. Originally, it had been planned to hold a Members' Seminar on 12th November and to consider the Corporate Plan at a Special Meeting of Council on 27th November 2003. It had not been possible to hold the planned Members' Seminar, but this had since been rearranged and the revised programme was reported.

COS/36. **SPECIAL PROJECT – CUSTOMER CARE**

Following introductions, the Chair reminded Members of the purpose of this Special Project. He referred to the 'Customer First' initiative that was currently being progressed, the Committee's desire to look at customer care issues and to examine the level of satisfaction with Council services. The Direct Services Manager had been invited to attend and give an outline of the way that customer care was delivered at the Council's Depot. A report was circulated to show the roles performed by the Customer Services Team. This comprised three members of staff, including a Team Leader. Examples were provided to show the types of services delivered and the way the section responded to service requests and complaints. There was a detailed complaint monitoring procedure, which stemmed from the former Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime. The Chair felt there was a need to distinguish between service requests and complaints. He asked how the section ensured that errors were not repeated. The Officer explained the review mechanisms in place and the monitoring of trends to seek to prevent future problems.

In response to questions from Councillor Ford, the Officer explained how the section responded when wheeled bins were not placed at the kerbside for collection and there was a discussion about the formal complaints procedure. The Customer Services Manager responded to a comment from Councillor Murphy, explaining the approach taken to help complainants and the methods in which complaints could be registered. The Direct Services Manager added that there was a responsive approach to remedy errors. It was noted that performance of the Refuse Collection Service was in the upper quartile Nationally. The Direct Services Manager praised the Customer Services Team for their excellent performance, their enthusiasm and

commitment to deliver service improvements. The Chair praised the Refuse Collection Team for their excellent performance. It was confirmed that contractors were used occasionally and the Customer Services Team also undertook site supervision to check on contractors' performance. It was confirmed that details of other comments and praise were recorded as it was hoped to use this information to pursue a quality accreditation.

The Policy and Best Value Officer sought clarification on the scope of the review. He asked whether it should look at the formal corporate complaints procedure, the complaint systems in place within each department or whether the review was to be focussed more on service delivery issues. The Chair felt that this review should focus on service delivery issues. The Vice-Chair considered that there should be a common corporate model used by all services to respond to complaints.

Councillor Harrington praised the approach taken by the Direct Services Organisation to respond to complaints, but felt that this approach might not be taken by all service departments. He spoke of the need for training and to bring about a cultural change throughout the Council. The Customer Services Manager echoed praise for the Direct Services staff. She then spoke about the Customer First initiative and if a call-centre was introduced, complainants first point of contact would be with specialised, trained staff that were able to deal with complaints appropriately.

The Chair repeated that the review was not just about how complaints were handled. He suggested a quality assurance approach with the establishment of suitable systems to prevent future problems.

The Vice-Chair asked how Members were kept informed of complaints statistics and was advised that a six monthly report was made to the Finance and Management Committee. There was a discussion about service level agreements, committed service timescales and how Officers recorded complaints received before the timescale had lapsed. In the main, it depended on whether customers were aware of the permitted timescale. As part of the Customer First initiative, the complaints procedure was likely to change and ultimately, it was hoped to record compliments and comments so that these could be publicised to demonstrate the service levels that the public could expect.

The Committee considered which other service areas could be looked at as part of the review. It was noted that Environmental Health in particular received a high volume of telephone calls. The Vice-Chair asked how services were publicised and examples quoted were the annual Best Value Performance Plan Summary and the recent A-Z of Council Services. The Chair suggested that other direct service providers be invited to attend future Meetings of the Committee, to explain the way that their services and customer care were delivered. In particular he referred to the Environmental Health and Planning Divisions. The Vice-Chair sought the involvement of the Personnel Division, so that training needs could be discussed and the Chair confirmed that this was a future area for the review to look at. The Customer Services Manager spoke of the Environmental Health pilot for the Customer First project and the planned process mapping exercise. This would be undertaken for each service provider across the Council. The Chair felt that the Committee could add value to this process and could even visit service departments.

It was questioned whether the Committee could have an input into the Customer First initiative and seek to influence its outcomes, rather than undertaking a separate exercise. Periodic reports could be made to the Scrutiny Committee, to provide a “reality check”. The Chair felt that the Committee had an overview role, but required basic information on service delivery to enable its review to be completed. He did not feel that this would duplicate work being undertaken on the Customer First initiative. He requested that the Customer Services Manager attend future Meetings of the Committee, when the special project was being discussed.

Councillor Ford asked how staff felt about the Customer First initiative and some had concerns over their ability to fulfil the new roles. Staff would be required to have specialist knowledge of a wide range of service areas. A view was expressed that this highlighted the need for a review of service delivery and Councillor Stone felt that service improvements would raise customers’ aspirations and might lead to further complaints. The need for continual improvement had been recognised and would be built into the Customer First initiative. The Customer Services Manager explained that High Peak Borough Council operated a call-centre and it might benefit Members to see how it worked.

The Chair asked whether co-option should be considered for this special project and there was a need to assess the timescale for completion of this exercise. To secure available Government funding, the Council would need to put in place customer relationship management by March 2004. If a call-centre was established, it would be mid-2004 before the physical environment was created and possibly 2005 before the new arrangements were introduced. The Chair thought that the Committee’s review needed to be completed by the end of January 2004, so that its recommendations could be considered. In response to a question from Councillor Harrington, it was confirmed that the Council had not yet committed to the call-centre approach. The Vice-Chair asked how any change management issues would be addressed.

In terms of the way forward, the Chair suggested that further consideration be given to the special project at the next Ordinary Meeting of the Committee. He felt that some small sub-groups might need to be established to progress this review with a target completion date of the end of January 2004.

R. BELL

CHAIR

The Meeting terminated at 5.45 p.m.